



The Huns

HYUN JIN KIM

The Huns

This volume is a concise introduction to the history and culture of the Huns. This ancient people had a famous reputation in Eurasian Late Antiquity. However, their history has often been evaluated as a footnote in the histories of the later Roman Empire and early Germanic peoples. Kim addresses this imbalance and challenges the commonly held assumption that the Huns were a savage people who contributed little to world history, examining striking geopolitical changes brought about by the Hunnic expansion over much of continental Eurasia and revealing the Huns' contribution to European, Iranian, Chinese and Indian civilization and statecraft. By examining Hunnic culture as a Eurasian whole, *The Huns* provides a full picture of their society which demonstrates that this was a complex group with a wide variety of ethnic and linguistic identities. Making available critical information from both primary and secondary sources regarding the Huns' Inner Asian origins, which would otherwise be largely unavailable to most English speaking students and Classical scholars, this is a crucial tool for those interested in the study of Eurasian Late Antiquity.

Hyun Jin Kim is Lecturer in Classics at the University of Melbourne, Australia.

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INTRODUCTION

The Huns! The name of this ancient people triggers a multiplicity of responses and evokes a number of images (nearly all of them negative). Traditionally in Western Europe the Huns were identified with unspeakable savagery, destruction and barbarism. The name Hun in Western European parlance was a term of abuse, a derogatory epithet that one would use to defame a foreign enemy, such as imperial Germany in World War I which was labelled 'the Huns' by the hostile British and American press. The Huns have attained almost legendary status as the quintessential 'savage' nation, 'a parasitic mob' according to one modern historian, 'running a vast protection racket'. Such is their reputation that even in academia there is still today a residue of this image of the 'cruel savage'. In the not so distant past some scholars even argued without hesitation that the Huns contributed nothing to European civilization. All the Huns did was destroy and plunder, so it was claimed.

However, as more evidence on the Huns and their empires came to light via the spectacular research of Inner Asian Studies experts, more recent scholarship on the Huns has begun to adopt a more balanced approach. It acknowledges that the 'notorious' Huns and other associated Inner Asian peoples were certainly not the simple 'savages' of lore, but a significant historical force not just in 'Europe', but also in 'Asia'. The geographical division between Asia and Europe is hardly realistic when discussing a truly pan-Eurasian phenomenon such as the Huns and a pan-Eurasian phenomenon requires an Eurasian approach, which treats 'Asian' and 'European' history holistically, not as separate disciplines. Only then can one do justice to the striking geopolitical changes brought about by the Hunnic expansion over much of continental Eurasia. We, therefore, need to approach the socio-political, historical and geographical background of the Huns with this understanding in mind.

INNER ASIA: THE HOMELAND OF THE HUNS

In order to understand the real Huns, it is first necessary to discuss the region from which they originate, Inner Asia. Inner Asia is a term coined by modern historians to denote primarily (though not exclusively) the historical geography of peoples whom we commonly label 'steppe nomads'. It would be a great mistake, however, to consider Inner Asia to consist of purely grass steppeland or think Inner Asians were solely 'nomads'. Inner Asia, as defined by eminent historians such as Denis Sinor and Peter Golden, is a vast region encompassing all of what is today called Central Asia (the five Central Asian republics and Afghanistan), almost all of what is now southern Russia from western Siberia to the Pacific Ocean in the Far East, all of modern Mongolia and large portions of northern and western China. In this vast area there are extremes of climate, diverse ecosystems and varied topography. Inner Asia contains both regions with near arctic weather conditions and also some of the world's hottest and most inhospitable deserts. Oases, deserts, many of the world's highest mountain ranges, temperate forests, taiga, as well as the steppes constitute the physical geography of Inner Asia.

The peoples who historically called Inner Asia home were likewise equally diverse in their way of life. Inner Asia was home to pastoralists (whom we often mistakenly label as nomads), agriculturalists (farmers), hunter-gatherers and urban-dwellers. In many cases all four categories of peoples were to be found living in the same or adjacent regions in a complicated symbiotic system. A person belonging to one category could just as easily experience the lifestyle of the other categories during his or her lifetime. Many of these peoples also spoke multiple languages belonging to at least three, different, major language families: Altaic (thought to consist of Turkic, Mongolic and Tugusic languages: all mutually unintelligible); Indo-European (mainly Iranian and Tocharian languages); Yeniseian (now largely extinct languages spoken by indigenous peoples such as the Kets in central Siberia). The speakers of these three language families were also in frequent contact with other groups bordering Inner Asia who all spoke different languages. To the southeast of Inner Asia there were the Sino-Tibetan language groups (most prominently Chinese). To the southwest, Inner Asians interacted with Iranian and Semitic language speakers of the Middle East and also at times with the Indo-Iranian languages of South Asia (the Indian sub-continent). To the northwest they met the Indo-European and Uralic languages of Europe and western Siberia. All these groups and languages influenced Inner Asians and were in turn influenced by Inner Asians.

