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A Central Asian Culture in Europe:

**Avar Interaction with their Subjugated Peoples
and the Romans**

Master's thesis in Historie

Supervisor: Leif Inge Ree Petersen

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Faculty of Humanities
Department of Historical and Classical Studies



Preface

This thesis was written because of my genuine and undying interest in the distant past, because of its distinctiveness and its existence as world apart from our modern existence. This is also why the Avars in particular piqued my interest. What is more unique and distinctive than a group which seemingly appear from nothing, almost destroys one of the dominant empires of its time, before being conquered and disappearing a few centuries later? All the while not leaving any written records and with its only way to communicate its point-of view and peculiarities being its archeological record. Nonetheless, this project has required sustained effort, which although fun can also be described as tiring.

I therefore need to especially thank my advisor Leif Inge Ree Petersen who through excellent advice as guided me away from the worst pitfalls and towards the best ways to enhance my thesis. Additionally, I must thank for introducing me to the early Medieval world. I also need to thank my friends and family in particular my Astrid Pedersen who has read several drafts of this thesis and pointed out several inconsistencies and writing mistakes. Lastly, I must thank NTNUI langrenn who has been an extremely important part of my life during my years in Trondheim. I can confidently say that my life in this city would not have been even close to as positive without the social environment of the group.

Any mistakes within this thesis are naturally mine and mine alone.

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1: Introduction

The Avar khaganate was a nomadic polity based in the Carpathian basin which dominated the area from 568 to their subjugation by Charlemagne around 800. Most of the books mentioning the Avar khaganate consider them from a Roman point-of-view, limiting themselves to their effect on the late Roman empire, thereby only considering the Avar khaganate as the enemies of the Romans. This lack of attention on the Avar khaganate is not due to its minor historical importance, as it strongly influenced historical developments within the late Roman Empire especially between 550-625. Its importance is underpinned by its frequent mentions in primary sources from the period.¹ Additionally, the Avars were most likely responsible for spreading new technologies, including the stirrup and other items of war, across Eurasia.² The Avar khaganate also has a well-developed archeological field of study, with large amounts of graves and rich archeological material. It is therefore natural to research the Avar khaganate as its own entity, not as someone else's enemy.

This thesis will explore how the culture of the Avars, and their subjugated groups, changed due to their mutual interactions and their interaction with the Roman empire. These cultural changes will further function as an example of the changes undergone by a steppe culture in close proximity with a sedentary culture and in an environment not ideal for the continuation of a steppe way of life. It will argue that the culture of the Avars, originated in Central Asia before adapting to its new surroundings to better control its subjugated populace.

Furthermore, it will argue that throughout the early Avar khaganate the Avar khagans (the leaders of the Avar khaganate) balanced the demands created by their heritage and the geopolitical realities and that these processes were based on the interaction and communication between the originally Central Asian Avars and the more western Eurasian cultures of their subjugated peoples. This thesis will primarily be based on analysis of primary source material and archaeological finds. Additionally, steppe empires from Central Asia and theories from anthropology will be used to add additional context, because of a lack of primary sources written by Avars.

The thesis will cover the period 550-602. The year 550, is chosen because it slightly predates the arrival of the Avars in western Eurasia and in Roman primary sources. The year 602 is

¹ Walter Pohl, *The Avars: A Steppe Empire in Central Europe, 567-822* (New York, 2018), 1-2, Georgios Kardaras, *Byzantium and the Avars, 6th-9th Century AD: Political, Diplomatic and Cultural Relations* (Leiden, 2018), 1

² Denis Sinor & Nicola de Cosmo, eds., *Warfare in Inner Asian History (500-1800)* (Boston, 2001), 12

chosen for several reasons. Firstly, because a series of events culminates in 602, which results in political chaos within the Avar khaganate, and the deposing and murder of emperor Maurice. Secondly, after 602 there is a lack of primary sources until the Avar-Persian siege of Constantinople in 626, thereby making 602 a “natural end point.”³ Finally, 602 is chosen because of the limited size of this thesis, making research into the totality of the cultural changes within the Avar khaganate close to impossible.

1.1: Historical Background

The Avars were a nomadic group who in 568, created a khaganate in the Carpathian basin, from which they conducted several military campaigns primarily against the Romans. The earliest concrete mention of the group is by Menander the Guardsman who mentions that in 557, the Avars sent an embassy to the Roman court which concluded an alliance.⁴ The alliance included gifts from the Romans in exchange for the Avars defeating Roman enemies on the Pontic-Caspian steppes thereby ensuring Roman control, control which was threatened when the Avars migrated close to the northern Roman border in 563.⁵ This was followed by diplomatic negotiations, which included terms for the Avars settling in parts of Pannonia. The negotiations broke down, straining Roman-Avar relations, which were further strained following the ascension of emperor Justin 2, in 565, because he canceled the Roman-Avar treaties.⁶ After the treaties collapsed the Avars conquered and settled the Carpathian basin, thereby subjugating significant numbers of Gepids.⁷

Although the Gepids were conquered, the former Gepid capital Sirmium was captured by the Romans with the city almost immediately being besieged by the Avars.⁸ The siege failed, but Sirmium remained contested and was the basis for future conflicts before finally being conquered by the Avar khaganate in 582 after a three-year siege.⁹ During the intervening years the Avars and Romans entered several treaties with tribute reaching 80 000 solidi (Roman gold coins) by 575. They also created an alliance against the Slavs, who were raiding Roman land and opposing their nominal subjugation by the Avars. The alliance was dissolved

³ Pohl, *The Avars*, 217-218, 281-284, 293

⁴ Pohl, *The Avars*, 21-22

⁵ Kardaras, *Byzantium and the Avars*, 20-22, Pohl, *The Avars*, 22, 53, 222, 399-400

⁶ Kardaras, *Byzantium and the Avars*, 23-25, 32, Pohl, *The Avars*, 53-59, 221, Leif Inge Ree Petersen, “In Search of Equilibrium: Byzantine and the Northern Barbarians 400-800” *Journal of Medieval Military History* 104 (2017): 37-69, at 51

⁷ Kardaras, *Byzantium and the Avars*, 27-28, Pohl, *The Avars*, 60-62

⁸ Pohl, *The Avars*, 69-72

⁹ Pohl, *The Avars*, 83-89

because of the previously mentioned second Avar siege of Sirmium.¹⁰ The cities fall was followed by the death of Emperor Tiberius in 582 and Baian khagan in 583, with subsequent khagans only known by their title. These deaths were followed by a short period of peace as the new leaders solidified their authority, which quickly ended with a short conflict in 584 which resulted in the Avar khaganate being granted a tribute of 100 000 solidi a year.¹¹

The next significant conflict was emperor Maurice's Balkan wars (592-602) with increased tension starting in 588 as emperor Maurice refused to increase the tribute as demanded by the Avars.¹² The Balkan wars were initially focused on the Slavs, which caused the Slavs to conduct their own military actions against the Romans.¹³ Active warfare between the Avars and Romans first began in 595 when the khagan interpreted the nearly annual Roman offensive as an invasion, which he responded to with his own offensive.¹⁴ The next active part of the conflict began in 597 and ended with the Avar sack of Drizipera and the responsible Avar army being ravaged by a plague which killed several of the khagan's sons. Peace was established with the Avar khaganate receiving another 20 000 solidi per year and the establishment of rules for Roman crossings of the Danube.¹⁵ Yet the Romans were on the offensive again the next year, this time against the Avars, with the Roman armies invading the khaganate and destroying several Avar armies, which resulted in more of the khagan's sons being killed. The Balkan wars ended after emperor Maurice ordered the Roman field army to remain north of the Danube during the winter of 602. This was unpopular, and together with changes in pay it resulted in the army revolting and killing emperor Maurice and his family.¹⁶ This gave the Avars a reprieve and the opportunity to reassert control over their polity following the lack of stability created by the deaths of the khagan's sons and the defeats caused by the Roman offensives of 598.

1.2: Primary Sources Referring to the Avars.

One of the major challenges for this thesis is the complete lack of written sources from the Avar khaganate, a lack shared with a large majority of pre-8th century steppe empires.

Research on the Avars is therefore forced to rely on sources written by outsiders, which creates another layer between the historian and the Avars, thereby increasing the challenge of

¹⁰ Kardaras, *Byzantium and the Avars*, 33-34, 37-42, Pohl, *The Avars*, 77-82

¹¹ Pohl, *The Avars*, 89-94, Kardaras, *Byzantium and the Avars*, 43-45

¹² Pohl, *The Avars*, 167-168

¹³ Pohl, *The Avars*, 171, Kardaras, *Byzantium and the Avars*, 51-54

¹⁴ Kardaras, *Byzantium and the Avars*, 54-56, Pohl, *The Avars*, 180-182

¹⁵ Pohl, *The Avars*, 189-190, Kardaras, *Byzantium and the Avars*, 57-59

¹⁶ Kardaras, *Byzantium and the Avars*, 60-64, Pohl, *The Avars*, 192-197

any study on the Avar khaganate. This is especially true for one focused on culture since sedentary sources generally are less interested in that aspect of nomadic states.¹⁷ Another challenge is my lack of knowledge of Latin and ancient Greek which limited my study to translations of the different texts into English. This naturally creates another layer inhibiting analysis as one has to consider the influence from both the original author and the translator.

One of the most important primary sources for this thesis is the *history* of Menander the Guardsman, which covers the period between 557 and 582. Menander was a trained lawyer but worked as a historian supported by emperor Maurice. The emperor gave him access to the imperial archives, which he utilized together with oral reports. His text has unfortunately only survived in the form of fragments. Menander mainly focused on the enemies of Rome, primarily the Avars and the Persians, with his text following the rules and traits of classic Roman history, whilst also continuing the history of his predecessors; Agathias of Myrina and Procopius. One such trait is fictitious speeches, but in Menander's *History* these speeches have varied personalities, possibly making them reflections of reality being based on oral or written reports. This is especially true for the Avar emissaries where straightforward statements are mixed with Roman oratory. Baian khagan specifically, emerges as a classic nomadic chief, treacherous, ruthless and greedy.¹⁸

Another very important source is the *Strategikon*, which gave advice to lower-level Roman officers on how to fight different enemies, including the Avars. It was written between 592 and 610 by either emperor Maurice himself or his brother-in-law Philippicus, who both were experienced field commanders. The *Strategikon* covers both Roman tactics and the tactics of common foes and because its author was an experienced soldier and an eyewitness to the peoples and ways of war which he describes the *Strategikon* is most likely a very reliable source. This reliability is supported by its need for accuracy as it was a teaching tool for officers, who would actively use the information it provided.¹⁹

The last central primary source for this thesis, was written by Theophylact Simocatta, who is considered the last classical historian. He covers the reign of emperor Maurice (582-602),

¹⁷ Denis Sinor, "Reflections on the History and Historiography of the Nomad Empires of Central Eurasia," in *Acta orientalia Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae* 58 (2005), 3-14, at 3-4, Pohl, *The Avars*, 230-231, Kardaras, *Byzantium and the Avars*, 8-9

¹⁸ Blockley, *History of Menander the Guardsman*, 1, 4-7, 9-10, 14-15, 18-19, 22, 28

¹⁹ George T. Dennis, *Maurice's Strategikon: Handbook of military strategy*, (Philadelphia, 1984), xiv-xvii, Florin Curta, *The Making of the Slavs: History and Archeology of the Lower Danube Region, C. 500-700* (Cambridge, 2001), 71

thereby continuing the history of Menander. Most likely he was born, raised and educated in Egypt, before moving to Constantinople just after emperor Phocas (602-610) was overthrown. Simocatta's history covers the Balkan wars and the war against Persia, which were the two most important topics of Maurice's reign. His history is generally less reliable than Menander's and the *Strategikon*, due to being written during the late 620s. He is also biased against the generals Comentiolus, Philippicus and Peter and biased towards general Priscus something which distorts and weakens his narrative. Furthermore, he also lacks knowledge of military matters and geography, which further distorts his narrative and chronology thereby further weakening his reliability.²⁰ Lastly, the translators, Mary and Michael Whitby mentions how Simocatta sometimes makes things up, "...grandiloquent language and bombastic imagery are often an indication of lack of factual substance."²¹ Despite these weaknesses, Simocatta is the most detailed primary source covering emperor Maurice's reign, making it an important source, despite its challenges.

This thesis will also utilize the *History* of Agathias of Myrina, which covers the years 552-559. Agathias was the son of a lawyer working in Myrina, who studied in Alexandria and Constantinople before working as a lawyer in the latter city. He was therefore both highly educated and well positioned to cover the events of the 550s, though his work was hamstrung by his lack of military experience and political connections. This resulted in limited access to official documents and information creating a somewhat inaccurate understanding of events.²² Agathias will primarily be used to cover Roman steppe relations immediately preceding the arrival of the Avars, something that is instrumental to understand the impact of the Avar migration.

Procopius's *History* covers the military activity of emperor Justinian and the campaigns of general Belisarius. He was one of General Belisarius's administrators, making him an eyewitness to the events he describes, which admittedly are not the most useful for this thesis.²³ Additionally, he is credited with *The Buildings of Justinian* and *The Secret History Of The Court Of Justinian*, two works which presents different opinions on emperor

²⁰ Michael Whitby & Mary Whitby, *The History of Theophylact Simocatta: An English Translation with Introduction and Notes*, (Oxford, 1986), xiii-xiv, xvii, xxii-xxvii

²¹ Whitby & Whitby, *History of Theophylact Simocatta*, xxii

²² Joseph D. Frendo, *Agathias: The Histories* (Berlin, 1975), ix-x

²³ Henry, B. Dewing, *History of the Wars by Procopius*, (London, 1914), Introduction

Justinian's fortification on the Balkans, the court of emperor Justinian and the public works commissioned by the Roman government.²⁴

There are instances of Avar self-presentation in both Menander and Theophanes, but the information derived from those instances is questionable because, as mentioned, it is not unknown for ancient historians to invent or otherwise edit speeches to correlate to style conventions of their time.²⁵ In addition, the instances of self-presentation are presented by Romans ensuring that there is no way to tell too what extent the information derived from those instances reflect the actual opinions of specific Avars and what extent the information has been transformed by a Roman pen. Especially since the Romans generally viewed the Avars as unfaithful, evil, greedy, ugly, inferior, deceptive, prideful and aggressive, all rather negative and usual stereotypes applied to nomads, and which were used to explain the actions of the Avars. Yet the Avars were also associated with a few positive traits primarily connected to their administration and military power.²⁶ This issue will be circumvented by analyzing each such statement individually, based on the author, the information provided and how the information contributes to specific arguments.

1.3: Historiography and Methodology

The most influential book covering the Avars is Walter Pohl's *The Avars*, which was revised and translated from German to English in 2018. Pohl creates an overarching narrative, thereby creating a basis for future scholarly endeavors into the Avar khaganate.²⁷ His work includes most aspects of the khaganate but is naturally most concerned with the comprehensive historical narrative. Another major book is by Georgios Kardaras who also creates an overarching and comprehensive narrative, but who to a lesser extent than Pohl ventures beyond the narrative and the relationship between the Avars and Romans. Whilst both works are invaluable and create a detailed overview of the Avar khaganate's history, neither wholeheartedly focus on the culture of the early Avar khaganate. This thesis will therefore attempt to fill some of this void by more explicitly investigating the culture of the early Avar khaganate through coherent interdisciplinary approaches. Thus, it will focus more on one

²⁴ Procopius of Caesarea, *Secret History of the Court of Justinian*, trans. Ted Garvin, (London, 2015), 7-8

²⁵ Roger C. Blockley, *The History of Menander the Guardsman*, (Liverpool, 1985), 9-10

²⁶ Kardaras, *Byzantium and the Avars*, 7-12, Peter B. Golden, "War and Warfare in the Pre-Činggisid Western Steppes of Eurasia" in *Warfare in Inner Asian History (500-1800)*, eds. Denis Sinor & Nicola de Cosmo (Brill: Leiden, 2002), 153

²⁷ Pohl, *The Avars*, xxi

aspect of the Avar khaganate whilst utilizing the narrative basis of the two books as a guideline to the events and actions of the Avar khagans.

Other than the two books there are several papers, and smaller works focused on the Avars. This includes a chapter written by Csanad Balint which expertly describes the work of Avar goldsmiths as an aspect of their cultural history. Falko Daim has a chapter in the same book which focuses on late Roman belt ornaments among the Avars. There are also several works by Gergely Csiky who is an expert on the armament of the Avar khaganate. Other researchers focus more on the interaction between the Avars and their subjugated populations with Tivadar Vida as the preeminent example. There are also researchers who focus on the subjugated peoples of the Avar khaganate with Florin Curta who has an extremely detailed book on the Slavs as one example. Another example is Alexander Sarantis who has written several thorough works on the Gepid kingdom preceding its destruction by the Avars and Lombards. These works therefore focus on more specific parts of Avar culture or on interaction between the different groups within the Avar khaganate. This thesis on the other hand will focus more on the overarching aspects of Avar culture and the interaction between the Avars, their subjugated peoples and the Romans, discussions which these works naturally contribute to.

1.3.1: Steppe and Steppe Related Empires: Methodological Challenges and Scholarly Works
Research on different steppe and steppe related empires will play a significant role for this thesis by providing information on political culture and other cultural phenomena of possibly historically connected steppe empires. Utilizing these empires as possible sources of information has a significant weakness as there can be no assurance that political systems and social organization are similar even if the empires are historically connected. At a certain level this method assumes that there were significant similarities, which fundamentally is anachronistic and based on the misguided idea that steppe societies never changed. The solution to this conundrum is to only use the information as an analytical tool, with possible correlation only being theorized if signs of similar systems appear in the primary sources. Such correlation is possible because there were significant intermingling and contact between different groups, with political traditions, for example, being inherited by subsequent empires.²⁸ Additionally, steppe communities were characterized by high mobility and connections across massive distances, resulting in a fluidity which diverged culture and

²⁸ Pohl, *The Avars*, 200, Hyun Jin Kim, *The Huns, Rome and the Birth of Europe* (Cambridge, 2013), 31-34, 59

political allegiance, causing borrowing of political systems and ideas as political formations changed significantly quicker than way of life.²⁹

The fluidity described above is also a general problem for research on early medieval steppe empires as there is a lack of information on the historical developments on the steppes. This makes connections and influences between different groups very difficult to accurately ascertain. Denis Sinor, a leading steppe historian has therefore argued that defining connections between different steppe empires should not be attempted, as there is too many unknown variables.³⁰ The lack of certain knowledge is relevant for the Avars because the origin of the Avars, and therefore also their original culture, is in dispute.³¹ This thesis will therefore also include a short discussion of the possible origins of the Avar elite since it was the original Avar elite which ensured the continuation of Avar culture.

The works by Peter B. Golden, the collaborative books; *the Cambridge History of Early Inner Asia* and *Warfare in Inner Asian History* (where Golden was a major contributor) and the works of Barfield will all be used to present information on political and cultural developments of the ancient and early medieval steppes. These books create a scholarly basis for early Medieval central Asian steppe culture, which the Avars might have brought with them into Europe. It should also be mentioned that Pohl also uses steppe empires as a source of information, but this thesis will attempt to utilize them more extensively and actively.

Peter B. Golden is often considered the most important researcher on early medieval steppe empires, and he focuses both on nomads in general, and specifically on the Gök Turks. His works cover the political traditions and culture of different steppe empires, including the importance of the khagan for the stability and the cohesion of khaganates. He also covers the Chinese foreign policy towards the Gök Turks, which most likely is comparable to the Chinese foreign policy possibly encountered by the ancestors of the Avars, which might help explain some developments within the Avar khaganate. Additionally, he argues that the Avar khaganate was disorganized, because the Turks and Khazars, western Eurasian steppe empire post the Gök Turks, were the only polities on the western steppes which became state like.

²⁹ Peter, B. Golden, *Ethnicity and State Formation in Pre-Činggisid Turkic Eurasia* (Indiana, 2001), 6, Peter B. Golden, *An Introduction to the History of the Turkic Peoples* (Wiesbaden, 1992), 4-5, Pohl, *The Avars*, 200-203

³⁰ Sinor, "History and Historiography," 5, 11

³¹ Petersen, "In Search of Equilibrium", 49

This level of organization was a result of their connection to the eastern steppes as the western steppes were too small to support enough nomads to develop state like structures.³²

The Cambridge history also includes a chapter by Ying-Shih Yu which covers Chinese diplomatic policies towards the Xiongnu which might be similar to the experiences of the Avar ancestors, even though this assumes that Chinese foreign policy remained relatively static.³³ Barfield presents several theories of how steppe empires and China were connected and argues that a strong China resulted in a strong steppe empire and vice versa.³⁴ These theories are useful for this thesis, as they might explain certain parts of Avar political culture and expectations, even if the theories do not always match reality, with the rise and fall of the Gök Turk empire, for example, not following the rise and fall of the different Chinese dynasties.³⁵

The nomadic empires from the area east of Persia, northwest of India and south of the Eurasian steppes, from the Kushan invasion in 135 BCE to the fall of the Hephthalites in 560 CE, will also be compared against the Avar khaganate. Similarly to Khodadad, this area will henceforth be referred to as east-Iran, but this is not a claim for modern Iranian supremacy and should not be interpreted as that.³⁶ Comparisons between the steppe adjacent empires of east-Iran and the Avar khaganate should be useful as an analytical tool because east-Iran was dominated by successive nomadic incursions. These nomads encountered Sassanid (the name for the concurrent Persian empire) as the dominant sedentary empire in the area, thereby possibly encountering the same challenges and opportunities as the Avar khaganate.

The main authors on this period and time frame is Etienne de la Vaissiere and Rezakhani Khodadad. Vaissiere discusses the growth and organization of the Sogdian commerce network, which was instrumental in the early Medieval cross-Eurasian commerce of Chinese goods. This was connected to the Gök Turk commercial culture which utilized the tribute acquired from the Chinese. Khodadad on the other hand discusses the importance of east-Iran for the development of the Sassanids and how the different entities of the area interacted with

³² Sinor & Cosmo, *Warfare in Inner Asian*, 17, Peter B. Golden, "The peoples of the south Russian steppes," in *The Cambridge history of early Inner Asia*, ed. Denis Sinor (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 1990), 256, Golden, "War and Warfare," 140, 157

³³ Ying-Shih Yu, "The Hsiung-nu," in *The Cambridge history of early Inner Asia*, ed. Denis Sinor (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 1990), 122, 142

³⁴ Thomas J. Barfield, *The Perilous Frontier: Nomadic Empires and China, 221 BC to AD 1757* (Cambridge, 1992), 9

³⁵ David A. Graff, "Strategy and Contingency in the Tang Defeat of the Eastern Turks, 629-630" in *Warfare in Inner Asian History (500-1800)*, eds. Denis Sinor & Nicola de Cosmo (Brill: Leiden, 2002), 33

³⁶ Rezakhani Khodadad, *ReOrienting the Sasanians: East Iran in Late Antiquity*, (Edinburgh, 2017), 8-11

the Sassanids, thereby creating a historical narrative for a rather under researched area and period.

