
THE AVARS

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A Steppe Empire in
Central Europe, 567–822

Walter Pohl

Original German-language edition, *Die Awaren: Ein Steppenvolk im Mitteleuropa, 567–822 n. Chr.* (3rd ed. 2015) by Walter Pohl, © Verlag C.H. Beck oHG, München 2015.

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First published 2018 by Cornell University Press

Printed in the United States of America

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Pohl, Walter, 1953– author.

Title: The Avars : a steppe empire in Europe, 567–822 / Walter Pohl.

Other titles: Awaren. English

Description: Ithaca [New York] : Cornell University Press, 2018. |

Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2018007698 (print) | LCCN 2018008080 (ebook) |

ISBN 9781501729409 (pdf) | ISBN 9781501729416 (epub/mobi) |

ISBN 9780801442100 | ISBN 9780801442100 (cloth ; alk. paper)

Subjects: LCSH: Avars—Europe, Central. | Europe, Central—History.

Classification: LCC DJK46.3 (ebook) | LCC DJK46.3.P6413 2018 (print) |

DDC 943.0009/021—dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2018007698>

Cover illustration: Avar belt mount (eighth century). Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

To my mother
Edith Pohl
1921–2016

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Timeline

- ca. 463 First mention of central Asian Avars in Byzantine sources (Priscus) in connection with westward migration of Sabirs, Ogurs, Saragurs, and Onogurs
- 527–565 Emperor Justinian I
- 552–555 The Turks under Bumin destroy the central Asian empire of the Rouran
- Dec. 558/Jan. 559 First Avar embassy under Kandikh in Constantinople; Avars north of the Caucasus
- 559 Invasion by Cutrigurs under Zabergan stopped outside Constantinople by Belisarius
- ca. 558–562 Western Turks under Istemi in alliance with the Persians subdue Hephthalite Empire
- 559–561 Avars advance north of the Black Sea and defeat Sabirs, Utigurs, and Antes
- ca. 560–582/83 Baian, khagan of the Avars
- 560/61–572 Alboin, king of the Lombards
- 562/63 First Turkish embassy in Constantinople warns against alliance with the Avars
- 562 Sigibert I, king of the Franks, repels an Avar attack near the Elbe
- 563 Avars at the Lower Danube; negotiations about a settlement on Roman territory fail
- 565–578 Emperor Justin II
- Nov. 565 The Avar envoy Targitius arrives shortly after Justin II's coronation; the emperor refuses to pay further subsidies
- 566 A second Avar expedition against the Franks under Sigibert I is victorious; he buys off the Avars with foodstuffs and concludes an alliance with them
- 566 The Gepids defeat the Lombards with Byzantine support, but do not hand over Sirmium to the Byzantines as promised
- Winter 566/67 A Lombard embassy concludes an alliance against the Gepids with Khagan Baian, but only under great concessions

- 567 Decisive victory of the Lombards under Alboin against the Gepids, whose king Cunimund dies in battle; the Avars occupy the land of the Gepids and besiege the Gepid capital Sirmium, which Byzantine troops under Bonus have occupied
- 567–574 Fruitless negotiations between the Avars and Byzantium for a new treaty
- April 568 Lombards and affiliated groups under King Alboin begin to leave Pannonia for Italy; the Avars occupy the land of the Lombards
- Late 568 Turkish embassy under the Sogdian Maniakh in Constantinople
- 569–571 Byzantine embassy under Zemarchus travels to the Turk khagan Sizabulos/Istemi
- ca. 570 Victory of Tiberius over the Avars
- 572 Beginning of the twenty-year war of Byzantium against the Persians; Avar pressure increases
- 574 Victory of the Avars over Tiberius; Emperor Justin II withdraws from politics, and in December appoints Tiberius Caesar
- Winter 574/75 A new treaty of the Avars with Byzantium fixes the annual subsidies at 80,000 solidi
- 576–577 Byzantine embassy under Valentinus meets the new Turkish khagan Turxanthus, who reproaches them because of the treaty with the Avars; Turks and subdued Utigurs take the Byzantine city Bosphorus/Kerch
- 578 First culmination of Slavic raids in Thrace; Avars attack the Slavic settlement area north of the Danube with Byzantine support after the Slavic prince Dauritas has killed Avar envoys
- 578–582 Emperor Tiberius II
- 579–582 Avars besiege Sirmium; the city capitulates after three years
- 582 The peace treaty between Baian and Tiberius leaves the subsidies at 80,000 solidi plus arrears
- 582–602 Emperor Maurice
- ca. 583–ca. 602/10 One of Baian's sons is khagan
- ca. 582/83 Inner conflicts in the Turkish Empire
- ca. 583 The Varchonite tribes Tarniakh, Kotzagir, and Zabender flee from the Turks and join the Avars
- 583/84 New wave of Slavic raids in the Balkan provinces; Greece is increasingly targeted

- Fall 584 After the Byzantines have refused to raise the subsidies, the Avars capture Singidunum, Viminacium, and Augusta and march as far as Anchialus; failed mission of Comentiolus to the khagan
- Spring 585 A second Byzantine embassy under Elpidius concludes a treaty with the Avars that raises the subsidies to 100,000 solidi
- Fall 586 On the instigation of the fugitive Avar high priest Bookolabras, Maurice interns the Avar ambassador Targitius; the khagan renews his attacks and plunders Aquis, Bononia, Ratiaria, Apiaria, Durostorum, Zaldapa, Pannasa, Tropaeum Traiani, and Marcianopolis
- Sept. 586 Avar-led Slavic siege of Thessalonica fails
- 587 War in Thrace, fighting at Tomis and at Sabulente Canalis; Avar attacks on Mesembria and unsuccessful sieges of Beroe, Diocletianopolis, and Philippopolis; successful intervention of John Mystacon at Adrianople
- 587/88 Avars and Slavs take Patras and other Greek cities and begin to settle in Greece
- 591–616 Lombard king Agilulf
- 591 Peace treaty between Byzantium and the new Persian king Chosroes
- 592 Slavs attack Singidunum; Avar war, fighting at the Procliana Pass; siege of Drizipera; Avar victory at Heraclea; General Priscus besieged in Tzurullon; renewal of the treaty
- 592 Bavarian campaign under Tassilo I against Slavs
- 593 Campaign of Priscus against Slavs north of the lower Danube; victories over the groups under Ardagast and Musucius
- 594 Slavic raids against Zaldapa, Aquis, and Scopi; Petrus leads a campaign against Slavs, victory over the Peiragast group, and defeat at the Helibacius
- 595 Campaign of Priscus against the Avars, confrontation at Singidunum; Avar raid on inland Dalmatia
- 595 Bavarian attack on Slavs; counterattack by the khagan, Bavarian army routed
- 596–597 Eighteen months of peace along the Danube
- 596 Avars attack Thuringia; the Frankish queen Brunhild buys them off
- Fall 597 Avar campaign along the Danube; Avar army hibernates near Tomi

