11 Huns and Romans in the fourth century

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Late antiquity was in many ways a 'golden age' of the Silk Road, if that concept is susceptible to any chronological definition (Di Cosmo and Maas 2018, Rezakhani 2010). The rise of powerful nomadic states, especially the Türk Empire, and their interaction with the sedentary civilisations at either end of Eurasia helped to knit together networks that linked China with the Mediterranean, via Central Asia and Iran. Through these networks, people, information, goods, and ideas moved on a scale and over distances that seem to have been a step change from what had come before. Silk was indeed a significant component of what was desired, written about, and traded (De la Vaissière 2005b). The spread of new religious ideas such as Christianity and Buddhism, of new modes of legitimising political power, and of new patterns of multilingual and multi-cultural interchange created a world of kaleidoscopic complexity. This entangled history continued into the eighth century, when the Arab conquests of Khurasan, Afghanistan, and the lands beyond the Oxus reshaped the Central Asian order (Grenet and De la Vaissière 2002).

This vibrancy of the Silk Roads in Late Antiquity had its origins in the turmoil of the fourth century CE. From 300 onwards, successive nomad invasions from the steppe world had a profound and destabilising influence on the settled civilisations of Eurasia. In the 310s, the old imperial capitals of northern China, Luoyang and Chang'an, were sacked by nomads, whom Chinese sources call Xiongnu. This fearsome name harked back to the great nomadic empire that had rivalled the Han dynasty from the third century BCE onwards (Lewis 2009 and Di Cosmo 2018). In the 350s, a group called by our only (Latin) source the Chionitae, led by one king Grumbates, seemingly put considerable pressure on the eastern frontier of Sasanian Persia (Ammianus 17.5.1; Rezakhani 2017). Nomads, called Huns by the locals, went on to found powerful states in Central Asia, which posed a profound challenge to the Iranian Shahanshas (Payne 2016). By the 370s, the Romans were similarly aware of a new nomadic power on the Pontic-Caspian steppe, which they also called the Huns. These, they believed, had crushed or subordinated the various other peoples who inhabited the region – the Alans in particular – and were responsible for the flight of many Gothic refugees into Roman territory. Mismanagement of that influx led to war, which culminated in the Roman defeat at Adrianople, where the Emperor Valens and much of the eastern field army was destroyed (Heather 2001, 122–56 and Lenski 1997, chapter 7). Across the fourth century,

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then, the Chinese world, the Sasanian Empire, and the Romans faced considerable pressure from powerful nomadic groups emerging from the steppe world.

The question of whether there was any connection between these episodes has been debated ever since Joseph de Guignes suggested in the 1750s that the Xiongnu and the Huns were the same nomadic people, an idea that fired the mind of Edward Gibbon as he attempted to put Roman history in a Eurasian framework (De Guignes 1756–58, Gibbon 1994 chapter 26). Attacked forcefully and influentially by Otto J. Maenchen-Helfen (esp. 1944–45a) – titan of Hunnic studies in the mid-twentieth century – the case has been powerfully restated by Étienne De la Vaissière (2005a; *cf*. 2015). De la Vaissière invoked two major items of textual evidence. First, a reference in the so-called Sogdian Ancient Letter II, written around 313, describing the devastation in northern China caused by the Xwn, the Sogdian word for Hun (Sims-Williams 2001). Second, the decision by the Buddhist monk and translator Zhu Fahu (or Dharmarakṣa to use his Indian name) in the late third and early fourth centuries to render the Sanskrit Huṇa (a people located in Central Asia by his earlier source texts) as Xiongnu in Chinese. These texts, de la Vaissière argued, established the Huns as equivalent to the Xiongnu. Chinese sources also referred to the Xiongnu invading Central Asia about the same time as the Chionitae and other Hunnic groups were active and suggested that their homeland lay in the Altai mountains.