1.3.2: Methodology of Identity and *Ethnos* Within the Avar khaganate

Identity is a natural extension of culture, with culture being decisive for self-identification and the identification of others. Discussing the identity of others during the early middle ages is challenging however since identity is primarily based on self-perception, which is usually unavailable to the modern historian. Another challenge is that discussions of identity almost intrinsically are based on theories and cultural ideas of the modern world, not the world of the past. This can partially be solved by including ideas and representations of identities from the past, with modern theories creating a framework for analysis of the past. It is also useful to use a different term than ethnicity to discuss identity, belonging and culture, thereby disconnecting it from modern understandings of nationality and race.³⁷ Ethnicity will therefore henceforth be called *ethnos* if singular or *ethne* if plural, when referring to the identities of the past. This has the added benefit of removing potential imagined connections between *ethne* and the modern versions of the same ethnicity, which is especially important when discussing the Balkans.

Modern theories on culture and identity are most readily available through social anthropology, where the usual definition of an ethnic group is that it is biologically self-sufficient, shares fundamental cultural values based on communication of shared ideas, whilst consisting of individuals who identify themselves as members of a unique culture group. Barth argues that this definition has several weaknesses.

Firstly, each group is viewed in isolation. Secondly, an ethnicity is not necessarily defined by way of life as an ethnic group can occupy several different ecological areas. Thirdly, he argues that ethnicity is essentially a form of social organization, focused on categorizing both oneself and others. He also speculates that identities based on ways of living are more solid than those only based on political allegiance.³⁸ This is supported by Denis Sinor who argues that national and cultural traits defines identity stronger than political allegiance.³⁹ Other scholars view ethnicity as a psychological state, based on a collective name, shared history, a nucleus of tradition, a sense of solidarity and similar ways of dressing, with one's identity

³⁷ Reuter, Timothy, *Medieval Politics and Modern Mentalities*, ed. Janet, Nelson L. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 101

³⁸ Fredrik Barth, *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries: The Social Organization of Culture Difference*, 4th ed. (Bergen: 1994), 10-14, 34

³⁹ Denis Sinor, *The Cambridge history of early Inner Asia*, (Cambridge, 1990), 1

communicated through non-verbal means, including the elite and possibly also common members of society.⁴⁰ Barth also presents theories for how the boundaries between ethnicities were maintained and how/when individuals could change identity. His most important argument is that even when ethnicities are in contact, boundaries can persist, and the different identities can be maintained. In fact, he argues that the contact between different ethnicities increases internal cohesion as knowledge of other ethnic groups causes the similarities within the group and the differences with other groups to be emphasized. Thus, contact creates knowledge and awareness which can differentiate the groups and strengthen the barriers between them.⁴¹

Barth also argues that changes in identity does not necessarily lead to the complete adoption of all the cultural material of an *ethnos*. This is partially because within an *ethnos* there will be cultural variation, with those transferring into the *ethnos*, only choosing the most necessary and accessible cultural traits. Furthermore, identity is itself a situational construct, which means one can exhibit membership in one *ethnos* in one situation and different one in another. It is also possible to outwardly be a member of one *ethnos* whilst internally identifying with another. This is especially true for individuals, who are members of several *ethne*, especially if the *ethne* covers political structures of different sizes and complexity.⁴²

Whilst these theories are created to explain modern societies, they also attempt to explain human nature, thereby also making them relevant for past societies. However, it is also useful to discuss how modern scholars understand medieval *ethnos*. *Ethnos* in the middle ages is believed to primarily be connected to law and language, unlike the modern ethnicity which is connected to language and territory.⁴³ This belief should probably be revised as they present *ethnos* as something objective and measurable, whilst Barth argues that it was created through

⁴⁰ Curta, *The Making*, 23, 32-34, Wolf Liebeschuetz, "Genes into regnum: The Vandals," in *Regna and Gentes: The Relationship Between Late Antique and Early Medieval Peoples and Kingdoms in the Transformation of the Roman World*, eds. Hans-Werner Goetz, Jörg Jarnut & Walter Pohl (Brill: Leiden, 2003), 57, Hans-Werner Goetz, "Gens, Kings and Kingdoms: The Franks," in *Regna and Gentes: The Relationship Between Late Antique and Early Medieval Peoples and Kingdoms in the Transformation of the Roman World*, ed. Hans-Werner Goetz, Jörg Jarnut & Walter Pohl (Brill: Leiden, 2003), 323

⁴¹ Barth, *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries*, 9-10, 15-16

⁴² Barth, *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries*, 29, Reuter, *Medieval Politics*, 103, Walter Pohl, "Archeology of identity: introduction," in *Archaeology of Identity-Archäologie der Identität*, eds. Walter Pohl & Mathias Mehofer (Wien, 2010), 15-17

⁴³ Patrick J. Geary, "Ethnic identity as a situational construct in the early middle ages," *Mitteilungen der Anthropologischen Gesellschaft in Wien (MAGW)* 113 (1983), 15-26, at 17-18

interaction and an individual's subjective view of others. There is therefore a disagreement between the anthropological view of ethnicity and the medieval historian's views on *ethnos*.

The best way to resolve such a conflict is through a medieval primary source which discusses *ethnos*. One example, a western European source from the 9th century, has been analyzed by Patrick J. Geary. The source defines three ways of distinguishing identity in the middle ages. These are origin, including geographical family and ancestry, ways of dressing and fighting and finally language, which was fluid as multilingualism was common. Notably none of these categories were objective, indicating that even in the middle ages, identifying with an *ethnos*, was a subjective matter not objective.⁴⁴ Naturally a 9th century western European source is not ideal when attempting to describe the nomadic Avar *ethnos*, even if the Avar khaganate included culturally Germanic *ethne* like the Gepids or Germanic influenced groups like the Slavs. Walter Pohl's different categorizations from *Archeology of identity* is therefore also useful, as he argues that during the medieval age *ethnos* might correspond to everything from local groups, villages and clans to sub-tribes and super-regional kingdoms.⁴⁵

As part of the research into the culture of the subjugated *ethne* of the Avar khaganate secondary sources looking at more western contexts have also been considered. Two such sources are the collaborative works; *The Other Europe* and *Regna and Gentes*, who both consider the evolution of Germanic cultural groups who had to adapt to changed geopolitical circumstances either because of migration or conquest. As these works provide information on the western Eurasian constituents of the Avar khaganate they are useful sources of information on both the Avar *ethnos* and the *ethne* they ruled. The books also discuss how different migrating groups established themselves, ensured the continuation of their group and how they related to the Roman foreign policy, all challenges faced by the Avars. Yet an understanding of European traditions and culture cannot alone explain the identities of the Avar khaganate. It should be combined with an understanding of the traditions of the central-Asian steppes, which, as mentioned, probably constituted an integral part of Avar political and social traditions.

1.3.3: Methodological Challenges of Archeology

A continuation of the methodological problems connected to identity is whether it is possible to identify *ethne* through archeological remains. This is a central problem as archeology must be used by this thesis because of the large amounts of archeological material, which primarily

⁴⁴ Geary, "Ethnic identity", 19-21

⁴⁵ Pohl, "Archeology of identity: introduction", 15-17

originated from about 60 000 graves. Most of the finds from the early Avar khaganate which therefore are relevant for this thesis have been found around the Danube and Tisza rivers.⁴⁶ The main issue is whether there is correlation between material culture and *ethnos* with the resulting discussions primarily focusing on the classification of cultures and how they correspond to the *ethne* of the past, whether self-identification can be found in grave material and how modern concerns have shaped historical interpretations.⁴⁷ These discussions are a reaction against prior archaeological trends which focused on identifying different ethnic groups through archaeological materials.⁴⁸ In recent years the discussion has drifted towards causation rather than correlation, acknowledging that archaeological material is found in a certain place for many different reasons. Additionally, as mentioned, it is possible to be a member of several different *ethne* and to switch between them, making identity less likely to have an impact on funerary material.

In the “introduction to Archaeology of identity”, Pohl argues that a historian needs to combine archeology with primary sources, using it to add context and information, thus creating new understanding, even though it can result in misunderstandings and misinterpretations.⁴⁹ The combination of archeology and *ethnos* are even more important in studies of the Avars as there was no overarching material culture, instead the Avar khaganate was dominated by many different influences and material cultures. It should therefore be extra fruitful to utilize archaeological finds when discussing *ethnos*, even if grave goods are unreliable as they have meanings beyond identity and way of life. An example is how elite Huns were most likely buried with items from defeated enemies, thereby displaying for example a Roman identity not their Hunnic identity. A concrete example of this is during a diplomatic mission to Atilla’s court there is a mention of a Hunnic merchant who was originally a Roman but who was dressed as a Hun and who was initially identified as a Hun by the diplomat. If the Avar *ethnos* had similar traditions a lax or unaware archologist or historian might therefore misinterpret funerary material from the Avar khaganate.⁵⁰

⁴⁶ Falko Daim, “Avars and Avar archeology. An introduction” in *Regna and Gentes: The Relationship Between Late Antique and Early Medieval Peoples and Kingdoms in the Transformation of the Roman World*, eds. Hans-Werner Goetz, Jörg Jarnut & Walter Pohl (Brill: Leiden, 2003), 463, 469

⁴⁷ Csanad Balint, “A contribution to research on ethnicity: a view from the east” in *Archaeology of Identity- Archäologie der Identität*, eds. Walter Pohl & Mathias Mehofer (Wien, 2010) 145-146, Pohl, “Archeology of identity: introduction”, 9

⁴⁸ Gergely Csiky, *Avar-Age Polearms and Edged Weapons: Classification, Typology, Chronology and Technology*, (Leiden, 2015), 16

⁴⁹ Pohl, “Archeology of identity: introduction, 18-20

⁵⁰ Pohl, *The Avars*, 101-105, Pohl, “Archeology of identity: introduction”, 19

Schmauder also views funerary goods as unreliable sources of information as he argues that age and gender have more impact than *ethnos*.⁵¹ He specifically questions whether one can even define the *ethnos* of entire cemeteries, which he argues indicates just how unsure conclusions of *ethnos* based on grave goods are.⁵² Csanad Balint and Gergely Csiky both agree, with Balint viewing grave goods as merely symbolic and Csiky arguing that they reflect the interests of the deceased, his family and society, rather than reality.⁵³ Falko Daim partially disagrees and argues that some signs of identity might be available through funerary goods, but that these are not necessarily connected to *ethnos*, as archeology only defines culture groups, not *ethnos*. He therefore argues that the archeological culture of the Avar khaganate cannot be extrapolated to an Avar identity.⁵⁴

Tivadar Vida strongly disagrees with Schmauder as he believes that it is possible to gain knowledge of past cultures and cultural interaction through archeology. He views archeological items as remnants of material traditions, not as reflections of identity, with archeological material allowing access to changes and material developments within different cultures.⁵⁵ Florin Curta goes even further arguing that certain types of decoration and jewelry were defining features of the Slav *ethnos* and therefore decisive for being identified as a Slav although not identifying oneself as a Slav.⁵⁶ This tacit acceptance of a connection between archeological material and *ethnos* can be viewed as too simple, as archeology should not be used by itself in a discussion of identity and *ethnos*, even if the argument is based on the Roman understanding of the Slav *ethnos*.⁵⁷ This thesis will therefore use the archaeological material to support the primary sources in an attempt to create a more accurate picture of the past, with the material providing insight into the cultural changes which occurred during the

⁵¹ Michael Schmauder, "The relationship between Frankish *gens* and *regnum*: a proposal based on archeological evidence," in *Regna and Gentes: The Relationship Between Late Antique and Early Medieval Peoples and Kingdoms in the Transformation of the Roman World*, eds. Hans-Werner Goetz, Jörg Jarnut & Walter Pohl (Brill: Leiden, 2003), 272, 275

⁵² Schmauder, "Frankish *gens* and *regnum*," 302

⁵³ Csanad Balint, "Avar Goldsmiths' Work from the Perspective of Cultural History," in 'Intelligible beauty': Recent Research on Byzantine Jewelry (British Museum Research Publication, Band 178), eds. Noel Adams & Chris Entwistle (British Museum Press: London, 2010), 147, Gergely, Csiky. "Armament and Society in the Mirror of the Avar Archeology: The Transdanubia-Phenomenon revisited". *Studia Universitatis Cibiniensis. Series Historica*. 8. (2011): 9-34, at 14

⁵⁴ Daim, "Avars and Avar archeology", 524, 589-590, Hans-Werner Goetz, Jörg Jarnut & Walter Pohl, eds., *Regna and Gentes: The Relationship Between Late Antique and Early Medieval Peoples and Kingdoms in the Transformation of the Roman World* (Brill: Leiden, 2003), 600

⁵⁵ Tivadar Vida, "Conflict and coexistence: the local population of the Carpathian Basin under Avar rule (sixth to seventh century)" in *The Other Europe in the Middle Ages : Avars, Bulgars, Khazars, and Cumans*, ed. Florin Curta (Boston, 2008), 15, 17

⁵⁶ Curta, *The Making*, 291-294, 310

⁵⁷ Curta, *The Making*, 310

early Avar khaganate. It will therefore conform with Vida's views on the information which can be derived from archeology.

Vida mainly focuses on the material relationships between the Avar *ethnos* and the different subjugated *ethne* and between the Avar khaganate and the rest of Europe.⁵⁸ His works are primarily useful for the development of the Avar *ethnos* and influences between the early Avar khaganate and the rest of Europe. Furthermore, Vida emphasizes the importance of the sedentary subjugated *ethne* for wider continental contact, thereby creating a basis for discussing the relationship between the Avar *ethnos*, their subjugated *ethne* and the Avar economy. Another very respected archeologist, who has focused on the Avars, is the already mentioned Falko Daim, who has among other things written "Introduction to Avar archeology", which covers archaeological developments spanning the entirety of the Avar khaganate's existence. One of the main topics is how different cultures influenced the Avar khaganate and how the Avar *ethnos* changed and developed. He also discusses potential points of contact between the Avar khaganate, the Balkans and other parts of Europe.⁵⁹

Archeology will also be utilized extensively to discuss trade between sedentary peoples and the Avar khaganate. This is because there is a general lack of mentions of trade in early medieval primary sources in general and regarding the Avars specifically. Investigations into trade during the early Middle Ages has overcome this challenge by investigating mentions of travel and supplementing them with archeological finds, primarily amphorae.⁶⁰ This method does not really work when describing the economy and commerce of the Avar khaganate as there is both a lack of mentions of travelers and finds of amphorae from the Avar khaganate.⁶¹ These methods will therefore not be used, instead signs of contact will be sought in other forms of archeological evidence and through a comparison of the foreign policy of sedentary empires.

Additionally, books by Wickham and McCormick have been consulted as they have had significant influence on the historiography of Mediterranean trade during the early middle ages. Sadly, neither book really discusses the Avar khaganate, limiting themselves to the core areas of the Mediterranean and therefore at most covering southern parts of the Balkans. Any

⁵⁸ Vida "Conflict and coexistence", 13-15

⁵⁹ Daim, "Avars and Avar archeology", 468-469, 480-481, 518

⁶⁰ Michael McCormick, *Origins of the European Economy: Communications and Commerce AD 300-900* (Cambridge, 2001), 5, 12-16,37, Chris Wickham, *Framing the Early Middle Ages: Europe and the Mediterranean, 400-800*, (Oxford, 2005), 693

⁶¹ Florin Curta, *The Long Sixth Century in Eastern Europe*, (Boston 2021), 97, 274

coverage on the Avars and the Slavs focuses on the effect of Avar and Slavic raids, which naturally does not include information on any connections, trading or otherwise. McCormick for example only argues that the Avar khaganate's raids destroyed the trade routes across the northern Balkans.⁶² Thus, the marginal status of the Avar khaganate is established in the historiography. This emphasizes the importance of archeology and the few references to connections in the Roman primary sources, especially since one of the only authors actually discussing the Avar economy, Florin Curta, relies heavily on archeology to do so.

A last methodological problem connected to archeology is connected to the dating of archeological finds. Avar archeology is usually split into three different eras, the early era from 568 to 650/670, the middle era from 650/670 to 710 and the late era from 710 to ca 800.⁶³ Of these only finds from the early age will be considered as they are the only ones relevant to the timeframe of this thesis. Naturally the categorization of an item within an era can be imprecise and as the early era stretches beyond the timeframe of this paper, some items from a later date might accidentally be used, especially since imprecise or wrongful dating is both possible and plausible. To ensure that such cases are held to a minimum, only finds which plausibly date to the 6th century will be used. This includes finds dated through carbon dating, which only give an inkling of when an item was made, not time of usage or burial. It also includes finds dated through numismatics which also only provides a date for the earliest burial, as coins can plausibly exist for decades before being buried. It is therefore close to impossible not to use finds post 600, even if the materials are dated through typology and other means.

1.4: Disposition

Chapter 2 will cover the political system of the Avar khaganate and focus on how the system was organized, how it evolved and how loyalty to the khagan and the cohesion of the Avar khaganate was ensured. It will also focus on how the political system dealt with specific historical events, as well as possible changes to the political system and the political culture of the Avar khaganate. The chapter will also construct a methodology for the later chapters by describing how the political system was organized and how decisions were reached within the Avar khaganate, thus creating a framework for discussing other developments. Additionally, it will describe how a specific group of nomads in a specific set of circumstances ensured the cohesion of a newly established state by utilizing resources extracted from the major

⁶² McCormick, *Origins of the European Economy*, 62, 68-69, 78, 370

⁶³ Daim, "Avars and Avar archeology", 465, 487

neighboring sedentary empire. Thereby partially exploring how the political culture of the Avars adapted because of influence from surrounding *ethne* and polities.

The third chapter will cover the Avar identity and *ethnos*, the identity of the subjugated *ethne* and how the different *ethne* interacted and resulting cultural changes. It will also discuss how interaction with the Romans effected these developments. The chapter will also explain how cohesion and control was ensured, by a specific nomadic group, over subjugated *ethne* with different cultural material and how the material culture of the nomadic group changed as a consequence. Thus, it will explain how the constituents of the culture of the Avar *ethnos* changed due to the interaction between the Avar *ethnos* and the subjugated *ethne*. Thus, it connects to the preceding chapter by presenting how the individuals participating in the political structure were united and who they were identified by others.

The fourth chapter will cover the economy of the Avar khaganate and to what extent there was economic contact between the Avar khaganate and surrounding polities. It will therefore discuss how the Avar khaganate's economy and international contacts was an extension of the political and social sphere. The role of the subjugated *ethne* within the economy will also be highlighted both by how they supported the Avar elite and how the *ethne* continued the contacts which predated the Avar conquest of the Carpathian basin. Furthermore, the chapter will explore potential reasons for why the Avars themselves did not prioritize trade. It will therefore discuss the development of the Avar khaganate's economy as an example of a nomadic *ethnos* interacting with its subjugated sedentary *ethne* and why a specific nomadic *ethnos* would avoid trade with surrounding sedentary polities, as a consequence of its culture and internal forces.

2: The Political Culture of the Avar khaganate

The Avar khaganate was created by a group which most likely originated and splintered from the Rouran khaganate following its destruction by the Gök Turk khaganate. During the group's westward migration, it likely created a political entity centered around a khagan as a continuation of their former empire. After their conquest of the Carpathian basin, the Avars established a political structure partially based on the political structure of their former empire. This structure ensured the loyalty of subjugated *ethne* and the cohesion of the Avar khaganate through a redistributive prestige economy. The economy created a demand for luxury goods, which were created by Roman gold coins, which was melted down and used to create prestigious items. The internal demand for luxury goods and the redistributive economy was connected to the ideology of the heavenly mandate, which stated that heavenly support resulted in worldly success. Lack of success could therefore result in changes in leadership, because of the lack of heavenly mandate, which ensured the continued cohesion and the existence of the polity.

2.1: The Origin of the Avars

Before discussing the political culture of the early Avar khaganate, polities with similar political cultures will be presented as they could have similar political systems or have influenced the Avar khaganate's political system. However, this demands an understanding of the likely origins of the Avars, as they would carry with them cultural baggage from their former polity and its history. Such an understanding is challenging as the origin of the Avars was the subject of an extended discussion, with two major possible origins, the Hephthalites and the Rouran. The Hephthalites (ca440-560 CE), was an empire created by a steppe people which controlled parts of east-Iran, whilst the Rouran (330-555 CE) was a nomadic empire which controlled modern day Mongolia and other parts of north-east Asia.

Whilst there is disagreements about the origins of the Avars, scholars do agree that they migrated because of the ascendance of the Gök Turks (a steppe empire which dominated the Eurasian steppe 552-657 CE) as they defeated both of the groups whom the Avars might have originated from.⁶⁴ The argument for a Hephthalite origin comes from Simocatta who, based on a letter from the Gök Turk khagan, claims that the Avars were pseudo-Avars who adopted the name to spread fear among other steppe peoples, with the real Avars fleeing east, not west

⁶⁴ Pohl, *The Avars*, 37-41

after their defeat. The same letter mentions that the “pseudo-Avars” were made up of two tribes, the Var and the Chunni, tribes who are both independently mentioned among the Hephthalites and the Rouran.⁶⁵ This might be because of their diplomatic connection and resulting alliance against the north Chinese state of Tuoba Wei.⁶⁶ An argument against a Hephthalite origin is that Simocatta’s information came from the Gök Turk khagan, who had an interest in downplaying the importance of the Avars.⁶⁷ Another argument is that Procopius mentions that the Hephthalites lived in cities, which would make it less likely that they were the originators of the nomadic Avars.⁶⁸

Theophylact Simocatta mentions also how the Avar name spread fear among the nomadic peoples of the western Eurasian steppes. This was possibly because “Avar” was how the Rouran styled themselves and was known as on the steppes, with the Rouran name being a mocking designation created by the Tuoba Wei and therefore how they were known among the sedentary Chinese. Such an association between the Rouran and the Avars is supported by the Orkhon inscription, written in the early 7th century by the Gök Turks, which among other things, described the Gök Turks rise to power and how they originally defeated the mighty Apar and came to dominate the steppes.⁶⁹ This utilization of the Avar name might indicate that after their defeat by the Gök Turks some of the former Rouran elite, now fugitives, organized themselves around the remnants of their old political structure. By utilizing their Avar name to legitimize the remaining structure and the elite connected to it, they could possibly have ensured the continuation of the Rouran khaganate.⁷⁰

The connection between the Rouran and the Avars described above is supported by a study which compared the genetics of elite Avars in the Carpathian basin, the genetics of Rouran and other Asian peoples and the genetics of peoples predating the Avars in the Carpathian basin. The elite Avars were identified through large uniform graves which contained wealth and symbols of power. With the study concluding that the genetic makeup of the elite Avars likely had an East-Eurasian origin, similar to the genetic makeup of the Rouran and the Tuoba Wei.⁷¹ Even so it is important to emphasize that this only refers to the elite Avars not lower

⁶⁵ Kardaras, *Byzantium and the Avars*, 17

⁶⁶ Jin Kim, *The Huns*, 183

⁶⁷ Kardaras, *Byzantium and the Avars*, 16-19

⁶⁸ Procopius of Caesarea, *History of the Wars*, 1. 3 trans. H. B. Dewing (London, 1914)

⁶⁹ Golden, *History of the Turkic Peoples*, 76

⁷⁰ Kardaras, *Byzantium and the Avars*, 14-16, Petersen, “In Search of Equilibrium”, 49

⁷¹ Vida, “Conflict and coexistence”, 15-16, Guido Alberto Gneccchi-Ruscione, et al. “Ancient genomes reveal origin and rapid trans-European migration of 7th century Avar elites”. *Cell* 185,(April 2022): 1402-1413, at 1405-1409

ranking members of the group and not the myriad of groups subjugated during the westward migration of the Avars.⁷² It is also possible that the subjugated groups changed the culture and language of the Avars, during the migration, thereby creating a group with little in common with the original Avars.⁷³ Another possibility is that the Avars consisted of groups from both the Rouran and the Hephthalites.