- 598 Fighting in Thrace, Comentiolus defeated at Iatrus; Avars capture Drizipera; their army decimated by the plague; Roman envoy Harmaton negotiates a rise of subsidies to 120,000 solidi
- 599 Offensive of Priscus on Avar territory: victories opposite Viminacium, and over the khagan's army at the Tisza
- ca. 600 Avar peace treaties with Lombards and Franks
- 601/2 Avars, Slavs, and Lombards raid Byzantine Istria
- 601 Avar army under Apsikh and Roman army under Petrus face each other at the Iron Gate
- 602 Avars under Apsikh defeat the Antes; Roman units under Guduin attack Slavs north of the lower Danube, but rebel against the order to hibernate in Slavic lands
- Nov. 602 Rebels under Phocas overthrow and kill Emperor Maurice
- 602–610 Emperor Phocas; new war against the Persians
- Aug. 603 A Slavic contingent sent by the Avars helps the Lombard king Agilulf to take Cremona
- ca. 604 Avar-Byzantine treaty; subsidies probably rise to 140,000 solidi
- ca. 602/10–626/30 Another son of Baian reigns as khagan
- 604 Slavic surprise attack on Thessalonica
- 609/10 Avar-Slav raids in Illyricum
- Fall 610 Civil war in Byzantium; Phocas overthrown
- 610–641 Emperor Heraclius
- ca. 611 Avar victory over the Lombard dux of Friuli, Gisulf II; capture of Forum Iulii/Cividale and deportation of the captives to Pannonia
- ca. 611 Bavarians under Garibald defeated by Slavs at Aguntum; Brunhild's enemies suspect her of plotting with the Avars
- ca. 615 Avars and Slavs capture Naissus and Serdica
- ca. 615 Siege of Thessalonica by Slavs under Chatzon
- 617 or 618 33-day siege of Thessalonica by Avars and Slavs under the command of the khagan
- ca. 618 Avar expedition to Thrace
- 618/19 Avar-Byzantine treaty (180,000 solidi?)
- June 623 Failed Avar ambush against Emperor Heraclius near Heraclea; raids inside the Long Walls
- 623 New treaty with subsidies of 200,000 solidi
- 623–638 Dagobert I, king of the Franks
- 623/24 Beginning of the successful rebellion of Slavs in Bohemia/Moravia under Samo

- ca. 625–640 Salona abandoned because of Slavic pressure, population moves to Split
- Summer 626 Great Avar siege of Constantinople with Persian support fails after ten days
- Winter 627/28 The Persian war ends with Byzantine victory; Heraclius in Ctesiphon
- 630 Frankish embassy in Constantinople
- 630/31 Throne conflicts in the Avar Empire between an Avar and a Bulgar contender; flight of the defeated Bulgars to Bavaria, where a large part is massacred; survivors under Alcicocus flee to the “March of the Vinedi” to Duke Walluc
- ca. 631 Large-scale Frankish attack on Samo’s kingdom repelled at Wogastisburc; Lombard victory over Slavs in the Alps
- 630/35 Bulgar Empire north of the Black Sea under Khan Kuvrat expands against Avars and Turks
- 636–642 Arab/Islamic expansion to Palestine, Syria, and Egypt
- 642–668 Emperor Constans II
- 650s/660s Death of Khan Kuvrat; dissolution of his empire and rise of the Khazar khaganate
- ca. 660 Death of Samo and dissolution of his kingdom
- 662–671 Grimoald, king of the Lombards
- 662 The dethroned Lombard king Perctarit, an exile at the Avar court, has to continue his flight because of diplomatic pressures by King Grimoald
- 663 Emperor Constans II fights the Lombards in southern Italy
- 663 Duke Lupus of Friuli rebels against King Grimoald; on Grimoald’s invitation, the Avars invade Friuli, and Lupus falls in battle; the Avars leave only when Grimoald arrives with his army
- ca. 663 Alzeco comes to Italy with his Bulgars and settles with Lombard consent in the duchy of Benevento
- 668–685 Emperor Constantine IV
- July 677 A conflict with the Slavic prince Perbund leads to a Slavic siege of Thessalonica
- 678 An Arabic fleet is defeated at Constantinople
- 678/79 The last attested Avar embassy in Constantinople congratulates the emperor on his victory
- 680 Bulgars under Asparukh defeat the Byzantines near the Danube delta; Bulgar khanate established in Moesia

- ca. 680 Kuver and his mixed group of Sermesianoi break free from Avar Pannonia and settle in the Keramesian Plain; failed plot of Mavros against Thessalonica
- 685–695, 705–711 Emperor Justinian II
- 712–744 Liutprand, king of the Lombards
- ca. 713/14 Destruction of Lorch by the Avars
- 742 The Carantanians under Boruth repel an Avar attack with the support of the Bavarian duke Odilo; beginning of Bavarian overlordship and Christian mission in Carantania
- 748–788 Tassilo III, duke of the Bavarians
- 768–814 Charlemagne, king of the Franks
- 774 Charlemagne defeats the Lombard king Desiderius and becomes king of the Lombards
- 782 Avar embassy meets Charlemagne at Lippspringe; an Avar army appears at the Enns
- 788 Tassilo III dethroned and confined
- 788 Frankish-Avar War; Avars defeated near the Italian and Bavarian borders
- 790 Avar embassy in Worms; no consensus on the boundary
- Aug. 791 A Frankish-Lombard army takes an Avar fortification at the Italian border
- Fall 791 Great Avar campaign led by Charlemagne, departing from Lorch in September and proceeding to the Rába without much resistance; horse pestilence, return via Savaria
- 791–end of 793 Charlemagne in Regensburg; preparations for an Avar war, works for Danube-Main canal
- 793–795 Saxon uprising
- 794/95 Inner conflict in the Avar Empire; death of the khagan and the *iugurrus*
- 795 Envoys of the tudun meet Charlemagne at Hliune at the Elbe and offer submission
- Fall 795 A Frankish-Slav army under Woynimir advances to the “ring” of the khagans and sacks it
- 796 The tudun comes to Charlemagne, submits, and is baptized; an army under Pippin of Italy and Duke Eric of Friuli sacks the ring again; the khagan submits; a synod at the Danube deals with the conversion of the Avars
- 797 Campaign of Eric of Friuli in Pannonia; fights against Slavs
- End of 797 Avar embassy meets Charlemagne at Herstelle

- 798 Bishop Arn of Salzburg is raised to archbishop with a view to the eastern missions
- 799–803 Great Avar uprising against the Franks
- 799 Eric of Friuli is killed by the residents of Tarsatica; Prefect Gerold I is murdered during a campaign against the Avars
- 802 The counts Chadaloh and Goteram fall in a fight against Avars near the castellum Guntionis
- 802/03–814 Bulgar khan Krum
- 803 The Franks finally put down the Avar revolt; the tudun comes to Charlemagne at Regensburg and submits
- ca. 804 Campaign of the Bulgar khan Krum against the Avars
- Early 805 The Christian kapkhan Theodore visits Charlemagne in Aachen and asks for land because of Slavic attacks; he obtains the region between Carnuntum and Savaria, but dies soon
- Sept. 805 The Avar khagan asks Charlemagne to reestablish his supreme rule; on September 21, he is baptized with the name Abraham in the Fischa river
- 805 The capitulary of Thionville institutes Lorch as a toll post toward Slavs and Avars
- 811 A Frankish army mediates in fights between Avars and Slavs in Pannonia; the *canizauci*, the tudun, and other Avar and Slavic princes are summoned to Aachen
- 811 Emperor Nicephorus invades Bulgaria and falls in battle; in the Bulgar army, Avars are also attested
- 814 Khan Krum plans to attack Constantinople; his army is said to have included Avar mercenaries; Krum dies before putting the plan into action
- 822 Last attested Avar embassy at the Frankish court
- 828 The administrative reform of the eastern territories of Bavaria removes the Avar tributary principality