In this complex world language did not always automatically lead to ethnic identity. Many Inner Asians had multiple identities. For instance a pastoralist in the fifth century AD living in what is now modern day Uzbekistan on the fringes of the steppe zone near the great urban centres of Samarkand and Bukhara may have

spoken primarily a Turkic language when with other pastoralists, but when he frequented the cities to trade his livestock and acquire other much needed commodities he would have conversed just as easily in Sogdian (an East Iranian language). He may have at some stage in his life decided to settle as a city merchant or perhaps chosen the path of a mercenary soldier in the service of the local urban ruler, who may himself have come from the steppes. Equally frequent would have been the journey in the opposite direction. A Sogdian merchant from Bukhara or Samarkand could frequent the pastoralist communities in the neighbourhood, maybe intermarry with his trade-partners and speak with equal proficiency the Turkic language of his in-laws as his native Sogdian. Neither the pastoralist who settled in the city nor the city-dweller who made his home in the steppes would have been regarded as particularly alien by the hosts. In fact during the fifth century AD both men would have belonged to the same political community and have been categorized as 'Huns', who were then ruling the region, while preserving also their multiple ethnic/sub-ethnic and linguistic identities. Their transition from one identity to another or conflation of multiple identities would have seemed distinctly normal.

Furthermore, our pastoralist turned urban-dweller and urban merchant turned pastoralist may in their lifetimes have been exposed to various belief systems: to Turko-Mongol shamanism and Iranian Zoroastrianism from their native regions; Buddhism making inroads from India in the south; Nestorian Christianity and Manichaeism being imported from the Middle East and the Mediterranean; even some doses of Chinese esoteric ideas (e.g. Daoism) from the east. They could have been practitioners of one or several of these different belief systems, quite remarkably without the bloodshed and agonizing conflict that usually accompanied contacts between multiple belief systems in other parts of the world. Even more astonishingly perhaps, they could do what no other Eurasians could do with ease, that is physically travel to the places of origin of all these belief systems and ideas, since their native Inner Asia bordered all the other regions of Eurasia.

What this demonstrates is the pluralism that was inherent to Inner Asian societies during the time of the Huns and also the geographical centrality of Inner Asia. Inner Asia was the critical link that connected all the great civilizations of Eurasia to each other: India, China, Iran and the Mediterranean world. Whatever happened in Inner Asia, therefore, had the potential to affect all the above mentioned adjacent regions of Eurasia.

While the complexity and importance of Inner Asia described above applies equally to Inner Asia of all time periods, the period we shall be focusing on in this book is obviously the Hunnic period, roughly from the third century BC to the end of the sixth century AD, but also extending into later centuries via the brief

coverage of the history of the successors to the legacy of the Huns. The history and impact of the Huns on both Inner Asia and the regions adjacent to Inner Asia during these centuries will be examined throughout this book.

NOMADS? THE HUNS, A HETEROGENEOUS AGRO-PASTORALIST SOCIETY

So, the Huns were from Inner Asia and therefore they were Inner Asians. However, what does that mean in practice? When one evokes the image of the Huns, one often imagines a fur-clad, primitive-looking race of nomads (usually of mongoloid extraction) emerging out of the 'backward' steppes of Inner Asia. Indeed the original Huns in Inner Asia were mostly pastoralists, partially or predominantly of Mongoloid extraction (at least initially). However, the term 'nomad', if it denotes a wandering group of people with no clear sense of territory, cannot be applied wholesale to the Huns. All the so-called 'nomads' of Eurasian steppe history were peoples whose territory/territories were usually clearly defined, who as pastoralists moved about in search of pasture, but within a fixed territorial space. One should not imagine that 'nomads' of the Eurasian steppe region lived in a political and geographical void with no territory and political control. Far from it, the 'nomads' such as the Huns operated under tight political organization and like other Inner Asian peoples described briefly above they were in fact hardly homogeneous either in lifestyle or in ethnic composition.

Most steppe confederacies and 'nomadic' state or proto-state entities in Eurasian history possessed both pastoralist and sedentary populations and the Huns were certainly no exception to this general rule. These Inner Asian peoples, as already pointed out, were also highly heterogeneous both ethnically/racially and linguistically. The Huns themselves when they first entered Europe from Inner Asia were in all probability multi-ethnic and multi-lingual, consisting of a mix of a variety of Turkic and Iranian speaking peoples and ethnicities. Therefore, when one talks of the Huns, one should not necessarily assume that they constitute an ethnic group or racial group. Rather what one encounters is a complex political entity that consists of a wide variety of ethnic, racial and religious sub-categories, all in the process of fusion or acculturation, accommodating a great diversity of lifestyles and customs. In other words we are dealing with a state or proto-state entity of imperial dimensions with a distinct Inner Asian flavour, rather than a simple, primitive ethnic, tribal or clan grouping. In fact the so-called 'backward' steppes of Eurasia was far from 'primitive' or 'backward' and modern archaeology has done wonders in revealing the astonishing sophistication of Inner Asian civilizations prior to the rise of the Huns.