Nonetheless, this paper will base itself on the argument that culturally the Rouran khaganate had the most impact on the Avar khaganate. A consequence of the elite most likely originating from the Rouran as, based on the above discussion, it seems to be the most likely place of origin. However, it should still be emphasized that this is a significantly insecure conclusion as it is based on information from sources from many different regions, political circumstances and periods of time. There is no way to be entirely sure how the information presented in the sources were influenced which makes it impossible to ensure that the same people are discussed in the different source materials.

2.2: Historically Related Steppe Empires

The political traditions of three steppe empires will be discussed as similar political structures might also have existed within the Avar khaganate. These three empires are the previously discussed Rouran and Gök Turk khaganates and the Xiongnu khaganate (3rd century BCE-1st century CE). The Xiongnu will be utilized because of their legacy on both the eastern and western steppes, with their political culture and organization being continued by the empires which followed the rupture of the Xiongnu in the east. Their western legacy was primarily spread by their likely descendants the Huns, (who also conquered the Carpathian basin).⁷⁴ Thus, the Xiongnu impacted both the future empires on the eastern steppe as well as the groups which the Avars encountered and accumulated during their westward migration, particularly the Onogurs and the Kutrigurs, who likely had been part of the late Hunnic empire.⁷⁵ This also makes the Hunnic empire another empire which is connected historically to the Avar Khaganate.

The Rouran khaganate was probably organized through units based on a decimal counting system, combined with the normal steppe organization of clans and tribes. These clans and tribes were further differentiated between the proper Rouran tribes and clans as well as

⁷² Pohl, *The Avars*, 42-43

⁷³ Golden, *History of the Turkic Peoples*, 110-111, Pohl, *The Avars*, 42-46, 198

⁷⁴ Jin Kim, *The Huns*, 2-3, 59, Barfield, *Perilous Frontier*, 8

⁷⁵ Jin Kim, *The Huns*, 89-90

unrelated tribes and clans who either had been subjugated or had joined the Rouran khaganate voluntarily. The unrelated tribes did most likely not have the same ethnicity as the core Rouran tribes, thereby adding linguistic and cultural variety to the Rouran khaganate.⁷⁶ The Gök Turks and Xiongnu had similar structures, which is seen as a general trait of nomadic empires. All three empires were led by autocratic leaders who, to varying degrees, were supported by imperial governors which again controlled the leaders of the subservient unrelated clans and tribes.⁷⁷

The imperial governors usually had formal titles in order to create a clear organizational structure below the leader. For the Xiongnu this structure likely consisted of four regional governors who controlled twenty-four imperial ministers.⁷⁸ The Gök Turks probably also had four regions, which were further divided into areas administrated by individuals holding titles like Yagbu, Tengin and Il-Teber. All titles likely inherited from the Rouran khaganate.⁷⁹ The administration was likely further supplemented by nobles, who were put in charge of different subjugated tribes and clans. They would acquire the loyalty of their subservient group possibly by marrying into it, thus ensuring their control over land and people.⁸⁰ This distribution of power could create problems by creating powerful individuals with independent power bases, who could revolt against the legitimate autocratic leader.⁸¹ This is what occurred after the death of Attila:

“For the sons of Attila, who through the license of his lust formed almost a people of themselves, were clamoring that the nations should be divided among them equally and that warlike kings with their peoples should be apportioned to them by lot like a family estate. When Ardaric, king of the Gepidae, learned this, he became enraged because so many nations were being treated like slaves of the basest condition, and was the first to rise against the sons of Attila. Good fortune attended him, and he effaced the disgrace of servitude that rested upon him. For by his revolt he freed not only his own tribe, but all the

⁷⁶ Nikolay Nikolaevich Kradin, “From Tribal Confederation to Empire: The Evolution of the Rouran Society” *Acta orientalia Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae* n.s. (2005): 149-169, at 153-155, Jin Kim, *The Huns*, 39-40

⁷⁷ Barfield, *Perilous Frontier*, 132, Jin Kim, *The Huns*, 22

⁷⁸ Jin Kim, *The Huns*, 22-23

⁷⁹ Peter B. Golden, *Central Asia in world history* (Oxford, 2011), 43, Golden, *Ethnicity and State Formation*, 39-41, Khodadad, *ReOrienting the Sasanians*, 179, Denis Sinor, “The establishment and dissolution of the Turk empire,” in *The Cambridge history of early Inner Asia*, ed. Denis Sinor (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 1990), 298

⁸⁰ Jin Kim, *The Huns*, 11-12, 64-65, Golden, *Central Asia*, 1

⁸¹ Kradin, “Tribal confederation to empire”, 159, Golden, *Central Asia*, 39

others who were equally oppressed; since all readily strive for that which is sought for the general advantage.”⁸²

Beyond this the administration of the Rouran, Gök Turks and the Xiongnu, were all almost definitely split into an eastern and western wing, with an authoritative leader controlling each wing and with the leader of the eastern wing traditionally having the most prestige. Golden argues that this organization ensured internal flexibility, whilst also lowering chances for internal conflict, by creating additional prestigious positions.⁸³ The rulers of these wings were therefore usually close relatives and high-ranking members of the royal clan/s.⁸⁴ The different tribes of the empires were also usually divided between the two wings, with the Gök Turks as an example as described by a Chinese source called *Institutional History of Tang*, from 961.⁸⁵ Yet the two-wing division was only the starting point for further developments. For the Xiongnu, the east-west split became less important over time. The Rouran khaganate developed differently as the division likely remained important, but the western half slowly became more important than the east.⁸⁶

Nomadic empires probably needed a stratified administrations due to the inherent mobility of nomadic peoples, with trustworthy people being necessary to ensure control. This demand resulted in the leader’s power being purely personal and based on personal relationships with the different leaders.⁸⁷ Such relationships were usually created and maintained through the distribution of luxury goods, gained from sedentary empires through war or trade. Failure to acquire such goods could result in the leader being deposed, something which was justified through the ideology of the heavenly mandate. This was a concept originally derived from the Chinese, based on the idea that the autocratic leader was the son of Tengri, who ruled everything under heaven, a term first adopted by Shanyu Mao-Tun of the Xiongnu in 174 BCE.⁸⁸

For the Rouran the demand for luxury goods likely resulted in fluttering between peace and war, with wars being followed by peace treaties which included tribute. In practice this meant

⁸² Jordanes, *The Origin and Deeds of the Goths*, 50.259-260, trans. Charles C. Mierow (Princeton, 1908)

⁸³ Barfield, *Perilous Frontier*, 37-38, Jin Kim, *The Huns*, 22-23, 39, Golden, *History of the Turkic Peoples*, 65, Golden, *Central Asia*, 30-31, 39

⁸⁴ Barfield, *Perilous Frontier*, 120

⁸⁵ Mihály Dobrovits, “The Thirty Tribes of the Turks,” *Acta Orientalia Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae* 57 n.s. (2004), 257-262, at 258-260

⁸⁶ Kradin, “Tribal confederation to empire,” 154-155, Yu, “The Hsiung-nu,” 136

⁸⁷ Barfield, *Perilous Frontier*, 5

⁸⁸ Pohl, *The Avars*, 55-57, 202-206, Golden, *Central Asia*, 14-15, Ying-Shih, Yu “Han foreign relations”, in *The Cambridge History of China: Volume 1*, ed. Denis Twitchett & Michael Loewe, (Cambridge, 1986), 378, 388

that the Rouran khagans had to succeed with war, because failure would not ensure access to the luxury goods which their power was based on.⁸⁹ The Gök Turk khagans were in a similar, but stronger, position. The demand for successful wars resulted in only the most brutal and talented khagans being able to ensure their rule, as failure to access luxury goods damaged the Khagan's heavenly mandate and his legitimacy, thereby weakening the cohesion of his empire.⁹⁰ For the nomads the heavenly mandate was probably not a demand for success, rather lack of success was a result of Tengri withholding his support, resulting in revolt being incentivized to ensure Tengri's good will. The importance of Tengri's support is apparent through the embassy of the Roman diplomat Zemarcus who visited the khagan of the western Gök Turks in 568. During his travels Zemarcus had to undergo rituals designed to protect the heavenly mandate of the khagan, with the heavenly mandate being illustrated through the khagan's throne and other associated symbols.⁹¹ The heavenly mandate was also connected to descent from a recognized royal clan, with the ruler therefore ensuring that the empire was a legitimate continuation of older, prestigious entities and therefore a legitimate political entity in its own right.⁹²

The importance of the heavenly mandate resulted in successful leaders being extensively mourned, as shown by the following description of Attila's funeral:

“Then, as is the custom of that race, they plucked out the hair of their heads and made their faces hideous with deep wounds, that the renowned warrior might be mourned, not by effeminate wailings and tears, but by the blood of men... His body was placed in the midst of a plain and lay in state in a silken tent as a sight for men's admiration. The best horsemen of the entire tribe of the Huns rode around in circles, after the manner of circus games, in the place to which he had been brought and told of his deeds in a funeral dirge in the following manner: "The chief of the Huns, King Attila, born of his sire Mundiuch, lord of bravest tribes, sole possessor of the Scythian and German realms--powers unknown before--captured cities and terrified both empires of the Roman world and, appeased by their prayers, took annual tribute to save the rest from plunder. And when he had accomplished all this by the favor of fortune, he fell, not by wound of the foe, nor by

⁸⁹ Kradin, "Tribal confederation to empire", 158-159

⁹⁰ Golden, *Central Asia*, 43, Golden, *History of the Turkic Peoples*, 146-147, Golden, *Ethnicity and State Formation*, 39-40, Pohl, *The Avars*, 204-206

⁹¹ Mihály Dobrovits, "The Altaic World Through Byzantine Eyes: Some Remarks on Zemarchus' Journey to the Turks," *Acta Orientalia Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae* n.s. (2011), 373-409, at 384-390

⁹² Panos Sophoulis, *Byzantium and Bulgaria, 775-831*, (Leiden, 2012), 71

treachery of friends, but in the midst of his nation at peace, happy in his joy and without sense of pain.”⁹³

The grief was therefore likely both a celebration of their recently departed leader and his successes and of the heavenly mandate which had supported him during his endeavors. The line “the favor of fortune” especially indicates the importance placed on the support of heaven for Attila’s success.

Naturally not all leaders were as successful, and several were deposed because of their failings. An example is the Rouran khagan Douulun (485-492 CE), who after losing several battles was assassinated and replaced.⁹⁴ Another example is Bleda who might have been killed and removed by his brother Attila in 444 CE because of military setbacks. Such brutal actions was because the heavenly support was shared with the entirety of the royal clan, with lacking support threatening the leadership of the clan as a whole.⁹⁵

2.3: The Roles of the Elite Avars Within the Avar khaganate

Roman primary sources and archeological finds indicate that the Avar khaganate probably had a stratified society and an elite just like the other steppe empires.⁹⁶ The elite, as described in the Roman primary sources, mostly appear as an amorphous group, with the only significant exceptions being the Avar diplomats mentioned by Menander and Theophanes.⁹⁷ However, through the archeological material the elite seems significantly more diverse, with some being buried in large uniform graves with prestigious items normal in steppe societies, whilst others were buried in west/central European style graves with Germanic cultural items.⁹⁸

A natural question is how the relationship between the khagan, and the elite of the Avar khaganate functioned. Did the khagan rule in isolation as described by Menander, Theophanes and the *Strategikon*?: “These nations have a monarchical form of government, and their ruler subject them to cruel punishments for their mistakes. Governed not by love but by fear, they steadfastly bear labors and hardships.”⁹⁹, or was support from the elite, combined with

⁹³ Jordanes, *Origin and Deeds of the Goths*, 49.254-257

⁹⁴ Kradin, “Tribal confederation to empire”, 158-159

⁹⁵ Herwig Wolfram, *The Roman Empire and its Germanic Peoples* (Berkeley, 1997), 128-129, Golden, *History of the Turkic Peoples*, 147

⁹⁶ Pohl, *The Avars*, 240-241

⁹⁷ Kardaras, *Byzantium and the Avars*, 12

⁹⁸ Vida, “Conflict and coexistence”, 15-16, 29

⁹⁹ Maurice, *Maurice’s Strategikon*, 11.2 trans. George T. Dennis (Philadelphia, 1984)

ideology and institutional systems like the heavenly mandate decisive for the cohesion of the Avar khaganate, just as in the previously mentioned steppe empires.

One possible role for the elite of the Avar khaganate was advisors for the khagan; which would mean that he was not the only decision maker within the Avar khaganate, with influence from leading Avars being decisive for the decisions taken by the khagan.¹⁰⁰ Menander provides some proof for this with an example of how the elite of the Avar khaganate could influence the khaganate's political choices:

“The Avar envoy was aware that this story had been purposely put together by the Emperor, who hoped by confronting them with the fear of the Turks to divert them from their object. The envoy, who was the major advocate continually urging war with the romans, seemed to go along and agreed to refer the whole matter to the khagan.”¹⁰¹

Another example comes from a peace negotiation from 594, described by Simocatta. “Now Targitius and the barbarian elite urged the Chagan to put an end to the war, for they said that his indignation against the Romans was unjustified.”¹⁰² This discussion is known because it happened in the presence of a Roman diplomat, who was negotiating with the khagan following Roman successes against the Slavs. These successes led to the khagan feeling threatened and therefore considering offensive military actions, which the elite of the Avar khaganate, led by Targitius, argued against.

The discussion resulted in: “...the Romans handed over the barbarian captives to the Chagan, and settled the dispute, although they left him without a share of the other spoils.”¹⁰³ Yet just a few sentences later: “Maurice reproached Priscus and imputed errors of simplicity to him, since he had foolishly surrendered the booty to the barbarians”.¹⁰⁴ I therefore believe it to be likely that the Avar khagan received both captives and a share of the booty gained by the Romans during their campaign against the Slavs. Simocatta claims that the compromise and settling of the dispute was a result of the diplomatic skills of the Romans: “...the ambassador, whose grasp of history was great, humbled the barbarian bombast with precedents.”¹⁰⁵ “And so the Chagan, in amazement at the man's good sense, reproved his arrogance, checked his

¹⁰⁰ Pohl, *The Avars*, 83-84, 220

¹⁰¹ Menander Protector, *History*, 25.2 trans. Roger C. Blockley (Liverpool, 1985)

¹⁰² Theophylact Simocatta, *History*, 6.11.6 trans. Michael Whitby & Mary Whitby (Oxford, 1986)

¹⁰³ Theophylact Simocatta, *History*, 6.11.20

¹⁰⁴ Theophylact Simocatta, *History*, 6.11.21

¹⁰⁵ Theophylact Simocatta, *History*, 6.11.9

boldness, and rearranged matters into a peaceful state,”¹⁰⁶ but again emperor Maurice’s reaction indicates that this is overemphasized. At worst the clear opinion of the elite of the Avar khaganate made it possible for the khagan to compromise, but I believe it is more likely that the Roman diplomats were duped by the khagan’s threats and conceded more than necessary to avoid war.

Based on Targitius’s influence and his pervasiveness as an ambassador it is very likely that he had a formal position within the Avar khaganate, something which could also explain why he is mentioned by name. The position could be akin to a high-level administrative position of for example the Xiongnu or the Gök Turks. It is therefore surprising that he is not mentioned with a title, as titles were, as mentioned, commonly used to organize the administrations of steppe empires. The lack of titles applies to almost the whole of the Avar khaganate as no titles beyond khagan are mentioned in the late roman written sources, including Menander and the *Strategikon*, who both had remarkable insights into Avar society.¹⁰⁷ This lack of titles is therefore surprising, something which is emphasized by mentions of multitudes of titles among the Avars, primarily with inner Asian origins, during Charlemagne’s conquest.¹⁰⁸

Szadeczky-Kardoss argues that Bokoolabras and Targitius were titles instead of names, but I believe this to be unlikely, because there are no clear predecessors and no successors to the titles, including the previously mentioned titles which the Franks under Charlemagne encountered.¹⁰⁹ As mentioned, Golden does not believe that the Avar khaganate was politically organized, something which would explain the lack of titles. However, just like the Gök Turks and the Khazars the Avars migrated from central Asia, thus making them just as likely to be politically organized. Furthermore, the *Strategikon* describes the Avar khaganate as organized, albeit in a military sense. “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.”¹¹⁰ The *Strategikon* thus contradicts Golden by mentioning the Turk and the Avar khaganates as examples of organized nomadic states. This organization likely consisted of the Avar armies

¹⁰⁶ Theophylact Simocatta, *History*, 6.11.16

¹⁰⁷ Blockley, *History of Menander the Guardsman*, 9-10, 18

¹⁰⁸ Walter Pohl, “A Non-Roman Empire in Central Europe: the Avars” in *Regna and Gentes: The Relationship Between Late Antique and Early Medieval Peoples and Kingdoms in the Transformation of the Roman World*, ed. Hans-Werner Goetz, Jörg Jarnut & Walter Pohl (Brill: Leiden, 2003), 594

¹⁰⁹ Samuel Szadeczky-Kardoss, “The Avars,” in *The Cambridge history of early Inner Asia*, ed. Denis Sinor (Cambridge University Press: Cambridge, 1990), 222

¹¹⁰ Maurice, *Maurice’s Strategikon*, 11.2

being divided into units based on the decimal counting system, which often is considered normal for steppe empires.¹¹¹ Such an organized military would have demanded a certain level of structure, thereby indicating that the Avar khaganate had a similarly advanced state structure as the Gök Turk and the Khazar khaganates, with this state structure perhaps being a partial remnant of the old Rouran structure.

Similarly to the lack of titles, there is no mention of the bipartite structure within the Avar khaganate until it is mentioned by Frankish sources during Charlemagne's conquest of the Avar khaganate early in the 9th century. Naturally, this does not mean that the Avar khaganate had a bipartite two centuries earlier even if such structures were central for empires like the Rouran.¹¹² The complete lack of mentions of such a structure during the early Avar khaganate is supported by finds of rich archeological material with strong central Asian connections, which through their geographical concentration indicate that the early Avar khaganate only had one center of power. Specifically, these finds consists of swords covered in gold with finds concentrated along the Danube and Tisza rivers, which plausibly makes this area the center of the early Avar khaganate.¹¹³

The lack of a bipartite structure might be because a small amount of the Rouran elite migrated to Europe to form the Avar khaganate causing no consistent cultural continuity between the Rouran and the Avar khaganates. Yet there are other alternative explanations for the lack of a bipartite structure within the early Avar khaganate. Firstly, it could be that the Avar khaganate was not large enough to need a bipartite structure. Secondly, the plentiful wealth extracted from the Roman empire, could have ensured that there was no lack of prestige for the remaining members of the royal clan. This would also explain why the bipartite structure reappeared within the later Avar khaganate as loss of tribute, a less stable state and possibly a larger royal clan led to a larger demand for prestigious positions and an increased need for more authoritative leaders.

Even though there was no title and no bipartite structure it is still likely that the elite of the Avar khaganate participated in a system which delegated power, just as in the previously discussed steppe empires. This delegation of power likely took the form of a pseudo-administration, which probably also existed within the Avar khaganate.¹¹⁴ The most likely

¹¹¹ Pohl, *The Avars*, 206

¹¹² Pohl, *The Avars*, 354-361

¹¹³ Daim, "Avars and Avar archeology", 469, Csiky, *Avar-Age Polearms*, 405-406

¹¹⁴ Petersen, "In search of equilibrium", 40, Jin Kim, *The Huns*, 22-24

form of this administration was that elite members of the Avar khaganate were given control of different clans and tribes, with the elite therefore creating independent power bases within the Avar khaganate, with internal competition and conflict as a possible consequence. This delegation would naturally encompass some of the newly subjugated groups, like the Gepids, with some signs of this administration possibly appearing in Gepid grave materials which shows signs of stratification. The graves could have belonged to members of the Gepid *ethnos*, but another interpretation is that it was members of the elite of the Avar khaganate presenting themselves as Gepids and therefore inhumed with Germanic cultural items.¹¹⁵ This would explain how the Gepids could be subjugated whilst still willingly fighting for the Avar khaganate and appearing free. Such an administration would also be similar to how the Xiongnu had an administrative position which controlled various sedentary peoples and ensured their loyalty.¹¹⁶

Targitius's arguments for increased tribute during an embassy to emperor Justin 2 (565-578 CE) illustrates how this structure could have functioned as he bases his arguments on the continued existence of different nomadic groups, within the Avar khaganate. "...the yearly payments which the Emperor Justinian used to give the Kutrigurs and the Utigurs (since today Baian is the master of all these tribes)"¹¹⁷ The Gepids are also mentioned in a similar manner and in similar circumstances. The subjugated groups still existing as unified entities within the Avar khaganate also fits with the political structure described by Pritsak, where subjugated groups had their own rules and internal structure under a dominant khagan.¹¹⁸

As mentioned, this organization was not unique to the Avar khaganate with similar delegations of power among the Gök Turks and the Huns, who all used members of the ruling clan as governors of subject groups.¹¹⁹ The description of the Hunnic army before the battle of the Catalaunian plains illustrates the control which such authoritative leaders could enact with this administrative organization: "Now the rest of the crowd of kings (if we may call them so) and the leaders of various nations hung upon Attila's nod like slaves, and when he gave a sign even by a glance, without a murmur each stood forth in fear and trembling, or at all events did

¹¹⁵ Tivadar Vida, "Survival of the Gepids in the Tisza region during the Avar period." In *Collapse-Reorganization-Continuity: Gepids after the Fall of the Hun Empire*, ed. Tivadar Vida, Dieter Quast, Zsófia Racz & Istvan Koncz (Archaeolingua, Budapest, 2019), 505-506, Vida, "Conflict and coexistence", 29

¹¹⁶ Yu, "The Hsiung-nu," 127-128

¹¹⁷ Menander Protector, *History*, 12.6

¹¹⁸ Pohl, *The Avars*, 206

¹¹⁹ Golden, "The peoples of the south Russian steppes" 261

as he was bid. Attila alone was king of all kings overall and concerned for all.”¹²⁰ Whilst this does not mention how these different kings were chosen it leaves no question as to the structure of his empire, with Attila commanding the kings of a multitude of peoples. If we compare the previous quote to Baian’s speech during the first siege of Sirmium, (see below), certain similarities appear. Most importantly, Baian leads several tribes which are subservient to him but still has independent political power, illustrating how similarly the empires could have been organized. This way of administrating steppe empires, and its similarities to feudalism, has led some scholars to speculate that feudalism originated on the steppes before becoming a staple of western European political culture.¹²¹ Personally, I believe this to be false and more likely the result of similar challenges including how to ensure control over a state with limited resources and no secure way of establishing authority.