Preface

The Avars dominated much of eastern central Europe from the late sixth to the end of the eighth century and were one of the big powers of the period: as powerful as Attila's empire, and as time-resistant as Mongol rule in eastern Europe. Still, historians have mostly neglected the Avar khaganate. The only longer study available in the English language is a ninety-page article by H. H. Howorth in the *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* published in 1889.¹

The present book therefore fills a gap. It was first published in German in 1988 and is now in its third edition.² I am grateful to Cornell University Press for accepting to publish an English translation. Preparing it was not an easy task and has taken a number of years to complete. I first cut some sections dealing with outdated debates or regional problems. Then the text was translated into English. I continued working on the basis of the translation and ended up introducing major revisions and updates. The basic approach, set out in the first chapter, remains the same. Fortunately, relatively little had to be changed in the historical narrative. Caution in reconstructing events on the basis of patchy or doubtful sources had been part of the initial approach; in some respects I have become even more cautious over the years. Still, my aim remained to provide a historical narrative where feasible, even though sometimes alternative reconstructions would be possible. The bottom line of a six-hundred-page book should not be that ultimately we cannot tell what happened.

In some fields, new evidence and lively debates have made substantial revisions necessary. Much has happened in research on the central Eurasian steppes, which was relevant both for the Eurasian background of Avar history and for structural comparison. There is also much recent research and debate about the early Slavs that I had to take on board; readers may notice that I have further developed my own position on the subject, already sketched in the German version. Even more has changed in archaeology, where an enormous amount of new evidence has emerged in the last thirty years. Some of the paradigms current when I wrote the German book were also transformed. Therefore, thanks to the advice of a number of eminent archaeological colleagues, I have completely rewritten the archaeological sections of this book. On the whole, I cannot claim to have done full justice to all the new works on different aspects of the topic that have appeared in thirty years. In the course of revising the manuscript, I frequently had to refrain from going deeper into many issues that are somehow connected

to the topic of the book, but not central to it. Unfortunately, I have not been able to consult two books still in the making while I finished mine: Georgios Kardaras was preparing an English version of his Greek book on the Avars and Byzantium; and Csanád Bálint will present a larger, more archaeologically oriented synthesis of the same subject.³ On the whole, I am confident that my book provides an overview of Avar history that, as far as possible, corresponds to the state of the art in the various disciplines involved and offers a number of new ideas, also as compared with the German version.

This book, which already has a history in itself, owes a lot to more people than I can possibly acknowledge here. Before and all the more since it appeared in German I had many opportunities to exchange ideas with numerous scholars who know much more about aspects of the topic than I would ever be able to master. The first thanks go to my academic teacher, Herwig Wolfram, who suggested to me to work on the Avars early in my career. Falko Daim provided the opportunity (and the funding) to concentrate on the Avar book in his part of a large project in the 1980s. C. H. Beck publishers accepted the book for publication and have kept it on the market since it appeared. A number of eminent British and American colleagues then sought a publisher for an English translation but were told that both the Avars and the author were too little known to promise relevant sales. Therefore, I am particularly grateful to Florin Curta for having raised interest in the book at Cornell University Press, and of course to Cornell for having accepted it. Will Sayers has swiftly translated it. Since that time, I have taxed the patience of John Ackerman, Peter Potter, and Mahinder S. Kingra, under whose guidance the book has finally gone to press. Thanks are also due to the scholarly institutions that I could rely on during my work: the University of Vienna, with its Institut für Österreichische Geschichtsforschung; the Institute for Medieval Research of the Austrian Academy of Sciences, which has offered me a generous research environment during the time when I worked on the English version; and not least, the Austrian Research Fund FWF and the European Research Council, which at different stages supported my research with grants and projects.⁴

Among the colleagues and scholars who have read sections of the English version and/or helped me with advice, material, and bibliography, my special thanks go to Csanád Bálint, Francesco Borri, Florin Curta, Falko Daim, Nicola Di Cosmo, Max Diesenberger, Stefan Eichert, Andreas Fischer, Herwig Friesinger, Matthias Hardt, Wolfgang Haubrichs, Georg Holzer, Michael Maas, Johannes Preiser-Kapeller, Helmut Reimitz, Philipp von Rummel, Pavlína Rychterová, Peter Stadler, Tsvetelin Stepanov, Peter Štih, Erik Szameit, Tivadar Vida, Herwig Wolfram, and Jozef Zájbojník. Over the years, I have also profited much from exchanges with Alexander Avenarius (†), Volker Bierbrauer, Sebastian Brather, Rajko Bratož, Neven Budak, Evangelos Chrysos, Slavko Ciglenečki, Uwe

Fiedler, Éva Garam, Patrick J. Geary, Franz Glaser, Peter B. Golden, John Haldon, Guy Halsall, Orsolya Heinrich-Tamáska, Joachim Henning, Hajnalka Herold, David Kalhous, Radoslav Katičić, Attila Kiss (†), Gábor Kiss, Johannes Koder, Sabine Ladstätter, Mihailo Milinković, Róbert Müller, Leena Mari Peltomaa, Andrew Poulter, András Róna-Tás, Alexander Sarantis, Michael Schmauder, Peter Schreiner, Andreas Schwarcz, Sören Stark, Béla Miklós Szóke, Jaroslav Tejral, Frans Theuws, Péter Tomka, Przemysław Urbańczyk, István Vásáry, Ian Wood, and Daniel Ziemann. Christina Pössel corrected the English in some chapters. Finally, Nicola Edelmann helped me with footnotes, bibliography, and copy editing throughout the long phase of preparation of this book.

THE AVARS

APPROACHING THE AVARS

The first chapter of this book addresses the question of why and how we can write a history of the Avars. Why are the Avars significant for European history, and why have they remained a marginal concern in its study? At a point where Eurocentric history is being criticized as seeing the world from a hegemonic but rather particular historiographic perspective, it seems promising to turn to a neglected Eurasian element in the European past: the steppe peoples. The history of contemporary perceptions, and of scholarly study of this alternative form of life in premodern Europe, is interesting in itself and exposes the deep ambiguity of European attitudes to its both threatening and fascinating eastern neighbors.

1.1 Marginal Europeans?

Few of the peoples who determined the fate of Europe during the transition from Antiquity to the Middle Ages have remained so poorly known as the Avars. For almost a quarter millennium, from 558 to 796, they ruled vast stretches of central and eastern Europe from their power base on the middle Danube. At the height of its power the Avar khaganate put the Byzantines and the Franks on the defensive, maintained relations with peoples as distant as the Persian Sassanians and the Turks of central Asia, and put a decisive stamp on Slavic expansion between the Baltic and the Aegean. After the fall of the Avar Empire, the court of

Charlemagne was astonished at the treasures that had been amassed in the “ring” of the khagans between the Danube and the Tisza.

Nevertheless the Avars have remained alien to European history. Attila’s Huns, who maintained their rule for only a few decades, are much more present in the consciousness of posterity. *The Song of the Nibelungs* (*Das Nibelungenlied*) and frescoes in the Vatican tell of Attila, and European schoolchildren learn his name. The khagan Baian, who established the Avars as a great power, is hardly mentioned in reference works. This may also be due to the fact that he and his successors gave his western neighbors, Franks and Lombards, little cause for complaint. While the Huns and the Magyars made their way from the Carpathian Basin across half of western Europe, the Avars directed their attacks almost exclusively against Byzantium.