The history of Huns is as intriguing and complex as that of any other ‘great’ ‘civilized’ peoples of the ancient world, be they the Romans or the Greeks. What we encounter in the Huns of Inner Asia is a civilization that has been comparatively neglected by historians, whose contribution to world history has been consistently overlooked and under-estimated. This book has the aim of introducing the history and culture of the historical and archaeological (not the mythical, legendary and imaginary) Huns to the wider reading public and in particular to undergraduate students who are learning about the Huns for the first time and who may not be well acquainted with the history of either Inner Asia or Late Antique and Early Medieval Europe. As such it cannot systematically address all the complex issues and debates pertaining to the Huns. Notes have been reduced to a minimum to facilitate an easy read for the beginner and where greater discussion and extensive citations might be desired by the more academic readers, directions will be given to other major academic publications either by the author or by other experts on the subject. However, the book will nonetheless attempt to present some new innovative perspectives and where necessary will provide essential references and notes to support and illustrate the contention or argument being made for that purpose.

THE QUEST FOR ETHNICITY AND ORIGINS: WHO ARE THE HUNS?

Part of the difficulty with writing a history of a people like the Huns is the perplexing and seemingly endless debate about who they actually were. Where did they come from and with which historically attested group(s) of people or state entities should they be identified or associated with? These are big questions that have often frustrated the attempts at explanation by numerous scholars in the past. Fortunately for us new literary and archaeological evidence that has accumulated over the past six decades has completely revolutionized our understanding of the Huns, of who they were and has made the entire question regarding their origin and affiliation (ethnic and political) easier to answer.

In the eighteenth century the remarkable Jesuit priest Deguignes in his now almost legendary work, *Histoire générale des Huns, des Turcs, des Mogols et des autres Tartares occidentaux* (1756–1824), made quite a spectacular conjecture based on his intuition. He equated the European Huns of the fourth and fifth centuries AD with the earlier powerful and sophisticated Xiongnu people (in what is now Mongolia) who appear in Chinese historical records of the Han dynasty (206 BC–220 AD). This conjecture then triggered a lively debate that has continued unabated for centuries. Historians and experts on the Huns and Inner Asia (most notably the great scholars Maenchen-Helfen and Sinor) tended to voice scepticism about the Hun-Xiongnu connection. They suggested that if any connections

existed between the Huns and the Xiongnu, they are only likely to have been cultural affinities of some sort rather than blood connections. However, this very debate regarding the Hun-Xiongnu connection was often based on the erroneous assumption that the Huns and Xiongnu constituted a specific race or a particular ethnic category. As explained above, the Huns and other Inner Asian steppe peoples like the Xiongnu must be viewed as heterogeneous political categories rather than homogenous ethnic groups. The key to understanding the links between the Xiongnu and the Huns is to recognize that the transmission of cultural and political heritage matters far more than potential 'genetic' links between the two groups.

Due to the excellent research of La Vaissière and others we are now more than ever before certain that the name Hun denoted the ancient Xiongnu. The first indication to that effect came in 1948 when Henning published a letter written by a Sogdian merchant named Nanaivande dating to the year 313 AD. It was a letter sent from the Gansu region of western China relating the fall of the imperial Chinese capital Luoyang to the Southern Xiongnu in 311 AD. In it Nanaivande without any ambiguity calls the Xiongnu Huns. More recent evidence collected by La Vaissière, the translations of ancient Buddhist sutras *Tathagataguhyasutra* and *Lalitavistara* by Zhu Fahu, a Buddhist monk from the western Chinese city of Dunhuang, who was of Central Asian Bactrian descent, reaffirmed this identification. Zhu Fahu, whose translations are dated to 280 AD and 308 AD respectively (so roughly contemporaneous with Nanaivande's letter), identifies again without any ambiguity or generalization the *Huna* (appellation of the Huns in Indian sources) with the Xiongnu, as a specific political entity adjacent to China.¹ Therefore, it is now perfectly clear that the imperial Xiongnu of Mongolia and China and the European-Central Asian Huns had exactly the same name.²

The archaeological evidence is more difficult to interpret, since the old practice of identifying archaeological cultures with ethnic groups cannot be seen as completely valid. The evidence available does, nonetheless, support the existence of strong cultural links between the European-Central Asian Huns and the old territory ruled by the Xiongnu. Most Inner Asian scholars now agree that Hunnic cauldrons, one of the key archaeological markers of Hunnic presence, ultimately derive from Xiongnu cauldrons in the Ordos region in Inner Mongolia.³ These cauldrons, which clearly had a religious function, were used in the same way in both earlier Xiongnu and later Hunnic contexts, their placement being on the banks of rivers. Cultural and religious continuity can therefore be argued for between the Xiongnu of Mongolia and the Huns in Central Asia and Europe. Naturally the fact that the Huns and Xiongnu had the same ethnic or rather political name and shared very similar religious and cultural practices does not prove conclusively that the Huns and Xiongnu were genetically related, though it does make the case quite likely. However,