Elite Avars are not only mentioned as administrators and advisors, instead they are primarily mentioned as diplomats to the Roman emperor, where the most frequently mentioned is the previously mentioned Targitius: “Targitius came again wishing to be granted an audience with the Emperor and made the same proposals and received the same reply as before.”¹²² Another who is specifically mentioned is Apsikh: “Finally, when Apsikh came as envoy”.¹²³ He is also mentioned by Menander leading soldiers: “The Romans and the Avars fought for three days, during which time no Roman force appeared against the bridge to Dalmatia, even though it was very unsound. Apsikh and the Avars under his command who were stationed there had demonstrated such contempt for the Romans that they had taken themselves off to the other bridge and had gone as reinforcements for Baian’s contingent.”¹²⁴ Apsikh thus served both as a military commander and as a diplomat, possibly indicating the importance of the elite for diplomatic and military undertakings.

2.4: The Heavenly Mandate Within the Avar khaganate

The heavenly mandate might also have affected the decision making of the khagan and his elite, which might be visible through the khagan’s arguments or the actions which he undertook. One such action is the first Avar siege of Sirmium, where through Menander, Baian khagan explains the pressure he is under, and the demand for success placed upon him. “I am shamed and dishonored before the tribes who follow me in alliance if I should withdraw

¹²⁰ Jordanes, *Origin and Deeds of the Goths*, 38.200-201

¹²¹ Jin Kim, *The Huns*, 11-12, 64-65

¹²² Menander Protector, *History*, 12.7

¹²³ Menander Protector, *History*, 15.1

¹²⁴ Menander Protector, *History*, 27.3

from this place having achieved nothing at all and having brought myself no profit. In order that I shall not appear to have made the assault to no purpose and benefit, send me some small gifts.”¹²⁵ Baian therefore likely believes that his authority would suffer if he broke the siege with no benefit gained, which would correspond to the ideology of the heavenly mandate. Additionally, this emphasizes the importance of Sirmium and the fragility of the khagan’s position as “some small gifts” could be significant enough to ensure the continued cohesion of the Avar khaganate.¹²⁶

Another action, possibly explained by the demands of the heavenly mandate, are the Avar campaigns against the Merovingians in 556 and 562. The campaigns were possibly undertaken because of lack of food (as food was demanded as tribute) and lack of prestige. “...Baian told Sigisbert, the leader of the Franks, that his army was suffering from hunger and that Sigisbert, as king and a native of the country, should not ignore the plight of the army which was his ally. He said that if he gave the Avar army supplies so that it could regain its strength”¹²⁷ These nominally victorious campaigns could have refortified the position of the khagan and ensured the continued stability of the not yet or recently established Avar khaganate.¹²⁸

The demands of the heavenly mandate might also explain certain actions undertaken by the Avar khagans during their many raids on Roman territory. A specific example comes from the Avar siege of Anchialus, and the imperial baths located close to the city, where: “...the Chagan’s harem cleansed themselves.”¹²⁹ Thus, the Khagan possibly symbolically claimed superiority over the Roman emperor, which would have strengthened his prestige, as his harem used the baths usually reserved for Roman emperors.¹³⁰ Another possible example is from a round of diplomatic negotiations from 583, during which the khagan demanded an elephant and a golden couch, both which he immediately sent back before demanding an increase in tribute, which resulted in war.¹³¹ These negotiations could have served several purposes as firstly, it possibly could have increased his prestige and secured his heavenly mandate, by seemingly relegating the Roman emperor to his slave. Secondly, it could possibly have created an opportunity for him to increase the tribute from the Romans, something that

¹²⁵ Menander Protector, *History*, 12.5

¹²⁶ Pohl, *The Avars*, 73, 86, Pohl, “A Non-Roman Empire”, 575

¹²⁷ Menander Protector, *History*, 11

¹²⁸ Pohl, *The Avars*, 55-57, 205, Kardaras, *Byzantium and the Avars*, 24-27

¹²⁹ Theophylact Simocatta, *History*, 1.4.5

¹³⁰ Pohl, *The Avars*, 90-91

¹³¹ Theophylact Simocatta, *History*, 1.3.8-13

would have further strengthened his internal position. Thirdly, when the Romans rejected his demands, it likely created a *Casus Belli*, which could further have strengthened his heavenly mandate. But this was dependent on the khagan defeating the Romans which would gain the Avars further tribute, whilst seemingly punishing a disobedient servant.

Another example of how the heavenly mandate might have impacted the Avar khaganate, occurred after the time period of this thesis. However, the example is so prominent and interesting that it must be mentioned. This example is the Avar siege of Constantinople in 626, which after its collapse was followed by a significant civil war, between the Avar and Bulgar *ethne*. The civil war resulted in significant numbers of Bulgars leaving the khaganate and a drastic weakening of the military might and prestige of the khaganate. There is direct correlation between the Avar defeat and the civil war as the collapse of the siege probably significantly weakened the authority and prestige of the Avar khagan.¹³² Thus, the defeat likely affected the khagan's heavenly mandate with resulting weakening of the khaganate's prestige. It is therefore very likely that the political ideology was a part of the early Avar khaganates political structure.

The 590s was in many ways a disastrous decade for the Avar Khaganate, which was amplified by the heavenly mandate. One reason was a plague which followed the Avar sack of Drizipera in 598. The plague decimated the Avar armies as: "...the barbarian hordes were stricken by a sudden visitation of plague, and their trouble was inexorable and would not admit any artifice. Accordingly, memorable penalties were exacted from the Chagan for his dishonor of the martyr Alexander: for seven of his sons were afflicted by swellings and a raging fiery fever, and departed this life on a single day."¹³³ While such an event likely damaged the heavenly mandate of the khagan, cohesion was still likely maintained because the khagan acquired a treaty. This ensured that the event did not have any catastrophic consequences, other than weakening the Avar khaganate's military and the khagan's personal loss.

The 590s was also dominated by Maurice's Balkan wars and increased Roman military activity which possibly resulted in the Khagan conducting fewer offensive campaigns. This might also have weakened his heavenly mandate and contributed to the large-scale desertions at the end of the decade.¹³⁴ Nonetheless the triggering event for the desertions were the loss of several battles along the Danube at the end of the decade, as this caused a negative spiral and

¹³² Pohl, *The Avars*, 218-219

¹³³ Theophylact Simocatta, *History*, 7.15.2

¹³⁴ Kardaras *Byzantium and the Avars*, 48-49, Pohl, *The Avars*, 179, 196

internal chaos within the Avar khaganate.¹³⁵ “In the course of these very events, large numbers defected from the Avars and hastened to desert to the emperor. So the Chagan was thrown into confusion at the news; he became greatly terrified, imploring and devising many schemes to win back the force which had defected.”¹³⁶ This process might be similar to the processes that led to the collapse of the Xiongnu khaganate, which collapsed due to internal chaos because of the Shanyu’s inability to either effectively trade or raid the sedentary Chinese empire.¹³⁷ The negative spiral at the end of the century could have resulted in the complete collapse of the Avar khaganate, but before this could happen the Roman army mutinied and deposed emperor Maurice, thereby very likely creating a much-needed reprieve for the Avar khagan. Even so, the loss of the heavenly mandate likely resulted in his and replacement with a relative.¹³⁸

2.5: The Importance of Luxury Goods Within the Avar khaganate

The Romans explained the Avar khaganate’s success with the cruelty of the khagans, but as mentioned, the khagans were able to stay in power through the heavenly mandate and the support of the elite of the Avar khaganate. As previously alluded to though, both the heavenly mandate and the support of the elite, was ensured by tribute from the Romans. The tribute was likely redistributed throughout the Avar khaganate initially by the khagan to the elite of the Avar khaganate and through them to the lower reaches of the Avar khaganate, thereby creating a tribute economy. Such tribute economies are generally accepted as normal for steppe empires, with similar systems also appearing in the historically related empires.¹³⁹

After the conquest of Sirmium in 582 increase in tribute was seemingly the main foreign policy goal of the Avar khagan, with this tribute being used to fund a prestige economy.¹⁴⁰ This demand for valuables was noticed by the Romans, such as the author of the *Strategikon*: “They are very superstitious, treacherous, foul, faithless, possessed by an insatiate 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 arrangements.”¹⁴¹ Yet the Avar khagans were very successful at extracting wealth from the Romans and by 626 they had received 6.5 million Solidi, with yearly amounts far exceeding

¹³⁵ Kardaras, *Byzantium and the Avars*, 63-64

¹³⁶ Theophylact Simocatta, *History*, 8.6.1

¹³⁷ Golden, *History of the Turkic Peoples*, 62

¹³⁸ Pohl, *The Avars*, 217-218

¹³⁹ Pohl, *The Avars*, 201, 234-340

¹⁴⁰ Kardaras, *Byzantium and the Avars*, 32, 42

¹⁴¹ Maurice, *Maurice’s Strategikon*, 11.2

those received by the Huns. It is however important to mention that Roman gold coins likely only had symbolic value and was regularly transformed to fit the prestige imagery of the Avar khaganate, with belts being the primary high prestige item.¹⁴²

The importance of tribute could also explain why the khagan who succeeded Baian khagan in 582 appears to be more aggressive.¹⁴³ As mentioned, the main foreign policy goal after the fall of Sirmium was probably to increase the tribute gained from the Romans. This was likely because the main way to ensure increases in tribute was through campaigns and other offensive military actions, thereby forcing the Romans to provide more and more gold. The need for these increases in tribute might have been further enhanced by the recent ascension of the khagan, with the new leader having to establish his authority which was most effectively achieved through victory in war which would showcase his heavenly mandate. Another possible reason for the increased aggression of the new khagan, is that early in the 580s: "...the Tarniach and Kotzager, who are also from the Var and Chunni, fled from the Turks and, on reaching Europe, united with the followers of the Avar Chagan. It is said that the Zabender also originated from the race of the Var and Chunni. The additional force which accrued to the Avars was accurately assessed at ten thousand."¹⁴⁴ This increase in manpower would have given the khagan more opportunities and more options when conducting military campaigns, which might be further amplified by increasing Avar control over the Slavs.¹⁴⁵

Whilst the Avar khagans utilized Roman tribute to ensure internal cohesion, the tribute could also be problematic. Instead of tribute the Solidi could be understood as a gift or as subsidies, which smacked of servitude and could therefore damage the khagan's heavenly mandate.¹⁴⁶ It would essentially recreate the same dynamic as the redistribution of tribute, but instead of ensuring the preeminence of the khagan it would place the Roman emperor at the top of the hierarchy. A hierarchy which the khagan had to dominate as his domination was the basis for the political system of the Avar khaganate and its existence as a state. This issue was apparent during negotiations following the beginning of the second Avar siege of Sirmium, ca 579 CE.

¹⁴² Michael Schmauder, "Huns, Avars, Hungarians- Reflections on the Interaction between Steppe Empires in Southeast Europe and the Late Roman to Early Byzantine Empire", in *Complexity of Interaction along the Eurasian Steppe Zone in the First Millennium CE*, eds. Jan Bemmann & Michael Schmauder (Vor-und Frühgeschichtliche Archäologie Rheinische Friedrich-Wilhelms-Universität Bonn: Bonn, 2015), 679-682, Florin Curta, *Eastern Europe in the Middle Ages (500-1300)*, (Leiden, 2019), 54-56, Curta, *The Making*, 205

¹⁴³ Kardaras, *Byzantium and the Avars*, 42

¹⁴⁴ Theophylact Simocatta, *History*, 7.8.16.-17

¹⁴⁵ Curta, *The Making*, 95

¹⁴⁶ Pohl, *The Avars*, 226-227

“The envoy continued that the khagan was satisfied with the gifts sent each year to him by the Emperor; for gold, silver and silken clothes were valuable commodities. However, since life was more valuable and desirable than all of these, he had been worrying about this and reflecting that many of the peoples who before times 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.”¹⁴⁷

This problem was also echoed by the Kül Tegin inscription, a part of the Orkhon inscription, showing that this was not only an issue for the Avars. The inscription blames the fall of the first Gök Turk empire on the weakening of the Turkic people due to the riches gained from China.

“(China) gives without care (*bunsuz*) gold, silver, embroidered silk brocade(*išgüti*). The word of the Chinese people (*Tabğaç bodun*) is sweet, its brocades (*ağisi*) are soft. Deceiving with sweet words and soft brocades, it draws near a distant people and after having them settle nearby, they begin to think evil thoughts about them. They do not permit good, wise or brave people to move... Being deceived by the sweet words and soft brocades, O Turk people,...many died...”¹⁴⁸

2.6: Conclusion

The Avar khaganate was a European polity, created by a group of nomads fleeing the fall of their former empire. With them they likely brought the political culture of their former empire which formed the basis for their new polity. At the center and at the pinnacle of the Avar khaganate’s hierarchy was the khagan, a position which was ensured through redistribution of Roman wealth, which was gained through raids or tribute, to the elite of the Avar khaganate. This redistribution would have ensured the khagan’s heavenly mandate, a concept which was derived from Chinese traditions. The elite of the Avar khaganate also participated in the administration of the khaganate, which might have included leadership positions over different subjugated *ethne*, in addition to positions as diplomats and/or advisors. This administrative system and the ideology of the heavenly mandate were very likely all inherited from the Avar past. The Avar khaganate did however lack some of the formal organization of other steppe empires, such as titles and a bipartite structure, both of which would be introduced later in the Avar khaganate’s existence.

¹⁴⁷ Menander Protector, *History*, 25.2

¹⁴⁸ Golden, “War and Warfare,” 128

3: Interaction and Influence Between the Avar *Ethnos* and their Subjugated *Ethne*

The identity of the early Avars was connected to members of a group which had migrated from central Asia to the steppes of Europe. During their migration they subjugated a multitude of tribes and peoples a process which continued after their arrival in the west, with the subjugation of groups like the Kutrigurs and the Gepids. The original Avar elite was likely originally made up of remnants of the Rouran elite, with certain individuals of the subjugated groups being adopted into this group, thereby becoming members of the elite of the Avar khaganate and the Avar *ethnos*. This development possibly changed the Avar *ethnos* from being based on descent to being based on social position and loyalty to the khagan.

Furthermore, the material culture of the Avars very likely changed after the conquest of the Carpathian basin to align itself with the material culture of the newly conquered peoples. The most important of these peoples were the Gepids. Parts of the Gepid elite became members of the Avar *ethnos*, but the Gepids still retained their unity. The nomadic peoples who had become subjugated prior to the conquest, on the other hand, coalesced into a single *ethnos* based on former political unions. Lastly, the Slavs were never fully subjugated, but the influence of the Avars might partially have created the impetus for the future creations of Slavic political units.

3.1: Problems Connected to Discerning the Identity of Nomads

One of the main issues when trying to understand past identities and the relations between different groups, is that one's understanding is limited by the impossibility of accessing the self-perception of individuals who are long gone. This becomes even more difficult when available source material originates from biased outsiders, which as mentioned is the case for many early medieval nomadic peoples including the Avars. Roman bias towards their "barbarian" neighbors generally resulted in a general lack of interest in cultural and social organization.¹⁴⁹ This is exemplified by Agathias who wrote: "This fact is illustrated by the case of the Ultizurs and the 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

¹⁴⁹ Pohl, *The Avars*, 5-7, Leif Inge Ree Petersen, *Siege Warfare and Military Organization in the Successor States (400-800 ad): Byzantium, the West and Islam* (Boston: Brill, 2013), 19

the ends of the earth.”¹⁵⁰ The quote can also serve as an illustration of the importance of political organization for identity, as the loss of political organization might have resulted in the disappearance of the group. Especially since the creation of political units often resulted in the creation of an identity, with all members of the political unit being understood as a member of the identity by outsiders, with the polity generally hiding a more complex cultural situation internally.¹⁵¹ The disappearance of the complex cultural internal situation becomes even more prevalent when the political unit appears in texts created by scholarly elites, usually working isolated from the world with little firsthand knowledge.¹⁵²

Identity in steppe empires are also in many ways different from identity in sedentary polities, further complicating the already complex issues connected to medieval identity. Steppe and tribal societies, like the Avars, had their own categories which defined membership in the *ethnos*. These were usually connected to origin, with kinship and descent being most important, but these kinships were still often imagined with unrelated individuals regularly being admitted into the tribal *ethnos*.¹⁵³ Creating unity and the illusion of a common background was still attempted though through a retelling of common stories and the continuation of common traditions, thereby forming a basis for the new *ethnos*.¹⁵⁴

The admission of unrelated individuals into an *ethnos* was often an important part of the creation of a steppe empire and the resulting creation of a people, but it could also create complex situations as an individual might be a member of several *ethne* at the same time. Such changes in identity was still usually only available to the elite of subjugated *ethne*, with the regular individuals remaining a part of the old *ethne*.¹⁵⁵ Steppe empires used these processes in an attempt to ensure unity, but in actuality the empires were usually a result of warfare, or tribal unions were a handful of clans and tribes acquired enough power to subjugate other clans and tribes.¹⁵⁶ The creation of new *ethne* only based on political allegiance also explains some of the political volatility of the steppe polities, since *ethne*

¹⁵⁰ Agathias, *The Histories* 5.4.3-7 trans. Joseph D. Frendo, (Berlin, 1975)

¹⁵¹ Pohl, “*Archeology of identity: introduction*”, 10

¹⁵² Reuter, *Medieval Polities*, 101

¹⁵³ Liebeschuetz, “*Genes into Regnum*”, 55-56

¹⁵⁴ Liebeschuetz, “*Genes into Regnum*”, 61, Goetz, Jarnut & Pohl, *Regna and Gentes*, 4-5

¹⁵⁵ Golden, *History of the Turkic Peoples*, 4-6

¹⁵⁶ Golden, *Central Asia*, 16, Golden, *History of the Turkic Peoples*, 5-7, Pohl, “*Archeology of identity: introduction*”, 10-11, Balint, “*A contribution to research on ethnicity*”, 152

based on culture and ways of life were more stable than those solely based on a political union.¹⁵⁷

Another difference between steppe *ethnos* and sedentary *ethnos* was the low importance of language as a defining feature, with language rarely functioning as a unifying feature within steppe empires. This was usually because such empires and related *ethnos* usually consisted of multitudes of peoples and languages.¹⁵⁸ Language also lacked importance because of the frequent intermingling between different groups, which led steppe empires to usually consist of many different tribes, clans and *ethne*.¹⁵⁹

3.2: The Cultural Nucleus of the Avar *Ethnos*

The natural place to start when discussing the constitution of the society of the Avar khaganate and the relationship between the different *ethne* within the Avar khaganate is to investigate the culture of the Avar *ethnos*. An example from Menander might provide some information on the culture of the Avar *ethnos*. Prior to the following example he recounts the second Avar siege of Sirmium, where Baian khagan built a bridge over the Save river to stop food from entering the city. The Romans were unaware of this purpose and to calm them, Baian:

“...immediately drew his sword and swore the oaths of the Avars, invoking against himself and the whole Avar nation the sanction that, if he planned to build the bridge over the Save out of any design against the Romans, he and the whole Avar tribe should be destroyed by the sword, heaven above and God in the heavens should send fire against them, the mountains and forests around fall upon them and the river Save overflow its banks and drown them”.¹⁶⁰

The description of the oaths as “the oaths of the Avars”, indicates that they were a part of the original Avar *ethnos* and its cultural nucleus. Yet the importance of these oaths can be questioned since Baian broke them seemingly without qualms, making it very possible that Baian used fake oaths since breaking the real ones could have damaged his heavenly mandate. He could therefore have used the Roman’s possible lack of knowledge about the culture of the Avar *ethnos* to his advantage. If this was the case, it might indicate a weakness in Menander’s

¹⁵⁷ Barth, *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries*, 34

¹⁵⁸ Sinor, *history of early Inner Asia*, 16

¹⁵⁹ Jin Kim, *The Huns*, 31-34, Dobrovits, “The Thirty Tribes,” 259-260

¹⁶⁰ Menander Protector, *History*, 25.1

narrative, however since the oath references heaven above and the God therein as the punisher it is likely not complete fabrication.

Simocatta also references “Avar songs” during a Roman expedition against the Slavs.

“In the third watch he moved away a short distance, came to the hiding-place, and led Alexander out of the ambush. And so he directed the Romans to the river Paspirius, exchanged signals, and came to the barbarians. Then, since the barbarians were still consorting with sleep, the Gepid gave Alexander the signal by means of Avar songs.”¹⁶¹

These songs must have been distinctive enough to be recognized as Avar songs rather than as Slavic songs. Furthermore, both the Gepid and the Roman commander had to be able to recognize the songs as songs of the Avar *ethnos*, meaning that by the 590s information on such aspects of Avar cultural probably was fairly widely known.

Ways of dressing and fighting was previously mentioned as important parts of an *ethne*'s culture. The *Strategikon* is the main source of information on this aspect of Avar culture, which it describes through its influence on Roman armament.

“They should have hooded coats of mail reaching to their ankles, which can be caught up by thongs and rings, along with carrying cases; helmets with small plumes on top; bows suited to the strength of each man, and not above it, more in fact on the weaker side, cases broad enough so that they can fit the strung bows in them, with spare bow strings in their saddle bags; quivers with covers holding about thirty or forty arrows; in their baldrics small files and awls; cavalry lances of the Avar type with leather thongs in the middle of the shaft and with pennons; swords; round neck pieces of the Avar type made with linen fringes outside and wool inside.... The men's clothing, especially their tunics, whether made of linen, goat's hair, or rough wool, should be broad and full, cut according to the Avar pattern, so they can be fastened to cover the knees while riding and give a neat appearance..... They are armed with mail, swords, bows and lances. In combat most of them attack doubly armed; lances slung over their shoulders and holding bows in their hands, they make use of both as need requires. Not only do they wear armor themselves, but in addition the horses of their illustrious

¹⁶¹ Theophylact Simocatta, *History*, 6.9.10

men are covered in front with iron or felt. They give special attention to training in archery on horseback.”¹⁶²

The *Strategikon* therefore describes the Avar elite as armored horsemen, clad in chainmail, helmets and cloth made from materials readily available on the steppes. Similarly to other steppe empires they fought with bows and arrows, lances and swords on horses covered in armor of cloth or metal. Csiky has estimated that during the early Avar khaganate such heavy cavalry made up only a small part of the Avar khaganate’s forces, somewhere between 1000 and 3000 men.¹⁶³ The importance of the lances is supported by archaeological finds, with lances often being found together with stirrups, which made the horse into stable fighting platforms and allowed the warrior to use both hands.¹⁶⁴ As earlier versions of these stirrups have been found on the eastern steppes, it is likely that the migration of the Avars was paramount for the introduction of the stirrup to Europe, thereby likely making it an important part of the cultural nucleus of the early Avar *ethnos*.¹⁶⁵

In addition to primary sources, archeological material is the best way to acquire a feel of Avar culture. Basing the relationship of the different *ethne* on archeological material alone, would however be futile. Rather archeological finds can show how the elite of the Avar khaganate were buried and thus illuminate parts of the Avar *ethnos*. Whilst the original elite Avars are recognizable through large uniform graves, containing horses and other symbols of power, there are no clear material analogies between the prestige items in these graves and graves from the steppes. This indicates that the Avar archeological culture was created after their conquest of the Carpathian basin.¹⁶⁶ It primarily consists of steppe items mixed with Germanic and late Roman material culture, something that fits neatly into Barth’s theoretical framework as examples of borrowing between *ethne*.¹⁶⁷ The most prestigious item were belts, which were probably used to showcase an individual’s position in the Avar khaganate. These belts had endings, fittings and buckles in gold and silver based on Roman designs but adapted to the tastes of the Avar *ethnos*.¹⁶⁸ Other high prestige items were single- and double-edged

¹⁶² Maurice, *Maurice’s Strategikon*, 1.2, 11.2

¹⁶³ Csiky, *Avar-Age Polearms*, 396-397

¹⁶⁴ Daim, “Avars and Avar archeology”, 468

¹⁶⁵ Florin Curta, “The earliest Avar-age stirrups, or the “stirrup controversy” revisited” in *The Other Europe in the Middle Ages : Avars, Bulgars, Khazars, and Cumans*, ed. Florin Curta (Boston, USA, 2008), 309-314

¹⁶⁶ Balint, “A contribution to research on ethnicity”, 160, Csiky, *Avar-Age Polearms*, 299-300

¹⁶⁷ Daim, “Avars and Avar archeology”, 518, Vida “Conflict and coexistence”, 17, 27-28, Peter Stadler, “Avar chronology revisited, and the question of ethnicity in the Avar qaganate,” in *The Other Europe in the Middle Ages : Avars, Bulgars, Khazars, and Cumans*, ed. Florin Curta (Boston, Brill, 2008), 59

¹⁶⁸ Daim, “Avars and Avar archeology”, 468, 471, 477-478, 506

swords decorated with precious metals. Only the single-edged swords are usually associated with the Avars, with those with ring pommels probably being of especially high prestige.¹⁶⁹

The Avar items created in the Carpathian basin were also heavily influenced by Roman culture, because of their connection with wealth and power, which the belts are the quintessential example of as they signify rank and prestige in both cultures.¹⁷⁰ The high prestige of these items also included the individuals making them, exemplified by the grave of a smith which contained several high prestige items as well as the tools to make them.¹⁷¹ Ultimately, this only informs us of the privileged position and culture of the elite, who had a monopoly on gold, precious metals and high prestige items. The latter of which was stylistically based on Roman material culture but limited by the sensibilities of a central Asian nomadic elite.¹⁷²

The development described above might unintentionally be similar to the Chinese influence on their steppe neighbors, who especially valued Chinese silk and started to use Chinese writing.¹⁷³ It could also be similar to the Greco-Bactrian influence on the Kushan empire (135 BCE-3rd century CE), which primarily influenced their coins. This influence had waned by the reign of Vima Kadphises (95-127 CE), who exchanged the Greco-Bactrian style iconography with Indian iconography. Similarly, the later Hephthalites adopted the iconography of the Sassanids on their coins, but like the Avars they adapted it to their own cultural tastes thereby keeping them recognizable as Hephthalite.¹⁷⁴ Steppe or steppe adjacent empires copying prestige items from the sedentary world was therefore not unusual, but this influence was usually limited by the taste of the steppe or steppe adjacent empire.