The Avars themselves have remained mute for us. Whereas the rulers of the Bulgars and the Turks in this same era had lengthy inscriptions chiseled in stone, we know of only a few brief runic texts from the Avar domain. As a consequence, the history of the Avars was written by their enemies. For contemporary observers the opponent was almost anonymous. Baian is the only Avar ruler whose name has been transmitted; all the others are designated in the sources by their title, khagan. A handful of other exotic titles, such as *iugurrus*, *kapkhan*, *canizauci*, and a scant dozen names are all that has been preserved. Does this anonymity reflect a conscious program or does it express the chroniclers’ sense of Avar foreignness?

For them this “ugly nation of hairy barbarians” appeared faithless, brutal, greedy, and unpredictable.¹ At the same time the Byzantines were not reluctant to adopt the military accomplishments of the “barbarians” such as the stirrup, which Avar horsemen from the steppe were the first to introduce into Europe. The armies of the Christian empire and the “ugly” central Asian horsemen had more in common than could be accounted for by the ideology of the times. The modern historical sciences have long fed on the prejudices of their informants. A “deadly storm tide” that drew “prosperous states and peoples into the maelstrom of a common annihilation” is how the Avars are viewed by one of their most distinguished modern historians.²

That the Avar military campaigns often spread death and destruction across the provinces of the Byzantine Empire cannot be denied. The army of the khagans resembled a highly specialized war machine,³ which only war itself could keep running. Yet what appeared to the enemy as blind rage was a carefully managed economy of force, a skillful alternation of threats, attacks, and negotiations that sustained the outpouring of riches from the empire. The khaganate made it possible for warriors to acquire in regulated fashion the prestige and goods through which they expressed their status and power. For the empire in turn, war and peace, inside and outside, became rather calculable. The highly militarized

late Roman state and the barbarian rulers competed for the distribution of the wealth still produced by the Mediterranean economy. In the west the post-Roman kingdoms of the Goths, Franks, and Lombards successfully mastered the apparatus of the state. The Avars did not aim for similar integration. When they made the attempt, like the later Bulgars and Hungarians, of founding a Christian state on the Roman model, it was too late to give their empire a durable foundation. The Christian khaganate, which the last Avars tried to establish east of Lake Neusiedl, was a belated caricature of the lost opportunity of integration in Christian Europe.

This failure was clearly the outcome of a centuries-long process and not its precondition, as a cliché-driven historiography of these nomads might easily lead us to believe. It was not because of the Avars' savagery and foreignness that they remained barbarians and as such disappeared again from history. The conditions for this failure at the same time led to the making of Europe as we know it, and thus are a part of the early history of the West. Medievalists should therefore not assume that a Frank, a Roman, or a Byzantine in the sixth, seventh, or eighth century was "one of us" and that an Avar on the other hand was a foreigner. For a long time, the "Germanic" peoples were seen as the direct ancestors of the Germans and thus as subjects of history, while the eastern barbarians were a matter for ethnography. An ethnocentric world view could establish the superiority of the Christian West (or even worse, the Nordic race) by drawing on prejudices that were already well known to Antiquity. For his war of conquest against the godless Avars Charlemagne was able to draw on a whole register of conventional resentment.⁴ In the modern age similar propaganda has accompanied the colonial subjugation of "savages" overseas. From the nineteenth century on, nationalism sought its justification to no little extent in a misconceived view of the peoples of the early Middle Ages.

Our painfully slow emergence from nationalism and ethnocentricity gives research on the barbarians a new relevance. After a century that reached the pinnacle of civilization but also the pinnacle of barbarity (in its pejorative sense), we need to account for the origins of our culture's double face anew. The way in which the Other was fixed in prejudice and eventually repressed in the course of a process of civilization has become an issue. The nomad, the nonsedentary is discovered as the quintessential Other. For instance, a postmodern "treatise on nomadology" set out to explore ways to a "nomadic thinking" that would transcend the dualistic logic of the West.⁵ Ethnology, once a discipline that reaffirmed the superiority of occidental culture, is now expected to provide information on alternative forms of life and material for the critique of civilization. Cultural transfers, acculturation, and the formation of identities become preferred areas of interdisciplinary research.

As long as such an interest does not fall back into the cliché of the noble savage, which from the time of Tacitus was the obverse of the barbarian stereotype, early medieval studies will have to take it seriously. An impressive array of research over the last decades has revealed the diversity of lifestyles in early medieval Europe and their complementarity. Even in the east-central European domain of the Avars a whole series of cultural patterns abutted one another. Where written sources are silent, archaeology is eloquent; some sixty thousand Avar graves have been excavated so far.⁶ The possibilities and limitations of historical interpretation of such finds are certainly not uncontested, and the dialogue between archaeology and historical research suffers from occasional misunderstandings. Yet results to date have clarified a great deal. Ethnic diversity and flexibility, cultural exchange, often over great distances, wide-ranging political activity, and regional differentiation emerge with increasing clarity from current investigations into the empires of the steppe.⁷ Early medieval peoples consisted of diverse groups that had found a common political frame and soon felt that they belonged; this simple model is quite useful to understand ethnicity on the steppe.⁸ The unusually rapid course of such ethnic processes in steppe environments permits new perspectives on the dynamics in the formation of ethnic identities.

Writing a history of the Avars presents two very different challenges. On the one hand it must address the many questions of detail that have arisen from recent advances in our understanding. Given the paucity of historical information, nuances in the interpretation of the sources may lead to a significantly different overall picture. An overview of the basic sources and of discussions among specialists is therefore necessary. The present work consciously runs the risk of interdisciplinarity and from the medievalist's side seeks a dialogue with the numerous disciplines involved: archaeology and ancient history, ethnology, classical, Byzantine, Slavic, and Oriental studies, in addition to an array of other philologies, whose research findings will enrich our knowledge of the Avars. Since the author has not mastered the methodology of all these disciplines, he must often limit himself to reporting their results and assess them from a historian's perspective. Nevertheless, in the case of the Avars such a synopsis is all the more necessary. It is to be hoped that the overview thus obtained may compensate for deficiencies in matters of detail. If this history of the Avars can serve as a tool for a diversity of future investigations that go far beyond its own possibilities, it will have attained its goal. Several new aspects and questions that are here raised will hopefully be of use.

On the other hand, it is not enough to recount the many ramifications of specialist studies and, to that end, advance a collection of material plus respective historical critique. The objective of this book, whatever the difficulties, is a view of the whole. If the confrontation between barbarian and imperial policies,

the encounters between various patterns of culture and social organization are described here, it is in order to contribute toward an understanding of a process from which, ultimately, the European Middle Ages would emerge. Perhaps a neglected part of the picture of European history can thereby be made more evident. The present history of the Avars is also directed to those readers for whom the fate of this—and other—early peoples has hitherto been less than familiar and who, like the author, are prepared to accept the challenge of this alterity.