Turning to the archaeology, de la Vaissière acknowledged the shortage of relevant material, but pointed to close similarities in both the design of cauldrons used by the Huns and Xiongnu and their deposition near springs and rivers. The latter habit, he suggested, attested some continuity of cultural or ritual practice between the two groups. He further argued from palaeoclimatological evidence that the Altai experienced a cooling episode in the fourth century. The adverse impact of this on the traditional nomadic way of life might have prompted invasions of settled areas. Sensitive to recent work on ethnogenesis and the formation of identity, de la Vaissière was careful to reject the idea of any ethnic coherence to the Huns, let alone direct continuity with the Xiongnu Empire that had existed centuries earlier. Still, he could tell a coherent story from the fractured evidence: climate change prompted the Huns to move and move they did, to northern China and then to Central Asia and the western end of the steppe.

Aspects of this reconstruction have been challenged. The argument from the cauldrons has not found wide acceptance and more recent palaeoclimatological work has suggested that the hypothesis of cooling in the Altai mountains is probably false (Brosseder 2018). Not all are convinced that it is possible to get from Xiongnu to Hun phonologically, at least not in the way that de la Vaissière has argued (Atwood 2012). It has also been suggested that the Chinese sources call the nomads who invaded northern China at the start of the fourth-century Chieh (*jie*, 羯) or *Kir, not Xiongnu, a generic way to identify northern barbarians rather than a specific description (Shimunek et al. 2015). In general, however, the idea that the same nomadic groups – however shifting and uncertain their identities – were active across Eurasia in the fourth century seems set to become the consensus and even dissenting voices (e.g., Atwood 2012) tend to accept its core observations.

From the perspective of a historian of the Roman Empire, this is an important development, the ramifications of which have not yet been fully worked out. From the middle of the fourth century at the latest, the fate of the Roman world was intimately bound up with developments that stretched from China to the Pontic-Caspian steppe. By the 350s, the Huns were reshaping the strategic environment for Roman leaders. The appearance of aggressive new powers on the eastern border of the Sasanian Empire was a 'strategic dilemma' for the rulers of Persia from which they never completely escaped (Howard-Johnston 2010, Payne 2016). The quiescence of Shapur II (r. 309–79) in the early to mid-350s, after over a decade of almost continuous war against the Roman Empire, was seemingly owed to problems on his eastern flank (Dodgeon and Lieu 1991, chapters 7–8). The impact of the Huns on the Goths was even more obvious and significant to contemporaries, leading as it did to the catastrophe at Adrianople (Lenski 1997).

Unsurprisingly, therefore, during the later fourth century, the world of the steppe began to intrude into the consciousness of educated Romans, who had previously known remarkably little about the vast region (Traina 2018). The dénouement of this entanglement with the steppe was the spectacular career of Attila the Hun, 'that formidable barbarian' (Gibbon 1994, 1.294; Maas 2015). In the fragments of Priscus of Panium's account of an embassy to Attila's court, we see sharp ethnographic observation and a sense that the Roman order was more fragile than anyone had supposed (Blockley 1981–83). Priscus was sensitive to the complex multiethnic and multilingual nature of the Hunnic Empire in a way that contrasts with other late Roman historians (Mullen and Woudhuysen 2023, 1–2). The later nomadic groups who lived to the north and east of the Roman world never quite intruded – militarily or intellectually – in the way or to the degree that Attila and his Huns had, but the Empire remained entangled with its steppe neighbours for centuries (Whittow 2018). Menander Protector offers another fragmentary account of embassies to the Türkish rulers 'Sizabul' and 'Turxanthus' under Justin II (r. 565–78) and Tiberius (r. 574–82). Though less vivid than Priscus, Menander's narratives of the journeys of Zemarchus and Valentinus deep into Inner Asia contains some unforgettable moments (Blockley 1985). When he describes how Turxanthus, who had berated and threatened to execute Valentinus and his fellow ambassadors, next ordered them to slash their cheeks in mourning for his father Sizabul (as was the Türkish custom), one can feel the menace. Sensibly, the ambassadors opted for self-mutilation.