The maintenance of a central Asian culture and the Avar identity during the migration to the Carpathian basin, must have rested on the remnants of the original Avar culture. This could be

¹⁶⁹ Csiky, *Avar-Age Polearms*, 174, 179, 188, 233

¹⁷⁰ Falko Daim, "Byzantine Belt Ornaments of the 7th and 8th Centuries in Avar contexts," in 'Intelligible beauty': Recent Research on Byzantine Jewelry (British Museum Research Publication, Band 178), eds. Noel Adams & Chris Entwistle (British Museum Press: London, 2010), 61, Tivadar Vida, "Local or foreign Romans? The problem of the late antique population of the 6th-7th century AD in Pannonia", in *Foreigners in early Medieval Europe: Thirteen International Studies on Early Medieval Mobility*, ed. Dieter Quast (Mainz, Verlag des Römisch-Germanischen Zentralmuseums, 2009), 244, 249

¹⁷¹ Daim, "Avars and Avar archeology", 478-480

¹⁷² Curta, *Eastern Europe*, 54, Schmauder, "Huns, Avars, Hungarians", 679-682, Balint, "Avar Goldsmiths' Work," 155. Daim, "Byzantine Belt Ornaments," 61

¹⁷³ Dobrovits, "The Altaic World", 388-389, Xinjiang Rong, "The Rouran Qaghanate and the Western regions during the second half of Fifth century based on a Chinese document newly found in Turfan" in *Great Journeys Across the Pamir Mountains: A Festschrift in Honor of Zhang Guangda on his Eighty-fifth Birthday* ed. Huaiyu Chen & Xinjiang Rong, (Leiden, Brill, 2018), 58-59

¹⁷⁴ Khodadad, *ReOrienting the Sassanids*, 59-60, 137-138

compared to the maintenance of Ostrogothic culture following the rupture of the Hunnic empire in 454 CE. Just like the pre-568 Avars, the Ostrogoths were composed of different *ethne*, with an Ostrogothic elite at its center, but with no secure homeland. Amory describes how the Ostrogothic elite manipulated the masses of other *ethne* through an ethnographic ideology to ensure the position of the elite. Thereby ensuring the continuity and superiority of the Ostrogothic identity within the Ostrogoth state. Additionally, the Roman description of the Ostrogoths as Ostrogoths was most likely initially a fabrication, since migrating barbarian armies mostly have loose structures and almost continuous changes in membership. Over time successful groups like the Ostrogoths became more structured, with resulting changes in identity. For the Ostrogoths specifically, it became structured after the establishment of the Ostrogothic kingdom in Italy.¹⁷⁵ How the Avars compares to this is unclear, as unlike the Ostrogoths, identities of steppe empires were usually not constrained to the elite, but also included lower-level clansmen.¹⁷⁶

3.3: The Composition and Organization of the Avar *Ethnos*

So far there has been some references to the culture of the Avar *ethnos* and how it changed, but there has been no discussion of the constituents of the Avar *ethnos*, nor how it was distinguished from its subjugated *ethne*. In the primary sources there is some discrepancy regarding the unity of the Avar *ethnos* as some primary sources describe the Avars as united whilst others describe it as fragmented. Some examples of this discrepancy are: “The Emperor asked, ‘Tell us how large a multitude of Avars revolted from Turkish rule and whether they remain subject to you.’”,¹⁷⁷ from Menander the guardsman and “After the defeat the barbarians were taken prisoner: three thousand Avars were captured, a total of six thousand two hundred other barbarians, and eight thousand Sclavenes.”,¹⁷⁸ from Theophylact Simocatta. The *Strategikon* on the other hand describes the Avars as fragmented the book advises a Roman general going into battle against the Avars to: “...spread rumors that an attack against the enemy is being planned in some other location. By means of such a rumor and the anxiety of their chiefs, each of whom will be worried about his own problems, they will not have the opportunity to get together and cause trouble for our army.”¹⁷⁹ The *Strategikon* also describes the Avars as “...very fickle, avaricious and, composed of so many tribes as they are, they

¹⁷⁵ Pohl, *Archeology of identity: introduction*, 12, 15

¹⁷⁶ Pohl, “A Non-Roman Empire”, 585

¹⁷⁷ Menander Protector, *History*, 10.1

¹⁷⁸ Theophylact Simocatta, *History*, 8.3.15

¹⁷⁹ Maurice, *Maurice’s Strategikon*, 11.4

have no sense of kinship or unity with one another. If a few begin to desert and are well received, many more will follow”.¹⁸⁰

There is therefore a question of whether the Avars were unified or fragmented. Most likely the information derived from a primary source is dependent on the knowledge of its author. Those with less knowledge generally saw the Avars as a unified group indicating that for “average” high class Romans the Avar name was significant enough and the khagan’s position was so secure that the Avars were recognized as a unit, with the khagan overriding the fractures of the *ethnos*. This includes for example Evagrius Scholasticus, a cleric from Aleppo, who defined the Avars as a unified group.¹⁸¹ However, Simocatta who was more knowledgeable distinguished the Slavs and the Gepids from the Avars, even if it is impossible to be sure that the categorization was accurate.

The author of the *Strategikon* on the other hand clearly argues that the Avars were fragmented, which might be attributed to the political organization of the Avar khaganate, and the many *ethne* subjugated by it. It might be that the previously mentioned Var and Chunni clans could have been some of the entities described by the *Strategikon*, perhaps being only two of many groupings making up the Avar elite. Another possibility is that the multifaceted organization of the Avar *ethnos* created confusion for the Roman chroniclers. Still there was likely some unifying and distinguishing features connected to the Avar *ethnos*, despite its evidently fragmented nature, as Simocatta’s source was able to distinguish between different *ethne*.

Beyond this the main source of information regarding the composition of the Avars comes from Simocatta as he recounts the tale of the Avars arrival in Europe.

“When the Barselt, Onogurs, Sabirs and other Hun nations in addition to these, saw that a section of those who were still Var and Chunni had fled to their regions, they plunged into extreme panic, since they suspected that the settlers were Avars. For this reason they honored the fugitives with splendid gifts and supposed that they received from them security in exchange. Then, after the Var and Chunni saw the well-omened beginning to their flight, they appropriated the ambassadors’ error and named

¹⁸⁰ Maurice, *Maurice’s Strategikon*, 11.2

¹⁸¹ Evagrius Scholasticus, *Ecclesiastical History*, 5.1.196 trans. Michael Whitby, (Liverpool, 2000)

themselves Avars: for among the Scythian nations that of the Avars is said to be the most adept tribe.”¹⁸²

He thus describes two seemingly different, but united, groups who took the Avar name because of the prestige and power connected to it. This claim is very questionable, as it was part of the argument for the groups being pseudo-Avars and therefore most likely only meant to disparage them. This does nevertheless not mean that the divided nature of the Avar *ethnos* should be rejected as several clans unifying to form a single *ethnos* is quite possible, even if the names and description provided by Simocatta ends up being inaccurate.¹⁸³

Walter Pohl argues that the Avars were distinguished by their position within the Avar khaganate as leaders and leading warriors, with those lower in the hierarchy either being Bulgars, Slavs or Gepids. Thus, he also argues that position and way of life, rather than origin was decisive for identity. He further argues that the Avar *ethnos* was a political *ethnos* connected to and dependent upon the Avar khaganate.¹⁸⁴ Pohl’s theories does therefore not exclude the possibility of several clans uniting into the Avar *ethnos*.

Pohl’s theories are the result of interpreting the source material based on the conclusion that the writers of the primary source, or their sources, could distinguish between the different *ethne*. This causes mentions like the following to be accepted as truth: “...he marshalled one thousand men to reconnoiter the enemy, and these encountered ten hundred Bulgars. Now the barbarians were marching off guard, since there was peace between the Romans and the Chagan. But the Romans, on the general’s decision, used their javelins against the barbarians. The Bulgars dispatched ambassadors to negotiate an end to the fight and advise the Romans not to destroy the peace.”¹⁸⁵ This trust in the primary sources leads Pohl to conclude that the different *ethne* had different roles within the Avar khaganate, even though it is questionable to what degree the writers of the primary sources could perceive role differences within the Avar khaganate.¹⁸⁶ This is especially valid since Pohl himself argues that Simocatta mixes Slavs and Avars when describing raids on Roman land during the 580s.¹⁸⁷

Pohl’s theories are also problematic because identity and membership in an *ethne* are the result of both self-perception and the perception of others and as there is no Avar primary

¹⁸² Theophylact Simocatta, *History*, 7.8.3-4

¹⁸³ Pohl, “*Archeology of identity: introduction*”, 16

¹⁸⁴ Pohl, *The Avars*, 263, 399

¹⁸⁵ Theophylact Simocatta, *History*, 7.4.1-2

¹⁸⁶ Pohl, *The Avars*, 263-264

¹⁸⁷ Pohl, *The Avars*, 136-137, Curta, *The Making*, 50

sources, the *ethne* of the Avar khaganate are entirely defined by an outsider perspective. Thus, whilst the *ethne* of the Avar khaganate were probably defined by the Romans through behavior and occupation, these descriptions are completely lacking an internal viewpoint.¹⁸⁸ Archeology is also no solution to this conundrum either, especially since analysis of archeological remains are influenced by primary sources. An already utilized example of this is the Slavic bow fibulae, a type of brooch, being understood by the Romans and therefore also today as a sign of a Slavic identity.¹⁸⁹

Pohl also argues that the lack of Avars outside of the Avar khaganate, with deserters being referred to as Bulgars or Slavs, is another argument for the Avar *ethnos* being limited to the elite of the Avar khaganate and dependent upon the existence of the khaganate.¹⁹⁰ However, whilst there are no mentions of Avars without simultaneously referencing the Avar khaganate, there are mentions of Avars leaving the khaganate. An example comes from Simocatta, whilst detailing the consequences of a Roman victory in 587. “On the fifth day it was indeed possible to extract the truth from the Avar deserters as well”.¹⁹¹ This example shows, contrary to what Pohl claims, that even after deserting the Avar khaganate they are still referred to as Avars. Furthermore, these deserters are unlikely to be prestigious members of the Avar khaganate as such desertions would be covered similarly to the Bokoolabras affair, which the description of also does not conform to Pohl’s arguments.

“A Scythian man who bore the name Bookolabra... at that time this man performed a foolhardy venture. For he slept with one of the Chagan’s wives and, enticed by brief pleasure, he was caught in the strong snares of death. Suspecting that perchance his crime might be discovered and that he would feel the pangs of the well-known cross-examination, he suborned seven of the subject Gepids and made flight towards his ancestral tribe. These are Huns, who dwell in the east as neighbors of the Persians and whom it is more familiar for the many to call Turks.”¹⁹²

Simocatta therefore claims that this high-level member of the Avar khaganate was a Turk not an Avar, which seems to contradict Pohl’s theory if not for the fact that Pohl also argues that the Avar *ethnos* was political. Thus, Pohl essentially argues that Bokoolabras was only an Avar as long as he was a member of the Avar khaganate, and that when he deserted, he was

¹⁸⁸ Pohl, *The Avars*, 399

¹⁸⁹ Curta, *The Making*, 310

¹⁹⁰ Pohl, *The Avars*, 269, Pohl, “A Non-Roman Empire”, 586-587

¹⁹¹ Theophylact Simocatta, *History*, 2.10.13

¹⁹² Theophylact Simocatta, *History*, 1.8.2-5

no longer an Avar, but a Turk. Bokoolabras had therefore shifted between *ethne*, which was possible as the cultures were in contact and similar in way of life. This transition also conforms to Barth's theory that identity is most malleable when based on a political organization.¹⁹³

Simocatta's description of an embassy to the Avar khagan in 583 sheds further light on the issue. "Comentiolus proudly demonstrated the nobility of his tongue, espousing Roman freedom unsullied like a chaste matron, and not corrupting it with whorish flattery. In the presence of the leading Avars, as well as the Chagan, he employed the following phrases."¹⁹⁴ This quote is not the most reliable, both because it was taken from a speech and because Simocatta is using flowery language, which as mentioned indicates that he has created his own narrative. The lack of reliability does however not adversely affect the important part of the quote, the reference to "the leading Avars", as a description of elite members of the Avar *ethnos*. In the eyes of Simocatta therefore not all the Avars took part in the negotiations, which means that the Avar identity was most likely not exclusive to the elite. Instead, it indicates that the Avar *ethnos* probably included a broader spectrum of individuals.

3.4: The Historical Development of the Avar *Ethnos*

The development of the Avar *ethnos* was a historical process which fundamentally changed the culture of the migrating Avars, a process which began during their migration and continued after their conquest of the Carpathian basin.¹⁹⁵ It is important to reiterate that because of the multitude of interferences and adaptations which the former Rouran likely underwent during their migration, categories like law, language and background cannot have been the most decisive way to categorize members of the Avar *ethnos*, even prior to the conquest. Therefore, to ensure the stability of the Avar khaganate, the Avar *ethnos* likely adapted from primarily being based on origin to being based on political allegiance. A process which was strengthened by the adaptation of the Avar material culture, as it created similarities between the Avars and their new subjects. This process which made the elites of the subjugated *ethne* into new members of the Avar *ethnos*, became Avars because they were powerful enough to be allowed to choose their political allegiance, thereby ensuring that their political choice would define their identity.¹⁹⁶ These additions slowly changed the constitution of the Avar *ethnos* by making it increasingly dominated by the rich and powerful. They might

¹⁹³ Barth, *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries*, 15, 18, 29, 38

¹⁹⁴ Theophylact Simocatta, *History*, 1.4.9

¹⁹⁵ Barth, *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries*, 38

¹⁹⁶ Geary, "Ethnic identity", 24-25, Reuter, *Medieval Polities*, 104

also have weakened the importance of the original cultural material of the Avars. Thus, over time the Avar *ethnos* would have become more varied, culturally, and by recruiting the leaders of the subjugated *ethne*, the khagan could utilize the manpower of the subjugated *ethne* to gain more prestige and wealth. These forces could be used to add new groups to the growing Avar *ethnos*, creating an *ethnos* defined by loyalty to the khagan and identified by a material culture created after the conquest of the Carpathian basin.

Whilst becoming a member of the Avar *ethnos* was, as mentioned, a political choice, but it was also likely a social choice, a choice which was probably made due to the prestige associated with membership and an improved position within the Avar khaganate. Even though not everyone could make this choice, it does not mean that everyone who could did. An example of someone resisting the dominion of the Avar *ethnos* were the Slav chieftains, who might have made a conscious choice to remain Slavs, perhaps because the incentive to change *ethnos* was insufficient compared to the power and prestige of their existing positions.¹⁹⁷

That the demand for adopting an Avar identity was limited to loyalty to the khagan was a result of the Avars, as argued, adapting their material culture to the material culture which already existed in the Carpathian basin. The demand of loyalty to the khagan and the changes in material culture would both have eased assimilation and might be a result of the Avars precarious position as foreign conquerors but might also be a result of their steppe legacy which included, acceptance of different cultures and languages within the state.¹⁹⁸ There was, for example, likely no focus on religious unity within the Avar khaganate as there is archeological evidence of churches and Christian insignias in the Carpathian basin during the rule of the Avars.¹⁹⁹

The changes undergone by the Avar *ethnos* could be similar to those undergone by the Frankish *ethnos*, which went from an *ethnos* based on origin and culture, to becoming a geographical term referring to the kingdom of the Franks, after losing its original connotations.²⁰⁰ The Roman *ethnos* was another such political *ethnos*, with one only being a Roman if one was loyal to Rome. This resulted in individuals with Roman background losing their Roman identity because of political choices and individuals with barbarian backgrounds

¹⁹⁷ Reuter, *Medieval Polities*, 104-106, Pohl, *The Avars*, 142, 266-267, 279,

¹⁹⁸ Barth, *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries*, 25

¹⁹⁹ Pohl, *The Avars*, 261

²⁰⁰ Goetz, "Gens, King and Kingdoms", 336-337

possibly becoming leading members of Roman society.²⁰¹ Similarly, among the steppe empires of east Iran, distinct polities might only be different tribal and dynastic units rather than completely distinct *ethne*, because they constituted a single invasion of formerly Xiongnu tribes. Conquered polities could simply become the subjects of a formerly rival polity. A concrete example might be the Hephthalite absorption of the Kidarites (320-467 CE), which resulted in the Kidarites taking part in Hephthalite embassies to China rather than continuing to send their own.²⁰²

Similarly, after conquering the Sogdians, a central Asian people renowned for their trading capabilities, the Gök Turks adopted the Sogdian alphabet while several Sogdians achieved high rank within the Gök Turk khaganate.²⁰³ The two *ethne* therefore essentially merged into a singular ruling *ethnos*. Prior to this the Sogdians had long been in contact with steppe or steppe adjacent empires which could have made the merger easier.²⁰⁴ This merger was also so extensive that the even the Romans noticed the close relationship between them. “The Turkish nations take pride in two things above all: for they claim that from the very beginning of time they have never witnessed an epidemic of plague, and that there is a dearth of earthquakes in that land. But Bakath, a city founded once long ago by the Onogurs was razed by earthquakes, and Sogdoane has experienced both plagues and earthquakes.”²⁰⁵

3.5: Influence Between the Different *Ethne* of the Avar khaganate

The Avar *ethnos* as a political *ethnos* which controlled other *ethne* made it possible for individuals to be part of several *ethne* at once. One could for example originally be a Gepid and therefore maintain one’s original Gepid identity but be loyal to the khagan and therefore also have an Avar identity. It is therefore paramount to understand the relationship between the different *ethne* as it forms the basis for how the Avar conquest effected the subjugated *ethne*.

Cultural influence is a very important aspect of the early Avar khaganate, with the constant cross-cultural influence being extremely noticeable.²⁰⁶ The cross-cultural influence is especially apparent in the archaeological material, where items with different cultural connections were for example inhumed in the same grave.²⁰⁷ This could potentially have led

²⁰¹ Petersen, *Siege warfare*, 18

²⁰² Khodadad, *ReOrienting the Sassanids*, 88-89, 100-101, 104, 137

²⁰³ Etienne De La Vaissiere, *Sogdian Traders: A History* (Boston, 2005), 200-204, 237

²⁰⁴ Vaissiere, *Sogdian Traders*, 108, Khodadad, *ReOrienting the Sassanids*, 180-181

²⁰⁵ Theophylact Simocatta, *History*, 7.8.13

²⁰⁶ Pohl, *The Avars*, 103

²⁰⁷ Vida, “Conflict and coexistence”, 17, Daim, “Avars and Avar archeology”, 465

to a weakening of the different *ethne*, but also a strengthening as the differences in cultural nuclei became clearly defined. The mixing of cultural material could be a result of individuals being part of more than one *ethne*. Another possibility is that these individuals had taken part in the Avar khaganate's redistributive network, where displays of high prestige items likely signified participation in military and politics as well as inclusion in the Avar *ethnos*.²⁰⁸ The redistribution of prestige items connected to Avar culture could also have made it easier for leaders of the subjugated *ethne* to become Avars. It is therefore natural that the different subjugated *ethne* were affected by their subjugation and the loss of their elite to the Avar *ethnos*.

The three major subjugated *ethne* of the Avar khaganate were the Slavs, the Gepids, and other groups with a Germanic material culture as well as the different nomadic groups encountered during the migration. The *ethne* are mostly detectable through archeological material with everyone but the nomads being subjugated after the Avar conquest of the Carpathian basin.²⁰⁹ The Avar khagan's control over the groups varied, with the nomads and the Gepids being completely subjugated, whilst the Slavs remained somewhat independent, which constituted a major headache for the khagans.

3.6: The Subjugated Nomadic *Ethne* of the Avar khaganate

The subjugated nomads had different cultural backgrounds than the Avars, as they were encountered and subjugated at different points during the migration of the Avars. Our knowledge of these tribes is limited by the knowledge of the Roman authors, which makes it close to impossible to account for all the different groups that were subjugated by the Avars before they arrived northeast of the Caspian sea. The groups that we do know they subjugated include "...the Unigurs, then the Zali, a Hunnic tribe, and they also destroyed the Sabirs."²¹⁰ The Avars also subjugated the Kutrigurs, on Roman orders because the Kutrigurs raided the Balkans in 558.²¹¹ They are next mentioned by Menander, being commanded by the khagan leaving no question of their fate. "He ordered ten thousand of the so-called Kutrigur Huns to cross the river Save and devastate the land towards Dalmatia."²¹²

²⁰⁸ Pohl, *Archeology of identity: introduction*, 20

²⁰⁹ Pohl, *The Avars*, 4, 26, 46, 101, Vida, "conflict and coexistence", 13, Curta, *The Making*, 207-208

²¹⁰ Menander Protector, *History*, 5.2

²¹¹ Agathias, *The Histories*, 5.11.6

²¹² Menander Protector, *History*, 12.5

The nomadic groups subjugated by the Avar khaganate most likely had similar ways of life, something which to some degree united the different groups. Some groups even considered each other culturally indistinguishable from each other as mentioned by the Utigur Sandilkh: "...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."²¹³ Their culture would have been somewhat similar to that of the Avar *ethnos*, which might have made it difficult for them to differentiate themselves from the Avars, with the major differences possibly including the subject nomads proficiency for siege craft, in addition to the previously mentioned Avar cultural material.²¹⁴ Nonetheless, they must have been possible to differentiate as Simocatta's sources were clearly able to differentiate between the subjugated nomads and the Avars.²¹⁵ Yet, these cultural similarities would still have made it significantly easier for the elite of the subjugated nomads to change identity and become Avars.