1.2 Sources and Prejudices

Historical accounts of the Avars come from their neighbors, who were often also their enemies, peoples who by virtue of religion and culture felt superior to them. This does not invalidate such sources. Partisan historical representations are seldom completely pulled from thin air. A millennium of classical ethnography had turned prejudice, as *topos*, into a method.⁹ The cultivated Byzantine and his often somewhat less cultivated contemporary in the West long saw the “Scythians,” as they were still occasionally called, through the eyes of Herodotus, Strabo, and Justin. Synesius of Cyrene stated in about the year 400, when new peoples were crossing the borders of the empire almost yearly: “There are no new barbarians; the old Scythians are always thinking up new names to deceive the Romans.”¹⁰ The view he expressed remained a reference point until the Carolingian era and beyond. The Huns were often called Scythians, and the Avars and Bulgars, in their turn, Huns. The Hungarians were variously named Scythians, Huns, Avars, or Turks. Goths and after them occasionally even Slavs were identified as *Getae*. Most of them were linked with the apocalyptic peoples Gog and Magog of the Bible, who were still entered on maps of the High Middle Ages.¹¹

In the first centuries A.D., most authors distinguished crudely between “Scythians,” armed horsemen who came from the steppe, and “Germans,” who lived in the West. In late Antiquity, the Goths were consistently counted among the eastern “Scythians.” Judgments were often schematic, as made by Procopius when he alluded to the “Hunnic” lifestyle of the Slavs. The passage is nevertheless a good example of how the use of the *topos* still permitted the communication of reliable information.¹² A manual on warfare written about 600, called the *Strategicon* of Maurice, divides the barbarians into four groups according to their ways of life and war: the Persians; the “blond peoples,” among whom the Franks and Lombards (the collective term *German* was not used any more at the time); the “Scythians,” that is, the Avars and Turks and the other Hunnic peoples; and the Slavs and Antes.¹³ For military purposes this was evidently adequate.

In the sixth or seventh century it was not difficult to acquire information about the barbarians. Even the distant Turks, soon after their first embassy, maintained a colony counting more than a hundred residents in Constantinople.¹⁴ Byzantine diplomats regularly gathered information on all the peoples who could be of interest to imperial diplomacy. In wartime it was often of decisive importance to be up-to-date on the political structure, modes of warfare, or internal tensions among the barbarians. This was the case not only for the imperial court but to a degree also for the residents of every province that had to reckon with barbarian incursions. The way in which clerics of Thessalonica describe the various attacks on their city in the *Miracula Sancti Demetrii* shows a relatively sound knowledge of the enemy.

Even the sober accounts of well-informed contemporaries are stamped with often unstated value judgments. To a cultivated Byzantine (and to a pious cleric in the West) nomadic life must have appeared coarse, brutal, and uncivilized. A summary of the barbarian *topoi* in Ammianus Marcellinus (fourth century) offers, *inter alia*, the following characteristics typical of barbarians: savagery, lack of restraint, rage, excessive courage, arrogance, cunning, boldness, inconstancy, greed.¹⁵ Even the names, coincidentally or not, were eloquent: *Avari* could be understood in Latin as “the greedy,” *Bulgares* as “the vulgar,” and the name of the Slavs apparently gave reason to replace the ancient *servus* with the modern word “slave.” With such a negative perspective it made no difference that barbarian society was occasionally described for culture-critical purposes as a positive antithesis to the writer’s own world, as Tacitus in his *Germania* or Salvian of Marseille illustrate. Even though the Avars found no Tacitus of their own, there are individual examples of this attitude. The ecclesiastical historian John of Ephesus describes how the Avar conquerors in 582 generously gave food to the half-starved inhabitants of Sirmium: “People also speak of the compassion shown by the barbarians to the inhabitants, on seeing the pitiable condition to which they were reduced by famine, and which well deserves the admiration of Christians, whose conduct too frequently it condemns; because they do not show kindness to their fellow-servants, nor pity those of their own flesh.”¹⁶ Something similar happened later in the midst of war when the khagan gave the opposing Roman army some wagonloads of food, so that they might celebrate Easter in proper fashion.¹⁷ That the simple life among the “Scythians” could offer an attractive alternative to many disaffected Greeks is illustrated in Priscus’s account of a Greek merchant he met at the court of Attila who had advanced to the status of Hun warrior. To the harsh criticism of the Roman-turned-barbarian who wished to “enjoy undisturbed the fruits of his bravery” the author opposes an apology for the Roman world.¹⁸

The Romans' sense of superiority over the savages could not be shaken by such traces of noble innocence in the portrait of the barbarians. The atrocities that were ascribed to "Scythians" of all kinds served as illustrations of the fact that a life with human dignity was impossible outside the Roman-Christian ecumene. For many, this perception rose to the intensity of a blind hate, as exhibited in the tirades of Theodore Syncellus after the siege of Constantinople in 626. He viewed the khagan as the "pernicious offspring of the eternally evil spirit; he has shown himself to be the devil's son, not by the necessity of nature, but by his own decision, and all devilish turpitude is incarnated in him. Like an anti-god who strives for dominance over land and sea, he stretches his mouth up toward heaven and with his tongue reaches down to earth in order to annihilate the people of God like abandoned eggs."¹⁹ Such depictions most of all served as a moralistic summons to desist from sin, because of which God had sent such punishments. The notion that barbarian incursions befell Christianity as divine retribution had become self-evident for contemporaries. The Frankish author of the seventh-century *Chronicle of Fredegar* put this thought in the mouth of Samo, king of the Wends, when he is vilified as a "heathen dog" by a Frankish ambassador: "Then if you are God's servants, and we his hounds, and since you persist in offending Him, we are within our rights to tear you to pieces!"²⁰ Christian Byzantine state ideology could only regard the existence of pagan, hostile barbarian kingdoms on its borders as a passing trial or punishment in the context of the divine plan of salvation. Baptism and subjugation by the emperor remained the ultimate objectives of Byzantine (and later also Frankish) policy.

Being savage, faithless, cruel, and perfidious was the very modality of the existence of Avars and other "Huns," quite independent of how they might comport themselves. It is to the credit of many Byzantine authors that these ascriptions, with which they are lavish, do not fully obscure the reality behind the accounts. The course of the battles between the Byzantines and the Avars, as they are depicted in Menander, Theophylact Simocatta, and others, reveals that neither side had much for which to condemn the other. Yet one has the impression that senseless cruelties rather belonged in the repertory of the Christian empire. The rare forays into enemy territory were regularly exploited for the massacre of sleeping noncombatants.²¹ A captive Persian emissary, during the siege of 626, was sent back to the khagan demonstratively mutilated, with the severed head of another fastened around his neck.²² Only exceptionally did the khagan have his prisoners massacred.²³

Breaches of treaties occurred on both sides. The Byzantines were the first to detain Avar envoys.²⁴ But clearly the khagan did not balk at swearing false oaths of various kinds and violating diplomatic rules.²⁵ The *Strategicon* of Maurice draws from this the usual conclusions: "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 agreements.”²⁶ The same manual repeatedly counsels Roman commanders to miss no opportunity to deceive the opponent and take him by surprise.²⁷ The policies of both the empire and the barbarians operated with similar methods, and the inhabitants of the Roman provinces had good reason to fear imperial forces almost as much as the barbarians.²⁸ The *pax Romana* was no less an expansive program than the hegemonic aspirations of the khagan. When Menander has the Emperor Justin say to Avar emissaries, “A war would do the Romans more good than a peace,”²⁹ this was no mere bluff. Byzantine armies initiated hostilities just as often as did the Avars. When boundaries threatened to become blurred in this way, language had to establish clear distinctions. The rhetoric provided a basis for dealing with the barbarians.