There is a potential trap here. From no later than the 410s, every Roman emperor was forced to think about the expanse of grassland that lay beyond the imperial outposts on the Crimean Peninsula: Huns, Avars, Türks, Bulgars, Khazars, and many other peoples were a factor in any calculation of Roman policy. These nomadic peoples also featured extensively in Roman historical writing and authors less curious than Priscus were obliged to cast an occasional glance at the steppe world. It is deceptively easy to read back from Priscus or Menander Protector into the 370s and 380s, the earliest phase of interaction between Romans and Huns. It seems natural to illuminate the customs and habits of the first Hunnic riders to cross the Volga from what we know of Attila's empire in the 440s (Maenchen-Helfen

1973). The difficulty is that the first Roman authors to grapple with the problem of the Huns did not have any inkling of what was to come. They were confronted by a terrifying and new phenomenon.[1] They had fewer tools at hand to understand this development, and certainly not the knowledge of nomadic life gained at sometimes uncomfortable proximity by later authors. We thus run the risk of misreading our evidence for the western end of the earliest stages of the Hunnic transformation of Eurasia. Instead, we need to examine the Roman sources for the Huns in the fourth century on their own terms.

The Huns themselves probably entered Roman consciousness only in the 370s. This is somewhat surprising, for Hunnic groups were causing problems for the Sasanians, with strategic ramifications for the Romans, from at least the 350s. They soon appeared on the Roman eastern frontier as well. When Shapur II invaded the Roman Empire in 359 and laid siege to the fortress-city of Amida (modern Diyarbakır, Turkey), he was accompanied by the Chionitae and their king Grumbates (the name is important: De la Vaissière 2005a, 19). We are fortunate to have a detailed account of this siege because Ammianus Marcellinus (c. 330–400), the great historian of the fourth-century empire, was involved. His account of what happened at Amida (in the nineteenth book of his *Res gestae*) is unforgettable. He vividly evokes the terror experienced by the besieged. Although he offers several vignettes of Grumbates and his Chionitae – a curious description of the death of the ruler's son and the funeral rites for him (19.1.7–11) – Ammianus does not connect them with the Huns whom he would describe later in the same work. In the 350s and 360s, in other words, the Huns were already exerting an influence on the Roman world, though the Romans had yet to grasp it.

Since Ammianus will feature a good deal in this chapter, it is worth saying a little about this frustratingly shadowy figure (Kelly 2008, chapter 3). Ammianus tells us that he was a gentleman, a soldier, and a Greek, by which he meant that he was Hellenic in culture and religion (that is, a pagan) (19.8.6, 31.16.9). He may well have been a native of Antioch. He was a young man in the late 350s, who served as a *protector domesticus* with the general Ursicinus, which was what took him to Amida in 359 (Ammianus 16.10.21). Being a *protector domesticus* was a prestigious commission, given to young men of good military family, who might aspire to positions of senior command later in life. We know that Ammianus participated in the Emperor Julian's disastrous invasion of Persia in 363. Beyond that, there is little we can say with certainty. He wrote a history of the Roman Empire, the *Res gestae*, from the accession of Nerva in 96 to the aftermath of the battle of Adrianople in 378. This is in 31 books, though the first 13 are lost and the narrative begins only near the end of 353. This was probably completed in Rome around 390. Despite his self-identification as Greek, Ammianus wrote in Latin and he shows a wide knowledge of Latin literature in his frequent allusions to many earlier authors. An acute, if not impartial, observer of the history of his own age, Ammianus had broad and deep interests. He included antiquarian, geographical, and ethnographic material in the *Res gestae*, including a lengthy digression on the Huns – and their nomadic neighbours, the Alans – in the 31st book of his history.

Ammianus included the digression on the Huns as part of his narrative of the entry of the Goths into the Roman Empire and the campaign that culminated in the battle of Adrianople. These events first put the Huns *qua* Huns firmly on the Roman map. When precisely they arrived on the Pontic-Caspian steppe and began to trouble first the Alans and then Goths is an interesting question. Our only evidence is what Ammianus tells us (31.3), for even if the archaeological material were considerably richer, it would be unlikely to offer us a chronology fine-grained enough to separate (say) the 360s from the 370s. His narrative is quite detailed but temporally imprecise: the Huns subdued the Alans, then in alliance with them warred against the Goths, fighting first Ermanaric, his successor Vithimer, and then his young son Viderichus, whose guardians were Alathaeus and Saphrax. In 376, the Goths led by Alathaeus and Saphrax sought refuge in the Roman Empire.[2] The current consensus is that the Hunnic attacks on the Alans can be dated to around 370 (Den Boeft et al. 2018, 39). That perhaps creates an unduly tight chronology for what seems to have been a good deal of warfare against both Alans and Goths, with Ammianus saying Ermanaric resisted *diu* ('for a long time') and Vithimer *aliquantisper* ('for some time') in what were only two phases of a much longer and more involved process. Without undue certainty, we should perhaps put the arrival of the Huns north of the Black Sea no later than the 360s and perhaps as early as the 350s (*cf*. Heather 1995, 6).