The cultural similarities between the different groups of subjugated nomads probably caused a significant change in the constitution of the groups, as their integrity and borders likely collapsed. The Kutrigurs, for example, are not mentioned again after their raid on Dalmatia. Instead, all of the subjugated nomads are referred to as Bulgars, like in the previously quoted skirmish. The skirmish was part of Maurice's Balkan wars, meaning that the constitution of the subjugated nomadic groups almost certainly changed fundamentally between Maurice's Balkan wars and the Avar khaganate's conquest of the Carpathian basin roughly 30 years earlier. The collapse of the borders between the different groups resulted in the different groups most likely uniting under a single distinct *ethnos*, which was recognizable for the Romans. Thus, the initial cultural similarities between the nomadic groups resulted in the boundaries collapsing instead of strengthening, perhaps because the cultural similarities outweighed the differences between the groups. These cultural similarities could be the result of previous political unions, which therefore essentially would have been recreated within the Avar khaganate. One of these former unions were also called the Bulgars, with the groups which split from the original Bulgar *ethnos*, possibly included the Kutrigurs and the Utigurs.²¹⁶

²¹³ Menander Protector, *History*, 1.2

²¹⁴ Kardaras, *Byzantium and the Avars*, 176-181

²¹⁵ See quote page 48.

²¹⁶ Pohl, *The Avars*, 177-178, Jin Kim, *The Huns*, 137-138, Sophoulis, *Byzantium and Bulgaria*, 66, 105, Golden, "The peoples of the south Russian steppes", 258, Golden, *History of the Turkic Peoples*, 99

Being subjugated by the Avars would therefore have forced these disparate groups into a single unity because of common fate and experiences, with a shared past and name functioning as the glue of the *ethnos*. This process is in practice unavailable, as no source describes it. Additionally, it is impossible to recognize such a reorganization of *ethne* through archeology. Furthermore, whilst some members of the Bulgar *ethnos* might also be a part of the Avar *ethnos* it was, as mentioned, probably only the elite nomads who became Avars. This would leave the rest as Bulgars, something which would have further strengthened the boundaries of the new *ethne*.²¹⁷

The process which resulted in the formation of the Bulgars might be the opposite of the processes undergone by the different nomadic peoples of east-Iran. Polities in east-Iran like the Kidarites were, as mentioned, likely simply tribal and dynastic designations with political changes essentially being the result of power transfers between related groups. Therefore, as the central control of the Xiongnu disappeared these new but related groupings were created, a process probably similar to what occurred after the collapse of the Hunnic empire. Which in the case of the former Hunnic groups was reversed by the Avars and their political control.

3.7: The Gepids Within the Avar khaganate

“The kingdom of the Gepids came to an end when they were defeated in battle by the Lombards. King Cunimund died on the battlefield and his treasury in its entirety was taken to the emperor Justin in Constantinople by Bishop Trasaric of the Arian sect and Reptila, the nephew of Cunimund”.²¹⁸ John of Biclar describes thus the destruction of the Gepid Kingdom (454-568 CE), which resulted in the subjugation of the Gepids by the Avar khaganate. This subjugation caused close interaction between the Avar and Gepid *ethne*, a process which was probably driven by Avars settling on former Gepid land and Gepid participation in the armies of the Avar khaganate.²¹⁹

After the conquest the khagan might have ensured Gepid loyalty by internally claiming the position of king. This would help explain the Avar khagan’s preoccupation with conquering Sirmium, the former Gepid capital, as it would have had great symbolic importance, thereby further explaining the extreme consequences of failing to capture the city, described in chapter 2.²²⁰ Furthermore, the Avars probably settled close to the former Roman cities north

²¹⁷ Liebeschuetz, “*Genes into Regnum*”, 77

²¹⁸ John of Biclaro, *Chronical*, 1.19 trans. Kenneth Baxter Wolf, (Liverpool,1999)

²¹⁹ Pohl, “A Non-Roman Empire”, 580, Daim, “Avars and Avar archeology”, 469

²²⁰ Pohl, *The Avars*, 73, 86

of Sirmium, which might be a result of the khagans new position as king. It also conforms to the general behavior of steppe empires where the leaders of conquered sedentary states simply were replaced.²²¹ Especially since administratively the Gepids were, as mentioned, in a position similar to that of the subjugated nomads.²²²

The Yue-Zhi nomads probably conducted a similar political action after migrating into east-Iran and forming the Kushan empire because of pressure from the Xiongnu. The empire was likely formed by Yue-Zhi tribes, each controlling their own cities, before they later reorganized themselves under one king, who inherited the title and authority of the previous rulers.²²³ Likewise, the Kidarites almost certainly performed a similar action after conquering the Kushan empire, by proclaiming themselves the master of the Kushan while utilizing the Kushan administration to ensure control over land and people.²²⁴

After the conquest of the Gepid kingdom, the Gepids are mentioned several times in the primary sources, mostly by Simocatta. One example is from the previously mentioned Bokoolabras affair where Bokoolabras “suborned seven of the subject Gepids and made flight towards his ancestral tribe”.²²⁵ Other examples include a murder committed by a Gepid member of emperor Maurice’s bodyguard and the previously mentioned Gepid who betrayed several Slavic villages.²²⁶ Lastly, Simocatta mentions several Gepid villages which were sacked by the Romans in 599.

“Accordingly they encountered three Gepid settlements; the barbarians knew nothing of the previous day’s events, had arranged a drinking session, and were celebrating a local feast. Then they had entrusted their cares to drink and were passing the night in festivity; but in the twilight, as it is called, when remnants of night still remained, the Romans attacked the drunken barbarians and wrought extensive slaughter. For thirty thousand barbarians were killed.”²²⁷

These four mentions of Gepids indicate some Gepid fates following the collapse of their kingdom. The mention of the villages indicate that the *ethnos* probably maintained some unity which included common festivals, despite the Gepid elite becoming Avars. The Bokoolabras

²²¹ Golden, “War and Warfare,” 158

²²² Menander Protector, *History*, 12.6

²²³ Khodadad, *ReOrienting the Sassanids*, 51-56

²²⁴ Khodadad, *ReOrienting the Sassanids*, 95-98, 103

²²⁵ Theophylact Simocatta, *History*, 1.8.4

²²⁶ Theophylact Simocatta, *History*, 6.2.4-6, 6.8.13-9.10

²²⁷ Theophylact Simocatta, *History*, 8.3.11-12, 8.3.15

affair, on the other hand, most likely shows that some Gepids became servants and tributaries to elite Avars, perhaps participating at a lower level in the redistributive network, a participation which over time might result in becoming full members of the Avar *ethnos*. The Gepid who betrayed the Slavs he was living with, however indicate that some Gepids were subjugated by other *ethne*. He did however probably retain his original identity, which made it possible for him to use the Roman offensive to regain his freedom. This is therefore an example of failed integration as the Gepid clung to his old identity rather than adopting a Slavic one, which could be the result of lack of incentives for changing *ethnos*. Last is the Gepid who was a member of the emperor's bodyguard, which membership in could indicate a prestigious background. This includes possibly being related to, the previously mentioned, nephew of the former Gepid king, who fled to the Romans following the fall of the Gepid kingdom. This Gepid might therefore be a member of the Gepid elite who fled to Constantinople following the fall of their kingdom.

The conquest likely also influenced Gepid material culture, with cultural changes appearing in Gepid graves after the conquest. This was most likely a consequence of the Avar khagan's political dominion and the prestige connected to the culture of the Avar *ethnos*. For example, the Gepid belts were slightly altered to better conform to the Avar versions of the same belts, even though belts as a prestige item might have been caused by Gepid influence. Other changes include the appearance of single edge swords and stirrups, items which are usually connected to the Avar *ethnos*, within graves of otherwise Germanic culture.²²⁸ A specific example is the previously mentioned grave of a prestigious "Gepid", who was buried with typical Germanic prestige goods, including a buckle with Christian iconography, but also a horse which is normal in steppe cultures.²²⁹ The dominion of the Avar khaganate probably also resulted in significant geographical dispersion with traditional Gepid items appearing across larger parts of the Carpathian basin than prior to the conquest.²³⁰

When the Gepids were conquered by the Avars a process of interaction started between the *ethne*. This interaction was probably primarily driven by the remaining Gepid elite, which

²²⁸ Vida, "Conflict and coexistence", 24, Daim, "Avars and Avar archeology", 472-473, Alpar Dobos, "On the edge of the Merovingian culture. Row-grave cemeteries in the Transylvanian basin in the 5th-7th centuries," In *Collapse-Reorganization-Continuity: Gepids after the Fall of the Hun Empire*, ed. Tivadar Vida, Dieter Quast, Zsolia Racz & Istvan Koncz (Archaeolingua, Budapest, 2019), 129, Vida, "Survival of the Gepids", 498-499, Daim, "Byzantine Belt Ornaments," 61

²²⁹ Laszlo Kocsis & Erzsebet Molnar, "A 6th-7th century solitary burial of a warrior with his horse at Tiszagyenda" *Acta orientalia Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae* n.s. (2021): 137-192, at: 168

²³⁰ Curta, *The Making*, 196-197

influenced- and in turn was influenced-by the prestige items of the Avar *ethnos* with elite Gepids participating in the Avar khaganate's redistributive networks and over time becoming Avars themselves. Despite the loss of political unity and a unified Gepid cultural elite, the Gepid *ethnos* likely still remained unified, with their own villages and culture, even if the culture changed and their people became spread geographically.

3.8: The Slavs Within the Avar khaganate

After the migration of groups like the Vandals, the Slavs came to inhabit the lands north of the Danube, wherefrom they conducted raids in small groups onto the Balkans, as described by Procopius who also emphasized their lack of political organization and simple society.²³¹ The Slavs are more frequently mentioned in primary sources than the Gepids and the nomadic groups subjugated by the Avars as they regularly acted independently of the Avar armies, possibly due to insecure Avar control.²³² This lack of control resulted in the Slavs attacking and killing a pair of Avar diplomats in 579: "When the Avars had made a treaty and were returning home, the *scamars*, as they are called locally, ambushed them and stole horses, silver and other goods."²³³ Usually, the Slavs were occupied with raiding the Romans, which was likely acceptable for the khagan as long as he could claim lordship over them, since lack of control could damage his heavenly mandate. It was therefore problematic when the Slav attacked the Avar diplomats, which likely resulted in an Avar-Roman alliance and military operation against the Slavs, in 578-579.²³⁴

Whilst the success of the Avar-Roman operation was questionable: "...since none of the barbarians there dared to face him, but took refuge in the thick undergrowth of the woods."²³⁵, it was almost certainly followed by increased Avar control over the Slavs. This control can however also be explained by the addition of ten thousand new warriors as three new tribes joined the Avars after fleeing the Turks.²³⁶ This increased control resulted in Simocatta claiming that during the 580s "...the Avars let loose the nation of the Sclavenes, who ravaged very many areas of the Roman territory."²³⁷ By the 590s Avar control had waned with numerous Slavic groups outside of the khagan's control, groups which the Romans were

²³¹ Petersen, "In Search of Equilibrium", 46, Pohl, *The Avars*, 161-162

²³² Curta, *The Making*, 92-95, Kardaras, *Byzantium and the Avars*, 33-34

²³³ Menander Protector, *History*, 15.6

²³⁴ Curta, *The Making*, 91-92, 207-208, Kardaras, *Byzantium and the Avars*, 38, Wolfram, *The Roman Empire*, 303, Menander Protector, *History*, 21

²³⁵ Menander Protector, *History*, 21

²³⁶ Pohl, *The Avars*, 92-93, Theophylact Simocatta, *History*, 7.8.16

²³⁷ Theophylact Simocatta, *History*, 1.7.1

conducting offensive military actions against. Similarly to the Slavs attacking the khagan's diplomats, Roman success against the Slavs was likely a threat to the khagan as they were attacking those who ostensibly were his subjects. After the Avar sack of Drizipera the khagan might therefore have abandoned the pretense of complete subjugation of the Slavs by establishing a treaty which included Roman provisions for crossing the Danube and attacking the Slavs.²³⁸

As described in the preceding paragraphs the Avars had significantly less control over the Slavs than over the Gepids and the subjugated nomadic groups. The reason for this lack of control was likely caused by the differences between the *ethne*, with clearest difference being between the nomads and the Slavs. This difference was their mode of existence, as the Slavs farmed and lived sedentary lives, whilst nomads produce food through their animals and related migrations.²³⁹ This does not fully explain why the Avars struggled to control the Slavs, but it does emphasize that the Avars and Slavs lived very different lives, which probably resulted in different social structures.

However, the Gepids also lived sedentary lives, whilst still being fully controlled by the Avars, thus way of life cannot have been decisive. The most significant difference between the Gepids and the Slavs was therefore likely more decisive and that was their political organization. Whilst the Gepids lived in a structured polity ruled by a king, which probably made it easy for the khagan to assume power by simply replacing him, the Slavs had no political entities, instead they were almost certainly divided into small groups led by chieftains controlling small pieces of land.²⁴⁰ Furthermore, as mentioned by the *Strategikon* they were likely stubbornly independent.²⁴¹ The love of independence coupled with a lack of established political structures could have made it close to impossible for the khagan to establish control over the Slavs and include them in the Avar khaganate's redistributive network. This however does not necessarily mean that the Avars had no effect on the Slavs, with Avar and Roman influence possibly together creating the basis for future Slavic polities, with the *ethnos* likely roughly being split into three parts, one subjugated by the Avars, one by the Romans and one which remained independent.²⁴²

²³⁸ Kardaras, *Byzantium and the Avars*, 58

²³⁹ Pohl, *The Avars*, 135, Golden, *Central Asia*, 6

²⁴⁰ Pohl, *The Avars*, 135, 156

²⁴¹ Maurice, *Maurice's Strategikon*, 11.4

²⁴² Jin Kim, *The Huns*, 144, Curta, *The Making*, 318, Petersen, *Siege warfare*, 374, Petersen, "In Search of Equilibrium", 47

The khagan's difficulties in controlling the Slavs and including them within the redistributive network, does however not mean that they were never partially included. Instead, they were simply placed on the side, with Slavs participating in it without being beholden to it, likely often gaining wealth and prestigious items through their own raiding. Instead, the Slavs probably subverted themselves under the khagan when undertaking challenging tasks, where the assistance of him and his warriors was needed for a successful outcome. The Avar-Slavic siege of Thessaloniki in 586 is an example as the city was besieged by a mix of Avars and Slavs, who were driven off by a successful defense. Such cooperation would sometimes have allowed the Slavs to gain loot and the khagan to gain their short-term loyalty.²⁴³ Additionally, there was almost certainly large groups of Slavs within the Avar khaganate, as Slavs are mentioned participating in Avar armies.²⁴⁴

There is not a lot of information on specific interactions between the Slavic and Avar *ethne*, making it difficult to reach any conclusions regarding how such interactions could have affected the Slavs. This is partially due to a lack of archeological evidence and, as discussed, due to a lack of descriptions of Avar-Slavic coexistence. As mentioned, the Romans recognized Slavic identities through the Slavic bow fibulae, with Curta arguing that the idea of a Slavic *ethnos* was created by the Romans to make sense of the political situation beyond the Danube.²⁴⁵ Consequently, there might not have been any Slavic identity when the Avars conquered the Carpathian basin, with the Slav category being similar to the Germanic as both were created by the Romans without any meaning for the people it described. This does not mean that the categorization had no impact on the Slavs. They may, over time, have adopted the category and thus created belonging beyond one's local life.²⁴⁶ Perhaps based on the way of living described by Simocatta. "They live among nearly impenetrable forests, rivers, lakes and marshes, and have made the exits from their settlements branch out in many directions because the dangers they might face. They bury their most valuable possessions in secret places, keeping nothing unnecessary in sight."²⁴⁷

²⁴³ Pohl, *The Avars*, 130-131, 138-141

²⁴⁴ Pohl, *The Avars*, 278-279

²⁴⁵ Curta, *The Making*, 118-119

²⁴⁶ Goetz, Jarnut & Pohl, *Regna and Gentes*, 6-7, Ian N. Wood, "Gentes, kings and kingdoms-the emergence of states. The kingdom of the Gibichungs," in *Regna and Gentes: The Relationship Between Late Antique and Early Medieval Peoples and Kingdoms in the Transformation of the Roman World*, ed. Hans-Werner Goetz, Jörg Jarnut & Walter Pohl (Brill: Leiden, 2003), 245

²⁴⁷ Maurice, *Maurice's Strategikon*, 11.4

3.9: Conclusion

From their arrival in Europe to the death of emperor Maurice the Avar *ethnos* almost certainly underwent a historical process which fundamentally changed the constitution of their *ethnos*. After the conquest of the Carpathian basin the material culture of the Avars most likely changed from the original Rouran culture, which could have been based around remnants of the proper Rouran tribes, to one akin to the material cultures of the Carpathian. The Avars therefore essentially adopted the fashion of the cultures of the Carpathian basin, which was influenced by Roman culture, but combined it with their former Rouran sensibilities. Thus, at the end of the process the cultural nucleus of the Avar *ethnos* probably consisted of the remnants of their Rouran culture, like the oaths and songs as well as their new material culture.

The Avar *ethnos* also changed in other ways after the conquest, primarily because the elite of their subjugated *ethne* were adopted into the Avar *ethnos*. This would have changed the constitution of the Avar *ethnos*, weakening the importance of origin and the original Rouran culture and instead making personal loyalty to the khagan the most defining feature. Thus, it would also change the constitution of the Avar *ethnos*, likely making it more prestigious and elitist as it became filled with the leaders of the different *ethne* of the Avar khaganate. The adoption of an Avar identity was also likely made easier by the redistributive system of the Avar khaganate, which would have introduced the newly subjugated elite to the culture of the Avar *ethnos* and the prestige associated with it. These formerly subjugated elite would therefore have combined loyalty to the khagan, the original culture of the Avars and the material culture of the Carpathian basin as the decisive features of the Avar *ethnos*.

The major subjugated groups within the Avar khaganate were nomads like the Kutrigurs, the Gepids and the Slavs. Both the Gepids and the Kutrigurs likely existed as distinguishable semi-autonomous groups within the Avar khaganate, under the leadership of elite Avars. For the nomads their subjugation possibly created an impetus for unity, with the barriers between the groups collapsing, resulting in the creation of a new *ethnos*. The Gepids likely remained unified even though their *ethnos* was disrupted, partially because their political structure remained intact. Avar control over the Slavs was likely less secure, with a high point during the 580s which had already fragmented by Maurice's Balkan wars. The lack of control was probably a result of lacking political and social structures, resulting in the khagan having to create these structures in an attempt at ensuring control over the Slavs. This almost certainly resulted in haphazard and limited authority which ultimately weakened the prestige of the

khagan. However, it could together with Roman influence perhaps have formed the basis for a Slavic identity and the creation of organized Slavic polities.

4: The Economy of the Avar Khaganate and its Connections With Surrounding Polities

The economy of the Avar khaganate was likely split into two distinct constituents with each constituent being the domain of different *ethne*. This organization was not unusual as other steppe empires had similar distinctions. What is unusual though was the almost complete lack of trade to support the prestige economy of the Avar khaganate, especially when compared against the Gök Turk khaganate where trade was decisive for the prestige economy. This lack of trade was among other things a consequence of the diplomatic interaction between the Avars and the Romans. The Roman foreign policy had significant differences to the Chinese foreign policy which the Avars probably were familiar with, whilst simultaneously being averse to include trade in an attempt to control the Avars. Additionally, the Avar khagans did not need trade to ensure the prestige economy of the Avar khaganate, as luxury goods were provided through Roman tribute and by their subjugated *ethne*, who also provided the Avars with agricultural produce. Furthermore, the depopulation of the northern Balkans probably prevented access to the commercial networks of the Mediterranean. Lastly, whilst the subjugated *ethne* maintained small-scale trade established before the Avar conquest, these *ethne* lacked traditions for commerce and contact with the Romans, which caused trade between the late Roman empire and the Avar khaganate to be held to a minimum.

4.1: General Economic Trends of the 6th Century

From the middle of the 6th century, the Roman economy showed clear signs of contraction. This contraction is generally blamed on demographic losses caused by a recurrent plague, which decimated the late Roman empire, including the Balkans where it likely increased the division between the populous south and the rural north. The trade networks of the 6th century still continued however because they were supported and held together by the Roman state through the *Annonae* system, where food and other necessary goods were transported between different parts of the empire. The *Annonae* is believed to have consisted of two parts, one part supporting the major cities and one part supporting the military frontiers, but it also stimulated trade and other economic endeavors by creating regular long-distance relations.²⁴⁸ The north Balkans, in particular, was supported by the islands of the Aegean (who were stable) and

²⁴⁸ Angelikie, E. Laiou & Cecile Morrison, *The Byzantine Economy*, (Cambridge 2007), 24, 33-34, 39-40, Curta, *The Long Sixth Century*, 55-56, Wickham, *Framing the Early Middle Ages*, 708, McCormick, *Origins of the European Economy*, 87-91, 106-109

whilst this supported the Roman troops it did not create markets or large-scale commercial relations since all the trade took place inside the forts.²⁴⁹

4.2: The Economy of the Avar khaganate

The main economic activity of the Avar *ethnos* was most likely the husbandry of animals as there are many archeological and textual proofs for animal breeding within the Avar khaganate.²⁵⁰ However there is also evidence of farming which has caused a discussion around the topic, if the Avars continued the nomadic lifestyle after conquering the Carpathian basin, in 568.²⁵¹ This had most likely not changed much by the early 560s, when the Avars rejected an offer for parts of Pannonia, because they were “unwilling to live outside of Scythia.”²⁵² Which Menander believed was because: “...they were greatly attached to the place.”²⁵³ He later mentions another possible reason for the rejection: “...if they managed to cross the Danube, they had planned to launch an attack with their whole army.”²⁵⁴ Whilst the offensive might have been the primary motivator, the rejection probably also had to do with the geography of Pannonia, as the Carpathian basin can at most support 70 000 animals, it was therefore almost certainly not large enough for sustained nomadic food production.²⁵⁵

Because of this it is not unreasonable to expect the Avars to transition from a fully nomadic way of life to a more sedentary way of life following their conquest of the Carpathian basin in 568. This transition might very well have begun whilst the Avars were on the Pontic-Caspian steppes prior to the conquest, as this area also was too small for a fully nomadic lifestyle.²⁵⁶ This could possibly explain why the Avars had seemingly changed their mind by 568, and therefore settled in the Carpathian basin, as they could already have abandoned their fully nomadic lifestyle. Another possible explanation, is that the Carpathian basin was safer than the Pontic-Caspian steppes since the Carpathian mountains hindered possible invasions from the east.²⁵⁷

This transition from a fully nomadic life to a more sedentary life could have been eased by the adoption of elites from subjugated sedentary *ethne* into the Avar *ethnos*. The merger could to

²⁴⁹ Curta, *The Long Sixth Century*, 58-60, 274

²⁵⁰ Daim, “Avars and Avar archeology”, 485

²⁵¹ Florin, *The Long Sixth Century*, 98-99

²⁵² Menander Protector, *History*, 5.4

²⁵³ Menander Protector, *History*, 5.4

²⁵⁴ Menander Protector, *History*, 5.4

²⁵⁵ Sinor, “History and Historiography” 8-9

²⁵⁶ Golden, “The peoples of the south Russian steppes”, 256

²⁵⁷ Schmauder, “Huns, Avars, Hungarians”, 671

some extent have diverged the connection between sedentarism and poverty, which was commonly existed in nomadic societies.²⁵⁸ Nonetheless, the transition from a nomadic to a more sedentary lifestyle was probably quite disruptive with Golden arguing that the raids conducted by the Avar khaganate can be explained by this transition.²⁵⁹ Whilst valid, the importance of prestige and the redistributive network should not be underestimated as motivators for the military actions of the Avar khaganate.