Rigorous criticism of the texts is therefore necessary. Even though the sources for the history of the Avars should not be summarily dismissed as “literary constructs” or “opaque barriers,” text and context have to be considered critically, especially since many of them were written down at some temporal distance from events and were often transmitted in much later manuscripts.³⁰ Sources have all too often been exploited as mere mines of information in research on the Avars; the validity of isolated pieces of information has been accepted or rejected on the basis of sometimes quite arduous reconstructions of the events. Despite all the distortions, the contemporary accounts of the barbarians represent the traces of a tempestuous encounter of cultures, a dialogue that had consequences for both sides.

We owe a substantial part of the information on the European Avars to Byzantine authors. The newcomers from the East arrived in the 550s in one of the most productive periods of Byzantine historiography. Few periods of Roman history are so well documented as the reign of Justinian. Procopius’s eight-volume history of Justinian’s wars goes up to 552 and gives a rather detailed if sometimes polemical description of the empire and its barbarians prior to the arrival of the Avars.³¹ Agathias, who wrote during the reign of Justin II, picked up the thread of his work and continued it to the year 559.³² But of the Avars he mentions only their hairstyle. Menander Protector successively wrote a history of the years 558 to 582, our primary source for the first Avar wars. Unfortunately the work itself is lost. But its numerous accounts of embassies, based on excellent sources of information, were fortunately still judged so instructive in the tenth century that many were incorporated in the *Excerpta de legationibus*.³³ The last of the literarily versed and historically interested jurists who has left us a work of early Byzantine history is Theophylact Simocatta. Under the emperor Heraclius

he continued the work of Menander and described the reign of Maurice (582–602).³⁴ This Egyptian, who was long judged by classical philologists a “paragon of the grotesque” because of his luxuriant rhetoric, is our chief witness for Avar history.³⁵ It may well be that in this mimetic homage to classical models he no longer reaches the level of his predecessors. Moreover, he seems to have misunderstood and arbitrarily arranged some of his at times excellent sources. Nonetheless, the extensive descriptions offer on the whole a valuable picture of the battles and thus also of the policies of the khaganate.

The experiences of Byzantine generals in the Avar and Slav wars under Maurice informed a source of a different kind: a manual on warfare that was compiled around 600 by an anonymous author, known as the *Strategicon* of Maurice.³⁶ Whoever the author was, it is a handbook based on praxis that illustrates how pragmatic and flexible the Byzantines could be in their relations with their opponents and how seriously they took the conduct of psychological warfare.

Not only the military but also the church was challenged by the barbarian incursions. One of the most interesting but also most debated sources for the early Avar period is the *Ecclesiastical History* of John of Ephesus, preserved in a Syrian compilation from the time of the Crusades, the work of Michael the Syrian. A Monophysite bishop, John spent the last years of his life around 580 cloistered near Constantinople, where, well on in years, he still incorporated a considerable amount of current information.³⁷ He wrote under the fresh impression of the first great Avar-Slav invasion of 584 on the basis of indirect information, so he reflects perceptions in Constantinople rather than actual events. Some material about the Avars is also found in the *Ecclesiastical History* of Evagrius Scholasticus, probably composed in 593 in Syria.³⁸

Firsthand information assembled with hagiographic intentions is found in the *Miracula Sancti Demetrii*, a collection of accounts of the miraculous interventions of the patron saint in the manifold crises that befell his city, Thessalonica. The first part, written during the reign of Heraclius, recounts among other things the first great Avar-Slav siege of the city. Further attacks are described in a continuation compiled toward the end of the seventh century.³⁹ The supernatural actions of Demetrius are swiftly woven into a surprisingly sober account, rich in detail and for the most part quite plausible—after all, the audience of the text, the citizens of Thessalonica, had also witnessed the sieges.⁴⁰

Similar intentions to reinforce the cohesion of the community during difficult times guided the composition of Theodore Syncellus’s sermon on the liberation of Constantinople from the hardships of the Avar siege in the year 626. Composed on the heels of these events, it expostulates on the moral, salvific, and eschatological dimension of the rescue of the imperial city by the Mother of God.⁴¹ The same events are treated in two further contemporary sources: One

is a poem composed for the occasion by George of Pisidia, which, despite all its rhetorical effects, offers some valuable pieces of information.⁴² The other is the less high-blown, unfortunately incomplete but still relatively extensive account of the Easter Chronicle (*Chronicon Paschale*).⁴³

After 626 the Avars more or less disappear from the field of vision of Byzantine historiography. The seventh and eighth centuries are, to a degree, the dark ages of the writing of history in Byzantium.⁴⁴ After Theophylact Simocatta the chronicle tradition breaks off. It is not until the late eighth century that we again find a historical work on a grander scale. The patriarch Nicephorus, in his *Breviarium*, gives some relevant information about the Avars and Bulgars.⁴⁵ More extensive is the *Chronography* of Theophanes the Confessor, composed soon after 810 by a well-connected monk. The years between 285 and 813 are dealt with in annalistic fashion, with, however, some chronological uncertainties. For the period of the Avar wars the chronicler draws mostly on the work of Theophylact; for the seventh century, he relies on the same set of information as Nicephorus.⁴⁶

Finally, a considerable enrichment to our knowledge of the Avars is offered by two later works. In the tenth century the learned emperor Constantine Porphyrogenitus compiled the celebrated treatise *De administrando imperio* in the framework of a vast encyclopedic undertaking. Particularly for the history of the western Balkans and for the early Croats and Serbs this work offers unique material, albeit often with a tendency toward the legendary.⁴⁷ The *Suda Lexicon*, compiled at the close of the tenth century, also contains some otherwise unknown passages about the Avars, among which some fragments from Menander.⁴⁸

In the Latin West less notice was initially taken of the Avars. Very sketchy statements are found in some contemporary chronicles, as for example in Victor of Tunnuna, John of Biclaro, and Isidore of Seville. The lost work of Secundus of Trento, who died in 612, is only known from extensive excerpts found in Paul the Deacon's Lombard history.⁴⁹ His contemporary Pope Gregory the Great was above all interested in the ecclesiastical disputes of the time. But his letters do provide valuable clues for understanding the displacements of the Slavs and Avars in the direction of the Adriatic.⁵⁰ The khaganate plays a similarly peripheral role in the work of Gregory of Tours.⁵¹ The *Chronicle of Fredegar* in the mid-seventh century provides patchy but valuable information on events east of the Frankish frontier.⁵² The principal source for relations between the Avars and the West from the beginning is the Lombard history that Paul the Deacon, connected to both Lombard and Carolingian courts, committed to vellum toward the end of the eighth century. Since his origins were in Friuli, he also had family traditions about experiences with the Avars.⁵³ The conflicts between the Franks and the

Avares on the one hand and the Bavarians and the Slavs on the other up to the year 610, the Lombard-Avar entente, and the two raids on Friuli are for the most part known only from his record.

When Paul composed his history of the Lombards, the Avares were again on Charlemagne's political agenda for the Franks. The *Royal Frankish Annals* and a series of other annalistic works register precisely, if often scantily, the various stages of the conflict with the eastern neighbor.⁵⁴ The collapse of the khaganate for the first time revealed, as if on an operating table, its inner structure to Frankish observers. Now, since everyone seemed to be driving his own foreign policy, the various dignitaries with their oriental titles could be recorded in the annals, albeit not without some phonetic difficulty.