The first references to the Huns date to the late 370s and early 380s, all seemingly written after the battle of Adrianople. The texts are overwhelmingly Latin not Greek, something not always fully appreciated. The very first extant datable reference to the Huns is in the work of the poet Ausonius (*c*. 310–93), who mentions their 'wandering bands' in lines composed around 379.[3] There is also a mention of them (using the name Massagetae) in a speech by the orator Themistius (*c*. 317–89) in 383 (*Or*. 16.207c). Neither of these is more than a passing nod to the Huns. More substantial mentions of them are tricky to date, or come from a little later still, or both. As we have seen, Ammianus' *Res gestae* was completed in the early 390s, but Michael Kulikowski has made an intriguing case that Book 31 might have been a separate monograph, written soon after the battle of Adrianople (Kulikowski 2012, *cf*. Den Boeft et al. 2018, ix). Book 31 has an account of the battle and the digression on the Huns and Alans. The second edition of the history of Eunapius of Sardis (written after 404) contained an account of the Huns, which the author seems to have advertised (with characteristic modesty) as the first based on real research (Eunapius fr. 41 [Blockley 1981–83]). Whether the first edition of his history, written perhaps in the early 380s (Stover and Woudhuysen 2023, 390 n.91), included one as well is unclear. Ambrose, the bishop of Milan (374–97), who mentioned the Huns surprisingly often, included a paragraph about their addiction to gambling in his *De Tobia* (11.39) (Zucker 1933; Pizzolato 2011). The date of this tract is uncertain, but a convincing case has been made that it was written before 386/87 (Dunphy 1984). Ambrose might, therefore, have the best claim to offer the first extant detailed description of the Huns. The reference in the so-called *Epitome de Caesaribus* 47.3 to the Huns and Alans suggests that Aurelius Victor might have offered some coverage of them in the second edition of his *History*, probably

produced soon after the accession of Theodosius in 379, though caution on this point is perhaps advisable (Stover and Woudhuysen 2021 2023).

What did the Romans call the Huns when they first encountered them? This is more complex and interesting than it might first appear and again the Latin evidence is primary.[4] The Huns with a capital H are perhaps so familiar (at least to Anglophone scholarship) that the question of the name's orthography has escaped much attention (though see Atwood 2012; Maenchen-Helfen 1973, 447–52). Our earliest evidence suggests, however, that the name of the Huns was *Chūni*. That was the form Ausonius used, guaranteed by the metre. Ambrose also used it in both his *De Tobia* and his commentary on Luke (10.10).[5] So too did Pacatus in his panegyric of the emperor Theodosius (*Pan. Lat*. 2.11.4, 2.32.4), delivered in 389. *Huni* may very well be what Ammianus wrote, but in 31.8.4, the only authoritative manuscript (Vat. lat. 1873) offers *chinorum* for *hunorum*. In context, it is not easy to see how a palaeographical confusion could have introduced the initial c- and it is possible that the original form was *Chuni*, preserved here because a scribe did not recognise the word that he silently altered elsewhere. The only early author who consistently used *Huni* was St Jerome (*Adversus Iovinianum* 2.7, *Epp*. 60.16, 77.8, 107.2). It is possible that this was the orthography he preferred (perhaps under the influence of Greek Οὖννοι), but no other major late-ancient author is so poorly provided with modern critical editions as Jerome.[6] This might seem a tiny detail of spelling, but it could be of real significance. What sound precisely that *Ch*- was meant to represent probably cannot be recovered, but it seems rather closer to the ways in which the name of the Huns was rendered in Central Asian languages, though the difficulties of discerning this are formidable (Atwood 2012).