Both the Yue-Zhi and the Hephthalites possibly underwent similar transitions after capturing cities and their related sedentary populations.²⁶⁰ Yet these transitions were probably also long-term processes as the predecessors to the Hephthalites, the Chinonites, simply avoided Sassanid armies during attempted subjugations. This tactic was a favorite of steppe empires, who often simply retreated from enemies through a combination of high mobility and having no fixed infrastructure for enemies to attack.²⁶¹

The other important part of the Avar khaganate's economy was farming, which most likely was the economic sphere of the subjugated *ethne* even if the Avars were transitioning to a more sedentary lifestyle. These *ethne* were the Gepids and the Slavs who therefore would have constituted the agricultural sector of the Avar khaganate. The Slavs were specifically mentioned as farmers by the *Strategikon*. "They possess an abundance of all sorts of livestock and produce, which they store in heaps, especially common millet and Italian millet."²⁶² It is generally accepted that part of this produce was transferred to the elite Avars, as part of the irregular domination of the Slavs, with this being used to support the position of the elite Avars, thereby constituting a part of the Avar khaganates prestige economy.²⁶³ The Gepids probably also transferred part of their agricultural produce to the Avars and thereby also supported the political structure and the prestige economy of the Avar khaganate. There was also a Christian cultural island at modern Keszthely close to the edge of lake Balaton, likely partially created through the kidnapping of Roman provincials, which might also have produced food for the Avars. Such increases in human resources were not uncommon for

²⁵⁸ Golden, *History of the Turkic Peoples*, 5

²⁵⁹ Golden, *History of the Turkic Peoples*, 7-8, 111

²⁶⁰ Khodadad, *ReOrienting the Sassanids*, 135, Aydogdy Kurbanov, "The Hephthalites," (PhD diss., Freie Universität Berlin, 2010), 209-210

²⁶¹ Kurbanov, "The Hephthalites," 151

²⁶² Maurice, *Maurice's Strategikon*, 11.4

²⁶³ Pohl, *The Avars*, 142-143, 244, Curta, *The Long Sixth Century*, 288

nomadic polities were the kidnapped populace replaced the economic activity of absent or otherwise occupied individuals.²⁶⁴

In addition to the previously mentioned reason for why the Avars settled close to the old Roman cities west in the Carpathian basin, they might also have settled in this area because the surviving infrastructure might have made the transportation of food, for the Avar prestige economy, easier.²⁶⁵ Whilst the agricultural support was a part of the Avar khaganate's prestige economy, it could also have additional reasons. One such reason is that whilst nomadic food production generally was not labor intensive, nor relied on large numbers of people, it was precarious, being threatened by natural and human disasters which could destroy the possibility of food production for many years.²⁶⁶ Nomadic empires therefore generally utilized sedentary food production to ensure access to stable amounts of food, either through trade or tribute.²⁶⁷ Something which the transfer of agricultural produce from the sedentary *ethnos* to the Avar *ethnos* was very similar to. This reason for the transfer of agricultural produce is supported by the primary sources, as there is no reference to food in bulk as tribute to the Avars after the conquest of the Carpathian basin, whilst there is two such references prior to the conquest.

There is also evidence of other economic endeavors including weaving, ceramics and the previously mentioned metal working, which all to varying degrees were associated with the sedentary *ethne*.²⁶⁸ This is partially because the production seems to have been centralized, which is especially true for the ceramic production with production centers having been found at Szekszard, Ocseny and Dunaujvaros. It is also because, just like the production of food, these items were probably produced to be part of the prestige economy, with the mentioned production centers located close to the political center of the khaganate.²⁶⁹ Metal working was another important part of the prestige economy of the Avar khaganate as it produced some of the items which ensured the cohesion of the khaganate, by melting down the gold gained through raids and tribute.²⁷⁰

²⁶⁴ Pohl, *The Avars*, 200-201, Jin Kim, *The Huns*, 42, Wolfram, *The Roman Empire*, 75, Sinor & de Cosmo, *Warfare in Inner Asian*, 12

²⁶⁵ Pohl, *The Avars*, 246-247, Daim, "Avars and Avar archeology", 485

²⁶⁶ Pohl, *The Avars*, 199, Golden, *Ethnicity and State Formation*, 31

²⁶⁷ Wickham, *Framing the Early Middle Ages*, 698

²⁶⁸ Curta, *The Long Sixth Century*, 99-105

²⁶⁹ Curta, *The Long Sixth Century*, 268-269

²⁷⁰ Balint, "Avar Goldsmiths' Work," 149-150, 155, Daim, "Byzantine Belt Ornaments", 62

This economic relationship between the Avars and their subjugated *ethne* was not unique, it was repeated both on the steppes and on the borders of the steppes. Both the Scythians (Persian speaking nomads who dominated the western steppes during most of antiquity) and the Xiongnu dominated *ethne* which mostly consisted of farmers who produced food for their overlords.²⁷¹ Similar relationships also existed in east-Iran, where the Hephthalites established tributary relationships over local cities.²⁷²

There are also some few examples of Avar trade, in connection with their diplomatic visits to Constantinople.²⁷³ Such economic endeavors are not unusual with similar activities being well known between the Romans and the Persians, with this activity being regulated through treaties. “Ambassadors and all others using the public post to deliver messages, both those traveling to Roman and those to Persian territory, shall be honored each according to his status and rank and shall receive the appropriate attention. They shall be sent back without delay but shall be able to exchange the trade goods which they have brought without hinderance or any impost.”²⁷⁴ The lack of an agreement could have stopped these instances of Avar trade, yet this does not seem to be the case as there are several references, by Menander, to Avar envoys purchasing items from the Romans. “Since the envoys of the Avars could obtain none of their demands from the Emperor, they received their accustomed gifts from him and were allowed to depart, having purchased whatever they required, both clothing and weaponry.”²⁷⁵ Another example also from Menander: “When in this year Baian as usual sent Targitius to the Emperor to receive the agreed payment (which was eighty thousand *nomismata* per year) and when Targitius had returned to him with the gold and the merchandise which he had bought with some of the money”.²⁷⁶

Menander thus mentions two occasions where Avar diplomats used tribute to buy merchandise to take back to the Avar khaganate and whilst this trade cannot have reached large proportions it still occurred. These purchases were very likely luxury goods, with swords being mentioned in particular, and would probably have provided more varied high

²⁷¹ Jin Kim, *The Huns*, 41-42

²⁷² Kurbanov, “The Hephthalites,” 206-207, 215

²⁷³ Kardaras, *Byzantium and the Avars*, 110, 124

²⁷⁴ Menander Protector, *History*, 6.1

²⁷⁵ Menander Protector, *History*, 5.4

²⁷⁶ Menander Protector, *History*, 25.1

prestige goods to the prestige economy of the Avar khaganate.²⁷⁷ Yet, this trade was probably not important for the Avar khaganate's economy as a whole.

As described the Avar economy consisted of both nomadic and sedentary produce which roughly corresponded to the different *ethne*. Parts of the sedentary produce was however part of the prestige economy of the Avar khaganate. This was an important aspect of the Avar political system as the subjugation of sedentary *ethne* ensured regular access to sedentary food otherwise unavailable through the nomadic lifestyle. It also ensured sufficient access to food in case of large losses of animals. The ceramics and metalworking were also a part of the prestige economy, which ensured that the Avar khagan was less dependent on contact with other states to ensure stable access to those types of products. Thus, the Avar khaganate became more self-sufficient after the conquest of the Carpathian basin in 568. Similarly, the wealth the Avars gained from the Romans did not equate trade, with actual commerce being almost completely lacking. The only exceptions where some rare occurrences were Avar diplomats bought items in Constantinople with Roman gold, but this does not constitute trading relations.²⁷⁸

4.3: The Gök Turk khaganate and its Relationship with the Sogdian *Ethnos*

This lack of trade contrasts most effectively with the Gök Turks, who were notorious traders because of their cooperation with the Sogdians, the preemptive traders of the early medieval world. The integration of the Sogdians commercial networks with the steppe likely began in the second century CE, before becoming more and more integrated after further nomadic invasions during the 4th and 5th centuries.²⁷⁹ These nomadic invasions led to the economic preeminence of Sogdiana as they collapsed the southern parts of east-Iran both economically and demographically, resulting in corresponding demographic and economic growth in Sogdiana. A specific invasion was conducted by the Kidarites, who are seen as the progenitors of Sogdian commercial growth. It is likely that the Kidarites created solid economic foundations, which helped make Sogdiana a center of agriculture and industry.²⁸⁰ Kidarite control probably ended in 509 when Sogdiana was conquered by the Hephthalites, who placed the final piece needed for Sogdian commercial dominance. This piece was the

²⁷⁷ Csiky, *Avar-Age Polearms*, 326

²⁷⁸ Curta, *The Long Sixth Century*, 124-125

²⁷⁹ Khodadad, *ReOrienting the Sassanids*, 147, 151 Michael Shenkar, "The Origin of the Sogdian Civic Communities (naf)," *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient*, n.s. (2020): 357-388, at: 362-363, Vaissiere, *Sogdian Traders*, 108

²⁸⁰ Vaissiere, *Sogdian Traders*, 100-106, 109-110

ransoms of the Sassanid emperor, Peroz in 474 and ca. 480, with the ransoms being used to expand Sogdian commerce towards China, which caused the Sogdians over time to become the commercial mediators between China and the rest of Eurasia.²⁸¹

The relationship between the Gök Turks and the Sogdians started shortly after the establishment of the Gök Turk khaganate, with the Gök Turks invading and conquering the Hephthalites and therefore also Sogdiana. The Gök Turks and the Sogdians created a symbiotic relationship built on Sogdian commerce, with the Turks selling the silk which they gained through tribute, through the Sogdian commercial network.²⁸² This relationship was, as mentioned, so prevalent that Simocatta considered Sogdiana a Turkic nation.²⁸³ Initially the silk was sold to the Sassanids but after the Sassanid borders were closed the Gök Turks contacted the Romans to create an alliance which included trade, the initiative of a Sogdian-Turk named Maniakh.²⁸⁴ There is therefore a quite clear dichotomy between the Avars who almost did not trade and the Gök Turks who were avid traders.

4.4: A Comparison of Chinese and Roman Foreign Policy

The natural place to start when assessing the other possible reasons for the almost complete lack of Avar trade is the relationship between two major sedentary empires, the Chinese and the Roman, and their neighboring steppe empires. This is because the foreign policies of the sedentary empires dominated the relationship between the sedentary and steppe entities and would therefore have impacted the trade between the entities. The foreign policies of sedentary empires usually had some general similarities, which should quickly be mentioned. Sedentary empires generally preferred to relate to single steppe entities as they were usually easier than trying to manage a multitude of different groupings. Consequently, sedentary empires sometimes created the impetus for unification of steppe entities. Once unified, steppe empires were generally managed by controlling their access to luxury goods through tribute, trade agreements or treaties. Of these options the least risky one was usually tribute based on a treaty as steppe empires often seemed fickle and untrustworthy, making their management quite problematic.²⁸⁵

By the middle of the 6th century CE Chinese foreign policy had a long history, which probably started in earnest when the Xiongnu dominated the steppes north of ancient China.

²⁸¹ Vaissiere, *Sogdian Traders*, 110-112, Khodadad, *ReOrienting the Sassanids*, 140, 153

²⁸² Vaissiere, *Sogdian Traders*, 205-208, Khodadad, *ReOrienting the Sassanids*, 180-181

²⁸³ Theophylact Simocatta, *History*, 7.8.13

²⁸⁴ Vaissiere, *Sogdian Traders*, 209-210, 237, Kardaras, *Byzantium and the Avars*, 26

²⁸⁵ Golden, "War and Warfare", 111, 153-155

This domination was by the Chinese understood as the Xiongnu subjugating the different northern Hu (Chinese name for barbarians) and the resulting unification of the steppes was likely a new foreign policy challenge to the Chinese empire. To meet the challenge, they created an all-inclusive ideology, which created the basis for an organized tributary system and systematic foreign relations. This ideology organized the world into several zones, with the innermost zone being the Chinese imperial court with the other zones having different obligations to this court. The other zones were primarily inhabited by native Chinese except for the last two zones. These zones were inhabited by outer or inner barbarians, with the former inhabiting the zone for those outside of Chinese control and the latter inhabiting the zone for those under Chinese control. The biggest difference between the different zones was the amount of tribute which had to be paid to the central court. Whilst the Chinese attempted to impose this tributary system onto the non-Chinese, it likely was never systematically imposed because of forces outside of Chinese control, including the might of the different steppe empires.²⁸⁶

The tributary system described above was also attempted to include the Xiongnu, but as the threat of Xiongnu raids and Xiongnu political influence caused loss of frontier control, it was initially abandoned. The Xiongnu threat resulted instead in several treaties, with the first being signed in 198 BCE. These first treaties were called Ho-Ch'in and included the marriage of a Han Chinese princess to the Shanyu, gifts from the Chinese to the Xiongnu, the Shanyu being accepted as a brother of the Chinese emperor and border trade to try to stop the continuous Xiongnu raids. The Ho-Ch'in treaties therefore did not conform to the ideology, described above, which was supposed to dictate foreign policy. Still, a primary goal of the Ho-Ch'in treaties was to spread Han culture among the Xiongnu, something which over time could force them to conform to Chinese demands.²⁸⁷

There was still discontent among the Chinese related to the Ho-Ch'in treaties as they were not very effective as the Xiongnu continued to plunder whilst receiving tribute, thereby not conforming to Chinese expectations. These treaties were therefore not maintained, with Xiongnu superiority and ability to dictate the treaties, causing treaties like the Ho-Ch'in, only occurred during the rule of the first Xiongnu Shanyus and the rule of Shanyu Hu-tu-erh-shih (20-30 CE), who reinvigorated the Xiongnu.²⁸⁸ The initial Ho-Ch'in treaties were therefore

²⁸⁶ Yu "Han foreign relations", 381-383

²⁸⁷ Yu, "The Hsiung-nu," 122-124, Yu "Han foreign relations", 385-389

²⁸⁸ Yu, "The Hsiung-nu," 142

likely canned when the Han became politically, militarily and financially prepared to force the Xiongnu to conform to their world order and expectations. It resulted in the Ho-Ch'in treaties being replaced by a treaty which demanded that the Shanyu should pay their respects to the Chinese emperor, who should receive one of their sons as a hostage and in return give the Xiongnu significant amount of sedentary luxury goods. Nonetheless, neither empire was consistently able to force their opposition to conform to their foreign policy goals, resulting in the politics alternating between war and peace.²⁸⁹ Yet, the ideology which the Chinese foreign policy was based on likely still persisted and might overtime have resulted in a common understanding of how steppe and sedentary politics should interact and their roles in the interaction.²⁹⁰

The treaties between the Gök Turks and the Chinese had some similarities with the treaties between the Xiongnu and the Chinese. One possible similarity was that the Gök Turks were accepted as an equal state during periods of Chinese weakness. However, just as with the Xiongnu, when the Chinese had consolidated power, they attempted to force the Gök Turks to submit to the Chinese world order.²⁹¹ Other similarities include marriage between the politics and trade, which mainly consisted of exchanging silk for horses. The Chinese empires probably only accepted trade because trade could have significant cultural influence on the nomads and because it was a way to restrain the nomads and avoid warfare. Lastly, when the treaties were not in force the relations were dominated by Turkic raids and Chinese punitive expeditions, similar to the interaction between the Xiongnu and the Chinese.²⁹²

A major difference between the circumstances of the Roman and the Chinese was the organization of the neighboring nomadic empires, as the nomadic groups close to the Roman border were significantly less organized than those close to the Chinese border.²⁹³ This was due to the lack of steppe lands in the west compared to the east, which caused organized steppe empires in western Eurasia to originate on the eastern or central Eurasian steppes. This lack of organization is one probable reason for why the Roman foreign policy devolved into paying of troublesome and hostile nomads. “But Zabergan and his forces said that they would not leave until they also acquired a vast sum of money from the Romans, just as the Utigurs

²⁸⁹ Yu “Han foreign relations”, 389, 395-397, 404

²⁹⁰ Pohl, *The Avars*, 202-203

²⁹¹ Graff, “Strategy and Contingency”, 34-37

²⁹² Sinor, “establishment and dissolution,” 307, Golden, *History of the Turkic Peoples*, 144, 153

²⁹³ Golden, “War and Warfare,” 110-111, 140, 154-155

had done.”²⁹⁴ This policy was unpopular among some segments of Roman society including the historian Procopius. “As soon as he (Justinian) found himself at the head of his uncle’s empire, he at once did his utmost to squander the public treasury over which he now had control. For he lavished wealth extravagantly upon the Huns who from time to time came across and, ever afterwards, the Roman provinces were subjected to constant incursions; for these barbarians, having once tasted our wealth could not tear themselves away from the road which led to it.”²⁹⁵ For Procopius therefore this aspect of Roman foreign policy seemed like a waste of money as it failed to stop the nomadic incursions which were devastating the Balkans. If this is correct it would mean that Roman foreign policy was both less complex and less effective than Chinese foreign policy.

Procopius’s mistake was that he considered the nomads a cohesive unit. The tribute was not only paid to stop raids, but also to gain the support of specific nomadic groups against other nomadic groups.²⁹⁶ This was a long-running strategy, which also included the creation of buffer zones, the settling of people on Roman land and making them *foederati*, essentially close allies. Noteworthy examples of *foederati* included the Antes, Ostrogoths and Gepids.²⁹⁷ Agathias mentions how Roman foreign policy worked in practice, whilst discussing the previously mentioned Zabergan. “He had in fact resolved to employ every conceivable stratagem in order to sow dissension among the barbarians and bring them into mutual conflict. With this end in view he immediately sent a letter, while Zabergan and his men were marching at a leisurely pace, to Sandilch the leader of the other Hunnic tribe, who was an ally and in the pay of the Empire.”²⁹⁸

This foreign policy is also described in the *Strategikon*, whilst referring to the Slavs. “Since there are many kings among them always at odds with one another, it is not difficult to win some of them by persuasion or by gifts, especially those in areas closer to the border, and then to attack the others, so that their common hostility will not make them united or bring them together under one ruler.”²⁹⁹ This quote emphasizes another important point about Roman foreign policy, with tribute and alliances being used to avoid hegemonic powers which could

²⁹⁴ Agathias, *The Histories* 5.23.7

²⁹⁵ Procopius, *Secret History*, 23

²⁹⁶ Golden, “War and Warfare,” 110-111

²⁹⁷ Curta, *The Making*, 80-82, Menander Protector, *History*, 12.6, Alexander Sarantis, “Military Encounters and Diplomatic Affairs in the North Balkans during the Reigns of Anastasius and Justinian” in *War and Warfare in Late Antiquity*, eds. Alexander Sarantis & Neil Christie (Brill: Leiden, 2013), 765

²⁹⁸ Agathias, *The Histories* 5.24.2

²⁹⁹ Maurice, *Maurice’s Strategikon*, 11.4

threaten Roman control. Roman foreign policy therefore does not correspond to the general foreign policies of sedentary empires as fractured groups were preferred to one unified entity. The focus on avoiding hegemonic barbarian states probably explains the decision not to support the Gepids against the Avars and Lombards, as the Romans initial support of the Lombards was to avoid a hegemonic Gepid kingdom north of the Danube. In retrospect this appears to be a mistake as the lack of support resulted in the establishment of a different hegemonic power and the eventual collapse of Roman control over their northern border.³⁰⁰

Roman foreign policy was therefore significantly different from Chinese foreign policy. This was because Chinese foreign policy focused on forcing unified steppe empires into accepting their political and social domination, whilst the Roman foreign policy focused on creating rival groups who were too busy fighting each other to attack the Romans. This created a fundamental difference in how the different empires interacted with their neighboring steppe peoples. Specifically in relation to trade it meant that the Chinese were significantly more willing to trade than the Romans, as trade could spread Chinese culture, whereas it would not help bring back a fractured political world north of the Danube.

4.5: The Diplomatic Contact Between the Avar khaganate and the Roman Empire
As mentioned, Roman-Avar relations started in 558 when the Avars first contacted the Romans through the Alans, another nomadic group. During the following negotiations, the Avars claimed that:

“The Avars were invincible and could easily crush 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... The emperor put the matter up for discussion, and when the holy senate had praised his plan and its shrewdness he immediately sent the gifts: cords worked with gold, couches, silken garments and a great many other objects which would mollify the arrogant spirits of the Avars.”³⁰¹

Justinian’s decision was, as discussed, according to the normal rules and procedures for how to manage barbarians, as he paid them off and used them to attack their enemies. The Avars also played their role as barbaric nomads well, being boisterous, arrogant and demanding.

³⁰⁰ Curta, *The Making*, 80-82

³⁰¹ Menander Protector, *History*, 5.1-2

As previously mentioned, this situation did not last long as by 562 the Avars were prepared to attack the Romans with diplomacy as pretext.

“Envoys came to Justinian from the Avars to look over the territory where the tribe was to make its home. On the advice of the general Justin, the emperor was planning to settle the tribe on the land which the Heruls had earlier inhabited, which is called Second Pannonia....Although no progress was made on the matter, the general Justin sent the envoys to Byzantium and advised the Emperor to detain them there for a considerable time. For he had made friends with one of the envoys, whose name was Kunimon, and Kunimon had told him confidentially that their intent was different from they professed. Their demands were very modest, and by asserting their goodwill towards the Romans they 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 had planned to launch an attack with their whole army.”³⁰²

This has been discussed earlier, so in an effort not to repeat myself, I will merely state that nomads attempting to raid and plunder Roman land was not unusual. It was rather the Avar's aggressiveness and willingness to use diplomatic discussions to raid which were unusual. This stated that they had ambitions beyond being Roman allies.

The next diplomatic development was the cancellation of the Roman-Avar treaties by the successor to emperor Justinian, emperor Justin.³⁰³ It was followed by the Avar conquest of the Gepid kingdom which, as discussed, removed the balance of power Justinian had fought so hard for and removed the normal mode of operations between the Romans and their northern neighbors.³⁰⁴ This overhauled the diplomatic situation and removed the status quo beyond the Danube. Thus, the Avars collapsed the control which the emperors Anastasius and Justinian had established of the northern border of the Balkans.