The heroes of the wars against the Avares were celebrated before the Carolingian public. A poem on the victory of King Pippin over the Avares in 796 and an obituary of Eric of Friuli by Paulinus of Aquileia have been preserved.⁵⁵ An episcopal synod that was held in enemy territory in 796 expressed concern for the conversion of the subjugated, and this was also a topic in the correspondence between Alcuin and Arn, the archbishop of Salzburg.⁵⁶ Even a letter from Charlemagne to his wife Fastrada about the Avar war of 791 has been preserved.⁵⁷ Charlemagne's biographer Einhard, in his summary, identifies the subjugation of the Avares as the emperor's greatest military accomplishment.⁵⁸ Lastly, the Carolingian efforts to organize the newly conquered eastern territories conserved, well into the ninth century, traces of the vanishing Avar elite.⁵⁹

1.3 Steppe Research and Its Methodological Problems

"L'histoire des Avares reste à écrire." With this statement Denis Sinor (1963) outlined an undertaking that, despite intensive research, remained unrealized at the time.⁶⁰ In 1983 Omeljan Pritsak characterized the Avares as "stepchildren in historical studies."⁶¹ Admittedly, there have been several efforts at a historical synthesis. Arnulf Kollautz, in collaboration with Hisayuki Miyakawa, portrayed the "history and culture of a nomadic people from the age of migrations" (as the title might read in translation), departing from a straightforward identification of the Rouran of central Asia with the European Avares.⁶² Rich in material, this work threw into relief a fundamental problem of research on the Avares: the patchy evidence and the wide range of regional particularities hardly allows a coherent narrative. The "histoire des Avares" is often obscured by the focus on detail.

In more coherent fashion, Alexander Avenarius attempted to delineate the fate of "the Avares in Europe."⁶³ The work was written under the difficult

conditions of repression after the “Prague Spring” of 1968 and could not deal equitably with the current state of research in all areas. In point of fact, for few other questions of the European Middle Ages is the historian more obliged to turn to the help offered by a number of more or less exotic disciplines. The historian of the Avars should not only gain a mastery over the Latin and Greek sources with all their nuances but must in addition deal in critical fashion with Iranian, Armenian, Syriac, Arabic, and Chinese texts, should be at home with Slavic, Hungarian, Turkic, and Mongolic linguistics and onomastics, be competent to interpret with caution the published and, to the greatest degree possible, unpublished findings of archaeologists, master the approaches and models of social anthropology, and, lastly, offer new insights into old problems discussed by colleagues in his own field.

It is no coincidence that one of the classics of steppe research is entitled *Osteuropäische und ostasiatische Streifzüge* (Rambles in eastern Europe and eastern Asia). It was not least the unsystematic and often excursive form of the work that enabled the author, Josef Marquart, at the turn of the twentieth century, to draw connecting lines between disciplines that may still be fruitfully pursued today. It was precisely these interdisciplinary ramblers who provided the decisive stimulus for the exploration of the nomadic peoples. In the second half of the nineteenth century the German Wilhelm Radloff made his way through the “Wild East” in the service of the Russian tsar. He collected an immense body of ethnographical and linguistic data, excavated caves from the Ice Age and kurgans or mounds from the Iron Age, undertook metallurgical investigations, and published his material in the form of a memoir “from Siberia.” Long before “interdisciplinary” became a vogue word in the humanities, frontier crossers such as Radloff and Marquart laid the foundations for research into the medieval steppes, combining archaeology and ethnography, linguistics and history.⁶⁴

In the constricted circumstances of the redrawn national boundaries of eastern Europe after 1918, this panoramic view could hardly be sustained. Rigid nationalistic thinking, which drew from Germanic, Slavic, or Hunnic antiquity justifications for chauvinistic politics, did not hinder serious research but ensnared it in a vicious circle of fierce discussions about wrongly formulated questions. Were the Slavs the slaves of the Avars or the Avars merely the rulers of an alliance of Slavic tribes? Are the Romanians direct descendants of the Daco-Romans or the late results of a reversal of ethnic processes in the mountain regions between the Hungarians and the Slavs? How Carantanian are the Carinthians and the Slovenes, how Slavic the Serbs and Croats? A protracted dispute arose over eighth-century graves in Slovakia as to whether the long-departed were Avars or Slavs, Avaro-Slavs or proto-Great-Moravians, until scholars settled on the neutral term “Avar-period” (*awarenzeitlich*). Just how explosive historical research into

remote periods could be when fed into political disputes was evidenced in the stir that arose in Romania over a history of Transylvania that was published in Hungary in 1986.⁶⁵ The multifaceted historical contexts for research into the early Middle Ages in central and eastern Europe must be taken into account.⁶⁶ After 1989 the search for national origins gained a new and often tragic topicality.

The multiple, changeable identities of the steppe peoples could in fact have undermined the retrospective disputes over nationality. We know from inscriptions in Old Turkic and from Chinese and Byzantine chronicles how rapidly the “peoples” of the horsemen and their followers took shape and then fell apart again. Sources attest that the Goths qualified as Scythians and that Gothic was spoken at the court of Attila the Hun. The “Hun” and “Avar” names that have come down to us are of extremely varied provenance. Germanic warriors, and even the rebellious sixth-century youth of Constantinople, assumed “Hunnic” dress; the Byzantines, Avar weaponry; the Slavs, Avar and German titles.⁶⁷ The efforts of highly qualified historians to identify peoples with the same name but widely separated locations in time and space as “one and the same” has therefore led to many dead ends.⁶⁸ Migrations, which continuously moved new groups of nomad warriors from one end of the Eurasian steppe zone to the other, are a fascinating object of study. Yet *the* Avars, (“Proto”)-Bulgars, or Magyars are not to be found in some fanciful original homeland somewhere between Manchuria and the Ural, even if we find similar ethnonyms there.

Soon after the apocalypse of nationalism in Nazi Germany 1933–45, the biological definition of ethnicity began to be abandoned in early medieval studies; a subjective sense of belonging came to be seen as the decisive feature of ethnic identity. Reinhard Wenskus maintained that early medieval peoples were not of common origin but rather held together by common myths and norms.⁶⁹ Concepts of ethnicity and identity have been further developed since. One problem with the post-1945 approaches was that in many cases, the early medieval sense of belonging is hard to trace in the sources. It is more productive to conceptualize ethnic identities as the results of a process of communication and interaction in which self-identification of individuals with a group, identification of the group as such by its representatives and in rituals, and the perceptions of the group by outsiders all play a part.⁷⁰ In any case, ethnic identities cannot be assumed as fixed categories; rather, ethnic processes are a part of the historical development under investigation.