Scholarship has tended to take a dim view of what these late-Roman authors had to say about the Huns. The transition is most obvious in the study of Ammianus, whose Hunnic digression is our most detailed account of their origin, history, and mode of life. For Maenchen-Helfen in 1973, the digression had its flaws, but it was still 'an invaluable document', a 'stylistic masterpiece' that 'cannot be praised too highly' compared with other sources (Maenchen-Helfen 1973, 1, 9). Diederik Burgersdijk's recent analysis of the digression says, in contrast, that 'the content is deficient and almost totally fictitious', that 'it is clear Ammianus had very little factual knowledge about the Huns and Alans' (Burgersdijk 2016, 114).[7] One can infer from judgements like this that other sources, offering briefer and more selective accounts of the Huns, are even less likely to contain fragments of truth. The broad idea here is that the surviving literary sources were crushed by the weight of tradition: they recapitulated earlier authors and drew on a deep well of ethnographic stereotypes about nomads. They were engaged in a kind of literary game, reaching back at least to Herodotus, about how the world of the steppe was to be described, not describing nomads as they actually existed.

There are some broad methodological points that are relevant here. Scholars often treat any glance backwards by a later author to an earlier account of nomads as though it were proof positive of straightforward copying. Allusion is not, however, an infallible sign of bad faith and we ought to allow that someone like Ammianus – whose use of earlier literary texts was sophisticated (Kelly 2008) – chose

any allusions in his account of the Huns with care: they were not unthinking appropriations of the past. There is also a risk that we will be fooled by randomness, if we insist on regarding any parallel between two ancient texts as suspicious. Maenchen-Helfen, for example, argued that Jordanes' account of the origin of the Huns as the offspring of three exiled Gothic witches and some *spiritus inmundi* (*Getica* 24.121–2) was a literary fantasia based on the story (found throughout patristic literature) that the fallen angels invented magic and took human wives, their children being the giants (Maenchen-Helfen 1944–45b). Beyond the fact that both stories involve illicit sex between a human and non-human, little links them: almost every point of detail is different. There is also a systemic problem: if we insist that later authors derived their information about nomads from earlier ones, we still have to identify an earlier author who made all these sharp ethnographic observations. One might imagine that Herodotus (or his informants) originated this endlessly recycled factual core, since his description of those who lived on the Pontic-Caspian steppe is a landmark in accounts of nomads. The Scythian *logos* has, however, been picked apart by specialists as a literary creation, based on little personal knowledge, and drawing instead on still earlier accounts (Armayor 1978; West 2002).

To these points, there is an obvious riposte. In the 1980s, Brent Shaw argued that most extant classical accounts of nomads participated in what he called an 'ideology' of nomadism. The core proposition of this ideology was 'a complete separation' of the nomad from the settled, with minimal interaction between them, the nomad representing 'the ultimate barbaric' type (Shaw 1982/83, 7). Direct acquaintance with nomads was vanishingly rare and most of what was written about them was 'a type of *a priori* mental construct' (Shaw 1982/83, 30). In Shaw's view, the key features of the nomad ideology emerged remarkably early (in the *Odyssey*'s description of the Cyclopes) and its power was that it was more than a bundle of assumptions, clichés, and nostrums: 'a structurally consistent set of ideas' (Shaw 1982/83, 5). There is, in other words, a deeper problem with accounts of nomads like that of the Huns in Ammianus (singled out by Shaw) than their reliance on a shared intellectual inheritance. This is no ordinary case of the anxiety of influence.

Shaw's magnificently argued essay has proved enormously influential. There are, however, some problems with it. Shaw identifies a cluster of features that characterise the nomad ideology: nomads are barbaric, and lack fixed homes, cities and states, social institutions and laws; they are idle, they live on meat and milk, and do not engage in cereal agriculture (Shaw 1982/83, 22, 24). These are, however, all genuine features of nomadic societies, certainly as seen from the settled Mediterranean. Pastoralists do tend to eat meat and drink milk. Nomads are mobile and they do not generally build or live in proper urban settlements, nor do their political and social institutions resemble those of settled agricultural societies. This is the fundamental problem with the 'nomad ideology': it takes the features of nomadic society most obvious to outsiders and says that they are *ex hypothesi* evidence that those outsiders knew nothing about nomads. The only way for a source to evade the accusation of being 'ideological' is to show remarkable ethnographic precision, or to be sympathetic to nomads, a steep demand to make of someone confronted by the Huns.