During the following years, the Avar khaganate coalesced by securely establishing its political structure, a development which weakened the Roman position by removing the possibility of

³⁰² Menander Protector, *History*, 5.4

³⁰³ Petersen, “In Search of Equilibrium”, 52, Kardaras, *Byzantium and the Avars*, 25

³⁰⁴ Alexander Sarantis, “The rise and fall of the Gepid Kingdom in Dacia and Pannonia, 453-567,” In *Collapse-Reorganization-Continuity: Gepids after the Fall of the Hun Empire*, ed. Tivadar Vida, Dieter Quast, Zsafia Racz & Istvan Koncz (Archaeolingua, Budapest, 2019), 22, Hrovje Gracanin & Jana Skrgulja, “The Gepids and Southern Pannonia in the age of Justinian 1,” In *Collapse-Reorganization-Continuity: Gepids after the Fall of the Hun Empire*, ed. Tivadar Vida, Dieter Quast, Zsafia Racz & Istvan Koncz (Archaeolingua, Budapest, 2019), 219

divide and conquer tactics. It is possible that emperor Tiberius and emperor Maurice tried to avoid Avar raids by concluding treaties, which eventually increased the tribute to the Avar khaganate to 80 000 solidi per year followed by another 20 000 just ten years later. These treaties could be considered ineffectual as they were regularly broken, with the shortest one lasting from the spring to the summer of 585.³⁰⁵ The effectiveness of the treaties should however be considered in relation to the collapse of the Roman foreign policy, the power of the Avar khaganate, Roman focus on Persia and future Roman attempts to revive control over the Danube during Maurice's Balkan wars. This would make the treaties significantly more successful as they were likely less focused on controlling the Avars, instead focusing on delaying and occupying the Avars. Thereby attempting to avoid a complete collapse on the Balkans until the then ongoing Roman-Persian war could be concluded.

Even during Maurice's Balkan wars there were treaties between the polities. One in particular followed the previously mentioned sack of Drizipera. "The Ister was agreed as intermedium between Romans and Avars, but there was provision for crossing the river against Sclavenes; the peace payments were also increased by an additional twenty thousand gold solidi. On these precise terms the war between Romans and Avars reached a conclusion."³⁰⁶ Except for the rules regulating warfare against the Slavs, this treaty was similar to other earlier treaties. It was also broken within a few years, as the Romans attacked and defeated the Avars in several battles on the Avar khaganate's land. The Drizipera treaty was possibly therefore simply a delaying maneuver and a way to remove the Avar army from Roman territory without having to fight a battle.

Based on the above it is clear that the Romans never utilized trade in an attempt to control the Avars. Initially, the Avars had the same role as other nomadic groups, a military tool, but their aggression and success destroyed the carefully cultivated balance of power beyond the Danube. This was partially because Justin attempted to subvert them by denying them access to luxury goods, a strategy which resulted in the Avar khaganates near total dominance of the Carpathian basin. The following treaties by Tiberius and Maurice were therefore simply attempts at constraining Avar activity, which were followed by an attempt at destroying the Avar khaganate's stranglehold on the Carpathian and reestablishing the status quo of a multitude of groups fighting for Roman favor.

³⁰⁵ Kardaras, *Byzantium and the Avars*, 33-37, 43-45

³⁰⁶ Theophylact Simocatta, *History*, 7.15.14

The writings of Menander and Simocatta possibly indicate that Avar foreign policy were based on their previous experiences with the Chinese foreign policies. One example is from the first Avar siege of Sirmium in 568 where the Avar envoys argued that :

“After enduring many labors and wandering far, I had barely taken possession of this land when you took it from me by force. In addition, you have taken from me Usdibad who was mine by right of conquest. Moreover, your emperor had poured upon me many bitter insults not once or twice but repeatedly, and he had refused to do any of the things which he ought. If, having suffered these wrongs at your hands, I have turned to arms, I am in no way to be blamed.”³⁰⁷

The envoys were therefore using Roman actions as a *casus belli*, viewing the broken treaties and the withholding of tribute as personal insults. The Roman general answered that the treaty was broken because of the Avars arrogance and threats.³⁰⁸ This clearly shows the different point-of-views of the two parties, with the Romans using the arrogance of the Avars as an excuse to break the treaties and the elite Avars viewing the broken treaties as insults and acts of war.

An even more explicit example of the Avar’s expectations comes from one of Targitius’s many diplomatic visits to the court of the Roman emperor, with this example coming from the reign of emperor Justin. “I am here, Emperor, on a mission from your son. For you are truly the father of Baian, our master. I am sure that you are eager to show your love for your son by giving him the son’s portion. Since these are our views (and perhaps the views of yourself and your people), will you not yield to him what he deserves?”³⁰⁹ Whilst the quote is from a speech, which could make it untrustworthy, it is from Menander meaning that it probably was based on actual negotiations. Furthermore, since the speech was humble and submissive, rather than aggressive and demanding it does not conform to Roman expectations of nomadic behavior. It is therefore even more likely to be based on reality as it breaks with the literary conventions of late Roman history writing.

The description of the familial relationship between Baian and the emperor is significant as it potentially was based on past experiences with Chinese foreign policy. Specifically, the marriage agreements between the Chinese empire and the leaders of neighboring steppe

³⁰⁷ Menander Protector, *History*, 12.5

³⁰⁸ Menander Protector, *History*, 12.5

³⁰⁹ Menander Protector, *History*, 12.6

empires, which made the Chinese emperor and the nomadic leader family. The agreement also increased the leader's prestige and potentially stopped nomadic raids. Targitius possibly tried to relate to similar policies among the Romans based on past knowledge of Chinese policies in an attempt to reach a new treaty with emperor Justin. Sadly, for Targitius the Romans focused less on appeasement and more on divide and conquer and therefore rejected his suggestions. This resulted in the diplomatic talks failing, as would every other negotiation until Tiberius became emperor in 578.³¹⁰ It is also worth noting that even when conducting diplomatic negotiations based on Chinese foreign policy there was no mention of trade or commerce.

There would be no familial relationship between the Avars and the Romans and no acceptance of the khagan as an equal to the Roman emperor. Instead, emperor Tiberius once claimed that: "I should rather betroth to him one of my two daughters than willingly surrender the city of Sirmium."³¹¹ This was likely a rhetorical statement used to announce his resolve in defending Sirmium, but it exemplifies how unwilling the Romans were to use marriage as a diplomatic tool, as it would make it harder to dismantle the Avar khaganate and return the western steppes back to its state prior to the arrival of the Avars. As trade agreements probably would have a similar effect, the Romans were likely unwilling to enter into active trade because it went against their goals and foreign policy. Similarly, it is likely that the Avars did not consider trade important since they had both their own agricultural base, through the Slavs and the Gepids, as well as wealth gained from the Romans. These two aspects of the Avar economy were enough to ensure the Avar khaganate's prestige economy and therefore also its political structure.

4.6: The Effect of the Depopulation of the Balkans on Potential Avar Trade

Another possible explanation for the near complete lack of Avar trade is the conditions on the northern Balkans, which might have made it impractical or close to impossible to conduct trade. As discussed by the 6th century the northern half of the Balkans was almost certainly an economic and agricultural drain on the Roman empire because the land south of the Danube was almost completely empty beyond a few isolated semi-independent cities. With the exception of the area outside of modern Greece and around Constantinople, agricultural

³¹⁰ Menander Protector, *History*, 12.6, 15.1

³¹¹ Menander Protector, *History*, 25.2

production was probably limited to areas around or inside forts, creating a divide between the rich south and the poor north.³¹²

It is likely that the depopulation of the northern half of the Balkans originally stemmed from raids by bands of Germanic raiders during the rule of emperor Aurelian in the third century. The land was further devastated by Gothic raids following the battle for Adrianople and by Hunnic raids during the fifth century. By the time the emperors Anastasius and Justinian reestablished control during the early 6th century the old city structure of the early empire was long gone in the northern Balkans. Evidence of lack of food production and the decline of cities start appearing during the fourth and fifth centuries, with radical changes appearing at different times at different places. In the north-Balkan city of Nicopolis this change was likely caused by its sacking by Attila's Huns. Still, even prior to its destruction Nicopolis was likely contracting and experiencing a decline in economic activity, even though there was seemingly no significant decline in agricultural production close to the city or in the surrounding territory. The decline was therefore perhaps the result of generally less secure conditions or simply a part of the general weakening of city life in the period.³¹³

The depopulation of the Balkans resulted, as mentioned, in the Roman soldiers being supplied through the *Annonae*, which resulted in commercial exchange occurring inside the defensive forts. The commercial network of the north Balkans was therefore close to completely separated from the commercial networks of the south. It would therefore have been even more difficult for the Avars to latch on to the southern commercial networks, simultaneously as the northern commercial network would have been unavailable for large scale commerce.³¹⁴

4.7: Trade and Contact Between the Avar khaganate and the Rest of Europe

The lack of trade during the early Avar khaganate might contrast with the situation prior to the arrival of the Avars as there is some evidence for exchange both within and with areas outside the Carpathian basin. This includes trade with quern stones which might have

³¹² Curta, *the Long Sixth Century*, 46-50, Laiou & Morrison, *The Byzantine Economy*, 39-40, Andrew G. Poulter, "The Transition to Late Antiquity", in *The Transition to Late Antiquity: on the Danube and Beyond*, ed. Andrew G. Poulter (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2007), 20-21, Andrew G. Poulter, "The Transition to Late Antiquity on the Lower Danube: the City, a fort and the Countryside", in *The Transition to Late Antiquity: on the Danube and Beyond*, ed. Andrew G. Poulter (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2007), 71-72, 77-78, 95, J. H. W. G. Liebeschuetz, "The Lower Danube Region under Pressure: from Valens to Heraclius", in *The Transition to Late Antiquity: on the Danube and Beyond*, ed. Andrew G. Poulter (Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2007), 106, 129

³¹³ Poulter, "The Transition to Late Antiquity", 19-22, 46, Poulter, "the City, a fort and the Countryside", 53, 67-71, 82, 89, Liebeschuetz, "The Lower Danube Region under Pressure", 105, J. H. W.G. Liebeschuetz, *The Decline and Fall of the Roman City*, (Oxford, 2001), 31-32

³¹⁴ Curta, *The Long Sixth Century*, 274, 283

originated outside the Carpathian basin, and stones in buildings found along the Tisza river which most likely came from the Carpathian mountains.³¹⁵ There is also archeological evidence indicating that the interactions which predated the arrival of the Avars, continued after the conquest. These interactions were most likely conducted by the subjugated *ethne* and was therefore not related to the prestige economy of the Avar khaganate nor to the changes in *ethne* which occurred in this period. Still, it is not impossible that the former elite of the subjugated *ethne* continued the interactions even as members of the Avar *ethnos*.

The previously mentioned Keszthely culture was pivotal for this interaction. The culture is characterized by Christian graves of which 5500 have been found and a material culture heavily influenced by Balkan and north-Italian material cultures. These graves are identified as Christian due to the large amount of jewelry with Christian markings and the finding of a church, indicating that it was a Christian religious center.³¹⁶ The disparate influences are usually explained through two different points of origin for the individuals of the group. The constituent with a more western origin was likely the remnants of the former Roman population of the Carpathian basin, which had kept up their contacts with northern Italy. The geographical continuity of this western constituent partially explains the wealth which the culture is associated with, with this constituent of the culture probably making up its elite. Especially since the constituent with a Balkan origin is however associated with a poorer material culture. They might be the, previously mentioned, kidnapped Roman provincials, which was mentioned by Simocatta.³¹⁷ “Then Priscus heard that the barbarian was razing the walls of Singidunum, and was forcing the population to abandon their home and to make settlements in enemy land.”³¹⁸

This western elite of the Keszthely culture continued their contact with northern-Italy and the larger Dalmatia area even after its conquest by the Lombards and their conquest by the Avars. The contact is most evident through the archaeological finds which indicate long term interaction. Some of these finds include disc fibulas with Christian imagery, as well as crescent shaped and basket shaped earrings and belts with mixed Avar and north Italian cultural influences. The fibulas are especially prominent being similar to finds across the Adriatic. These connections, evident in its material culture, has resulted in Keszthely being

³¹⁵ Curta, *The Long Sixth Century*, 97-98

³¹⁶ Daim, “Avars and Avar archeology”, 473-476, Pohl, *The Avars*, 109-110

³¹⁷ Vida, “Local or foreign Romans?”, 234-238, 243, 251-254, Vida, “Conflict and coexistence”, 31-32, 37-38,

Daim, “Avars and Avar archeology”, 475-476

³¹⁸ Theophylact Simocatta, *History*, 7.10.1

viewed as a center of trade, even if the extent and regularity of the trade is impossible to ascertain.³¹⁹

Similarly, to the Keszthely culture the material culture usually associated with the Gepids also shows signs of interaction and contact.³²⁰ The items of this material culture include weapons and other forms of military equipment, with examples of this being most common in the Transdanubia area.³²¹ A specific example comes from Tiszagyenda in the western half of the Carpathian basin from the early 7th century. It includes a spatha, a double-edged sword often associated with Germanic cultures, which has a fishbone pattern close to the hilt with this form of decoration also being popular within Merovingian culture.³²² A similar case is the spearheads categorized as lenticular which are most commonly dated to the early Avar khaganate and found in Transdanubia, but which are also found in western Europe.³²³ The main problem with this material is that it might have been created by the Gepids within the Carpathian basin rather than being a result of trade or other interactions.

Whilst the archaeological finds above only indicate contact between western Europe and the Avar khaganate, the existence of contact is supported by cultural changes in the burials of “Gepids”, which followed similar changes in western Europe. This includes increased usage of multipartite belts instead of three partite belts and the ways weapons were worn and the surrounding imagery during inhumation.³²⁴ The similarity of the changes makes it likely that the Gepids continued to maintain contact with west European kingdoms, even after their subjugation. This is further supported by late Roman coins which likely were spread from the Avar khaganate to western Europe. Even if this was not a result of trade it clearly indicates a certain level of contact.³²⁵

It also seems likely that the Amber trail was not stopped by the Avar conquest of the Carpathian basin.³²⁶ There is also some evidence for small-scale trade between communities

³¹⁹ Daim, “Avars and Avar archeology”, 474-477, 519, Pohl, *The Avars*, 110-112, Daim, “Byzantine Belt Ornaments”, 64

³²⁰ Vida “Conflict and coexistence”, 18, 26-28

³²¹ Csiky. “Armament and Society”, 23

³²² Kocsis & Molnar, “A 6th-7th century solitary burial,” 156-157, 168

³²³ Csiky, *Avar-Age Polearms*, 111-115

³²⁴ Vida “Conflict and coexistence”, 19, 24, Anita Rapan Papasa & Danijela Rokсандić, “Cibalae as the most western point of Gepidic kingdom,” In *Collapse-Reorganization-Continuity: Gepids after the Fall of the Hun Empire*, ed. Tivadar Vida, Dieter Quast, Zsófia Racz & Istvan Koncz (Archaeolingua, Budapest, 2019), 318-319, 422-423, Vida, “Survival of the Gepids”, 506, Dobos, “On the edge of the Merovingian culture,” 111-112

³²⁵ Curta, *The Long Sixth Century*, 124-125

³²⁶ Curta, *The Long Sixth Century*, 278

north of the Danube and the Roman forts, including finds of lower denomination bronze coins.³²⁷ Whilst this trade could not have been significant for the prestige economy of the Avar khaganate nor for its elite, it might have been significant for the border communities of the Danube. The continuation of these forms of commerce, makes it likely that other nodes of contact and commerce also survived the military and political upheaval caused by the Avar conquest, even if evidence of this contact is unavailable today.

The continuation of prior contacts by the subjugated *ethne*, can also further explain the lack of trade with the late Roman empire. Primarily because the *ethne* of the Carpathian basin also did not trade extensively with the Romans prior to the arrival of the Avars.³²⁸ Thus, there were no trading contacts to continue after the conquest. Similarly, the Rourans, the possible origin of the Avars were also not large-scale traders primarily only trading fur and horses for silk and other sedentary goods between 534 and 555. This was because it was only during this period that the Rouran were able to defeat the Tuoba Wei and force them to acquiesce to their demands.³²⁹ Thus the combination of lack of trading experience among the arriving Avars and no large-scale contact between their subjugated *ethne* and the Romans, would have made it further unlikely for the elite Avars and the khagan to prioritize trading relations as a way to gain prestigious goods.

4.8: Conclusion

The Avar economy can be split into two different constituents with different *ethne* being responsible for different aspects of the economy. The Avars themselves likely focused on animal husbandry, even if they slowly transitioned to a sedentary lifestyle. The Gepids and the Slavs on the other hand were agriculturalists, providing the elite of the Avar khaganate with a wider variety and a more secure access to food. Compared to other nomadic states, and especially the Gök Turks, the most striking feature of the Avar economy is the almost complete lack of trade. Instead of trading the goods available within or close to the Avar khaganate all the prestigious goods and wealth needed for its prestige economy were likely acquired through tribute or raids. The only trade within the khaganate was likely the small-scale trade conducted by the subjugated *ethne* through contacts established prior to the conquest and the irregular commerce conducted by Avar diplomats, with neither being

³²⁷ Curta, *The Long Sixth Century*, 125, 274

³²⁸ Curta, *The Long Sixth Century*, 96

³²⁹ Kradin, "Tribal confederation to empire," 157, Scott Pearce, "Northern Wei", in *The Cambridge History of China: Volume 2*, ed. Albert E. Dien & Keith N. Knapp, (Cambridge, 2019), 164, Charles Holcombe, "Foreign Relations", in *The Cambridge History of China: Volume 2*, ed. Albert E. Dien & Keith N. Knapp, (Cambridge, 2019), 308

decisive for the prestige economy. The trade conducted by the *ethne* did however not include the Romans thereby creating an almost complete lack of trade between the late Roman empire and the Avars.

This lack of trade has several additional explanations, all of which probably interacted and together caused the lack of trade. One explanation is that the Roman foreign policy focused on divide and conquer strategies which made trade problematic as it would only make it harder for the Romans to achieve their foreign policy goals. The Romans were therefore unwilling to include the Avars in their Mediterranean trade network. Additionally, the Avars had access to the necessary prestige goods, through the plentiful Roman tribute, as well as access to sedentary food sources, and other sedentary products through their subjugated *ethne*. Together this ensured that they did not need to participate in the larger trade networks to ensure the wealth needed for their prestige economy. Avar participation in the trade networks was further hampered by the depopulation of the northern Balkans, which made it difficult to access the commercial networks of the Mediterranean.

5: Conclusion

The Avars arrived onto the steppes of western Europe in 555 due to political upheaval on the central Asian steppes related to the rise of the Gök Turks. They subjugated the nomadic groups of the Pontic-Caspian steppes, before conquering the Carpathian basin and thereby subjugating the Gepids and to a certain degree also the Slavs. Prior to the conquest the Avars were likely a group with cultural legacy from the central Asian steppes, which in parts had changed fundamentally by the death of emperor Maurice in 602. These changes were likely not in the political culture as there were no fundamental changes in the political structure or organization of the Avar khaganate in this early period. The Khagan remained at the top of the khaganate's hierarchy, a position which was fundamental for the cohesion of the khaganate. This position was likely ensured through his personal prestige and heavenly mandate which was further ensured by his position as the center of a prestige economy centered around the redistribution of wealth and prestigious goods. Below the khagan were probably select Avars who had different positions and roles within the Avar khaganate including diplomats and advisors, but they were also the leaders of different subjugated peoples.

The most significant changes were likely in the constitution of the Avar *ethnos* and their subjugated *ethne*, with the changes probably being the result of the inclusion of the elite of the different subjugated *ethne* within the Avar *ethnos*. This inclusion probably also helped secure the Khagan's control over their subjugated *ethne*, the Avar khaganate as a whole in addition to ensuring the position and prestige of the different elite within a new political environment. The transition could also have been helped by changes to the material culture of the Avars, which after the conquest changed to correspond to the material culture of their newly subjugated *ethne*. Thereby, making it easier for the subjugated elite to become Avars themselves, whilst the material culture of the subjugated *ethne*, became the primary influence for the material culture and the prestigious goods of the Avar khaganate.

The addition of the subjugated elite within the Avar *ethnos* probably impacted the Avar *ethnos* in several other ways as well. One such way was the weakening of the importance of the original Avar culture which probably included songs and oaths as well as a specific way of fighting. The original Avar culture was originally the signifier of membership in the Avar *ethnos*. This was probably weakened by the increase in cultural variety caused by the addition of individuals with different cultural nuclei. Instead, membership in the Avar *ethnos* became connected to loyalty to the khagan. Over time it resulted in the existence of an Avar identity

being dependent on the existence of a khagan and a khaganate, whilst still to some degree still being identified by their original Avar culture. It also likely made the Avar *ethnos* more prestigious as the rich and powerful of the subjugated *ethne* changed *ethnos*.

The inclusion of the elites of the subjugated *ethne* into the Avar *ethnos* likely also affected the subjugated *ethne* including the only partially subjugated Slavs. The different nomadic groups probably unified because of the impetus created by the political structure of the Avar khaganate, but this re-creation of the Bulgar *ethnos* was still primarily based on similar cultural heritage and way of life. The Gepids on the other hand were likely severely disrupted by the conquest of their kingdom as they lost a coherent elite either to the Avar *ethnos* or by members of their elite fleeing to the Romans. Gepid unity was probably maintained by people living in villages, nominally under the khagan's control, but retaining their own way of life. The lack of Avar control over the Slavs was partially caused by lack of social and political hierarchy and cultural unity. Thus, the khagan likely had to create these structures in an attempt to control the Slavs, but it is likely that these structures were not properly implemented, which resulted in poor control. Nonetheless, it is likely that the influence from these structures as well as influence from both the Romans and the Avars over time resulted in the creation of Slavic political entities.

The economy of the Avar khaganate likely had two distinct parts. The first was animal husbandry which was connected to the Avar *ethnos*, and the second was agriculture which was likely connected to the Gepids and the Slavs. There was probably also some small-scale production of sedentary goods which together with the agricultural produce were used in the prestige economy of the Avar khaganate. The wealth and the prestige items gained from the Romans were likely utilized in the same prestige economy, but unlike other steppe empires the Avars did almost certainly not use trade to increase the amount of prestigious goods for the economy. The only secure evidence for commerce from the early Avar khaganate is connected to the subjugated *ethne*, who continued to maintain contacts and commerce which predated the Avar conquest.

There are many possible reasons for this lack of trade. One is that, as mentioned, the luxury and sedentary goods from their subjugated *ethne* and the tribute from the Romans were sufficient for the prestige economy of the Avar khaganate. Another possible reason was that because of Roman foreign policy, the Romans were unwilling to utilize trade in an attempt to stop the raids from the Avars. It is also possible that the depopulation of the northern Balkans made it close to impossible for the Avars to access the commercial networks of the

Mediterranean. Lastly, it is possible that the lack of trade was a result of a lack of commercial contacts between the Romans and the subjugated *ethne* prior to the Avar conquest. This would have made it impossible for the subjugated *ethne* to continue any commercial relationships with the Romans after the Avar conquest. Thereby ensuring that commercial contacts between the Avar khaganate and the Roman empire remained close to zero.

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