Moreover, though Shaw makes broad claims for the reach of this ideology, there is a lot of late-antique evidence that can be assimilated to it only awkwardly. Ambrose of Milan offers a substantial discussion of gambling amongst the Huns (*De Tobia* 11.39). He suggests that the desire to obtain resources for gambling explained Hunnic belligerence, describing institutions (moneylending, for example) and customs that had arisen from their addiction to dice. The problem here is not so much that all this contradicts the key points of the 'ideology' as that it lies outside them: alternative ideas about nomadic life were clearly readily available. The same problem arises from a sermon of Asterius of Amasea (fl. c. 390–410). The bishop uses the diet of the Huns to encourage his congregation to fast: they can live without bread and wine, so his listeners can learn to abstain from them.[8] Nomadic diet is invoked in an argument that assumes the shared human nature of the settled and the nomad.

If we return to Ammianus' account of the Huns with a more sympathetic eye, we find that much of the criticism of it is somewhat unfair. Many readers have been unduly influenced by a short section wedged between the account of the Huns and that of the Alans (31.2.14–16), which offers an ethnography of Inner Asia that was out of date by the later fourth century, naming many of the same peoples as are found in Herodotus. This, however, is explicitly antiquarian: Ammianus is seeking to explain to his readers why tribes familiar from earlier authors had vanished, to be replaced by the Alans (31.2.13), not claiming that any of these peoples still existed in his day. As we have seen, Maenchen-Helfen was more appreciative of Ammianus' Hunnic digression than most modern scholars, but he was exercised by what it said about the political structures of the Huns. His objection was that their success in conquering the Goths was incompatible with a depiction of them as 'an anarchic mass of howling savages' (Maenchen-Helfen 1973, 12). This line of argument is common in indictments of Ammianus, who is accused elsewhere of trying 'hard to give the impression that the Huns were unorganized barbarians', an idea incompatible with their ability to menace the Roman Empire (Den Boeft et al. 2018, 23; *cf.* King 1987, 82). Other scholars have discussed the 'obvious inadequacy of this distorted representations' (Kim 2013, 19), while Shaw himself objected that Ammianus claimed the Huns had 'no political assemblies, no laws or system of justice, and no established political rulers' (Shaw 1982/83, 25). What Ammianus in fact says is (31.2.7):

> When discussion of serious affairs takes place, they all deliberate in a common body in this fashion [*i.e.* on horseback]. They are not governed by royal strictness (*severitate regali*), but satisfied with the disorderly command of their leading men (*tumultuario primatum ductu*) force their way through whatever stands in their path.

This is at most a statement that the Huns lacked widely recognised and powerful kings and it strongly implies that the Huns did in fact have both political customs and assemblies. This is probably an accurate characterisation of their political organisation: there is no good evidence for Hunnic kings in the west until the early

fifth century, when Uldin appeared (Maenchen-Helfen 1973, 59–72). He was not the only royal figure among the Huns, nor was his authority unchallenged. The historian Olympiodorus, an experienced imperial diplomat and practiced observer of barbarians, knew of another monarch, Charaton (c. 412), whom he describes as 'first of the kings' (fr. 19 [Blockley 1981–83]): clearly there were more. As Maenchen-Helfen himself showed, Attila was at most the nephew of a Hunnic king and his rise to power certainly does not suggest that there was an uncontested Hunnic monarchy (1973, 82–3). One could almost describe this system as the *tumultuarius primatum ductus*. In any case, the underlying assumptions used to indict Ammianus on this score are simply false: strong monarchical authority is not needed to ensure political and military success. Recent work on early-modern horse-riding Native Americans (especially the Comanche) has shown how extremely powerful polities can exist without any strong centralised leadership (Hämäläinen 2008). So not only is the main objection to what Ammianus says conceptually dubious, it is far from clear that he was factually wrong. Other items in the *Res gestae* have been subjected to similar treatment and similarly prove to be less inaccurate than claimed. Ammianus has often been said to claim that the Huns had no knowledge of fire (King 1987). What he in fact says (31.2.3) is that they did not need (*indigeant*) either fire or flavoursome food but were content with roots and half-raw flesh.

Ammianus is only a single example. The late fourth-century Roman sources for the Huns deserve greater sympathy and more critical scrutiny than they have recently attracted. The Huns produced a profound intellectual shock in the Roman world of the 370s and 380s. The sources insist on their novelty and strangeness, their alienation from normal patterns of not only settled life, but even from the habits of more familiar nomads. Of course, Roman authors were the heirs of a formidable intellectual tradition that gave them a framework into which the Huns could (just about) be squashed, but these new nomadic conquerors challenged inherited assumptions and pushed authors like Ammianus to think about the world of the steppe and even events in far-away Central Asia. It is not a coincidence that some Roman historians of the next century showed a remarkable degree of ethnographic sophistication, based on autopsy, when they thought about the Huns.

What Ambrose, Ammianus, and others who first grappled with the problem of the Huns say about them would be important evidence regardless of circumstance, but in the context of de la Vaissière's convincing case that the Huns' arrival on the Pontic-Caspian steppe was merely one facet of a much broader process, they take on a special importance. In contrast to the later late-antique thriving of the Silk Roads, the fourth century in Central Asia and the world of the steppe is remarkably obscure. We *need* the Roman evidence, in combination of course with material from Central Asia, China, and India. It might also serve as a useful warning to us. The idea of the Silk Roads has proved conceptually fruitful, in spite of its problems. Of the latter, the greatest for late antiquity is that the 'Silk Roads' can transform Inner Asia into a place in-between: a region that drew its significance from being the link between China, India, Persia, and the Mediterranean.[9] This role as an artery for the flow of people, information, goods, and ideas was important. Yet

it risks making Inner Asia a marginal place, a region without its own history except in the context of its neighbours. That was certainly not how Ammianus – or other Roman authors – understood it. For all the criticism of them, they had a clear sense of the lands that stretched eastwards as a distinct place, with its distinct peoples, whose customs and way of life were quite different from those in more western climes, and who needed to be understood and analysed on their own terms. The later Romans were also acutely aware that the peoples of Inner Asia could exert a powerful influence on the settled powers around them. Few who had lived through the grim aftermath of Adrianople could have been under any illusions about that. Late antiquity was a golden age of the Silk Roads, in all their mercantile and cosmopolitan splendour. It is, however, the turbulent fourth century that still offers some of the richest opportunities for understanding Inner Asia in its own right.

Notes

1 Ammianus 31.2.1, 31.3.8 and Eunapius fr. 41 (Blockley 1981–3) both insist on the novelty of the Huns.
2 The year, which might be inferred from Ammianus, is secured by the *Descriptio consulum* (ed. Burgess, *Hydatius*, 240).
3 *Precatio consulis designati* l. 31: *Qua uaga Sauromates sibi iunxerat agmina Chuni*. *cf*. *Precatio* 1.8, which might be even earlier (Green 1991, 37).
4 The fairly uniform Greek material is gathered by Moravcsik, *Byzantinoturcica*, 2.231.
5 See the *apparatus* in Schenkl, *Ambrosii opera* and Adriaen, *Ambrosii Mediolanensis opera* (which I have verified by spot-checking the early manuscripts Paris lat. 1732, ff. 130v–131r and NAL 1438 p. 266 respectively). In *Ep*. 6.30.8, which also mentions the Huns, Faller, *Epistulae* opts for *Huni*.
6 In the case of the *Adversus Iovinianum* I checked Rome, Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale Sessoriano 128 (2109) (s. VIII ex – see Lowe, *CLA* 4.426 – and I believe the earliest MS to preserve this portion), which has *hunorum* at 2.7 (f. 109r).
7 For similar negative views: Richter, "Darstellung", King, "Veracity", Guzmán Armario, "Los Hunos". Matthews, *Roman Empire*, 332–42 was more positive.
8 Asterius, *Homily* 14.11.4-12.1. See Datema, *Asterius*.
9 A point very well made by Rezakhani, "The Road".

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