While archaeologists excavate hundreds of new Avar graves annually between the Moravian and Serbian Morava Rivers, the historian is not favored with such an increase in source material. Nevertheless, work on the written evidence has made significant progress. The Hungarian Byzantinist Samuel Szádeczky-Kardoss presented a compilation of the sources for the history of the Avars with

a short description of contents in 1972.⁷¹ A lexicon of the early medieval names and their occurrences from eastern Europe, the *Glossar zur frühmittelalterlichen Geschichte im östlichen Europa*, was unfortunately discontinued after the first fascicule, but at least the lemma “Avars” has been published.⁷² Over the years, decisive improvements were made in the editing and publication of important sources. Most of the essential authors for the history of the Avars are now available in new critical editions and/or translations (see section 1.2). In many cases the new editions proved a stimulus to numerous new studies.⁷³

The archaeological legacy of the Avar period is richer than for almost all other early medieval peoples and cultures, a fact that makes its exploration of particular methodological interest. Some time ago, Falko Daim presented a reliable summary of the present state of research in English.⁷⁴ It is not easy to keep track of all the new finds, since they come from almost a dozen countries, are studied in many different languages, and remain for the most part unpublished, while the body of available data is immense. The historian can barely call a dozen Avars by name, while the archaeologist knows not the name but many typical and individual characteristics of thousands of individuals of the Avar period. According to recent assessments more than two thousand Avar-period sites and approximately sixty thousand graves have been identified so far. Yet relatively few cemeteries have been fully excavated and published. Even though this flood of evidence occasionally lures the excavator into making hasty historical judgments, the historian, on the other hand, cannot simply ignore this mass of contemporary evidence.

For the nonspecialist who studies the excavation reports it may seem that the Avars come alive for us only in death. Relatively few settlements from the Avar period have been excavated so far. The Avar cult of the dead, on the other hand, has left striking traces. Prominent warriors were often buried in richly decorated costume and with magnificent weapons, sometimes with their horses. Their wives bore equally rich jewelry and decorations. A particularly rich example is a grave discovered in a sandpit in Kunbábony in 1971 and initially ascribed to a khagan.⁷⁵ The extensive burial ground of Zamárdi in southwestern Hungary, excavated in the 1990s, with its thousands of graves, produced much new information on the first period of Avar rule and its impressive cultural diversity.⁷⁶ The symbolic significance of grave goods as markers of status, their style, provenance, and distribution, the technologies used, the burial rites and organization of the cemeteries, the information on food and tools, the traces of illness and wounds, and much, much more make it possible to draw a host of conclusions. A strength of the school of Gyula László and István Bóna in Hungary was the great attention paid to social and economic questions.⁷⁷

“The finds, however, will give no answers without a prior question from the researcher,”⁷⁸ and these questions are connected to the inquirer’s historical understanding and interests. Many methodological questions are being debated: To what extent can an archaeologically based relative chronology provide a basis for historical datings? What is the relationship between archaeological culture and the ethnic and political entity? Can archaeological finds be interpreted ethnically at all?⁷⁹ These and similar questions call for further discussion in collaboration among the disciplines. It is, however, clear that each discipline must first begin with its own methodology to try to draw tenable conclusions, before results from neighboring disciplines are called on in support. A mixed argumentation can lead to circular reasoning and results. The same is true for the collaboration between history and onomastics.

A more attentive epistemological discussion and insight into fundamental methodological differences among the disciplines could further their collaboration. Both archaeology and historical linguistics seek to classify their material. But fundamental errors occur when the resultant schemata are equated with historical categories. An archaeological culture or a language group cannot, without further ado, be equated with a people or with a polity.⁸⁰ This is all the more true for early medieval ways of life, which, on the level of larger entities such as the Avar Empire, were much less homogeneous than modern nation-states. Archaeological cultures are abstractions based on certain features regarded as distinctive, not natural units. Furthermore, even an archaeological (or linguistic) chronology based on a broad range of material must presuppose the contemporaneity of the noncontemporaneous. While the historian can often date more precisely, the written sources only rarely permit spatial delimitation. Thus, the integration of data from all disciplines can offer a complex picture of life under Avar rule, and with the massive evidence at hand it seems plausible to describe the dominant cultural forms to be found in the Carpathian Basin from the late sixth to the end of the eighth century as “Avar.”

The German version of this book came out first in 1988; it is now available in the third edition.⁸¹ Surprisingly, relatively little has been published about the Avars since 1988 that would transform the picture drawn almost thirty years ago. However, significant progress has been made in several fields. Archaeology has advanced in a spectacular way, both on the methodological and conceptual levels and in the sheer mass of new material available. Already in the 1980s, a few tens of thousands of graves had been excavated; now this number has almost doubled, making the material evidence from the Avar khaganate easily the best-researched of all early medieval polities in Europe. Whereas in the late 1980s, scholars could rely on just a handful of complete publications of Avar-period cemeteries, many more, and some settlements, have now been made available,

mostly in German or English. An impressive variety of further evidence is now accessible through interim reports or particular studies. Although I could not hope to do justice to this enormous body of material and to all the new insights into life under Avar rule that it provides, I have thoroughly revised the archaeological sections in this book.⁸²

An area of research that has also seen a very dynamic development is the study of central Asian steppe empires.⁸³ This is also due to the fact that new texts and inscriptions have become available, which have provided some missing links in our understanding of the period.⁸⁴ New approaches to the character of steppe polities were developed, in particular, building on the relatively copious Chinese sources. In 1989, only a year after my book on *Die Awaren*, Thomas Barfield's work on *The Perilous Frontier* came out, offering a wide-ranging comparative study of relations between China and nomadic empires.⁸⁵ The chronological and thematic range of his study was of course much broader than that of mine; but in retrospect, some approaches and results of the two books seem interestingly related. Barfield's central hypothesis, the distinction between Mongol raiders and Manchurian conquerors, has justly been criticized. However, the attempt to study nomadic empires and sedentary polities as essentially linked and to concentrate on the impact of their exchanges has proved more fruitful than the traditional insistence on the fundamental alterity of nomadic societies.

In this respect, we have learned much about China-steppe relations, not least, from fundamental work by Nicola Di Cosmo.⁸⁶ This is also highly relevant for the relationship between late Rome and the Huns, or between Byzantium and the Avars. Two opposing attitudes should be avoided: On the one hand, romantic or nationalistic identification with past barbarians was current in German nationalism, which instilled pride in the Germanic forefathers. In a similar way, Hungarian national historiography promoted direct identification with Huns, Avars, and ancient Hungarians, underlined their Otherness, and tended to explain their culture as far as possible by Eastern influences.⁸⁷ On the other hand, steppe peoples have traditionally been regarded as devoid of a creative culture of their own, and whatever features of civilization they had was supposed to have come from sedentary neighbors. This was particularly characteristic of Chinese research on the Eurasian steppes, which derived steppe culture from Chinese influences. Only recently have Chinese scholars taken their distance from such Sinocentric attitudes.⁸⁸ It is ironic that this departure from Sinocentrism in China comes at a time when the late antique barbarians are often being seen more in a Roman cultural matrix than ever before in the West.

One important aspect to be taken into account is the language in which we speak about steppe peoples. To talk about the Avars as nomads may be misleading, because they seem to have become more or less sedentary at some

point. Theirs was not the only form of pastoralism practiced in the region at that time; the romance-speaking Vlachs in the Balkans survived for many centuries as transhumant (seasonally migrating) herdsmen. Thus, “steppe empire” or “mounted warriors” are more adequate labels. Ethnic terminology is a particularly problematic field. Notions such as “people,” “tribe,” “nation,” “race,” and the like have been stamped and colored in multiple ways by recent history. However concrete and realistic these notions may sound, their scholarly use is burdened with a series of assumptions and overtones and may get in the way of a differentiated understanding. A “people,” like a “class” or “layer,” is not a natural given but an abstraction. All these collective terms can serve to organize our knowledge about certain aspects of early medieval life but cannot adequately encompass the multiplicity of forms of existence. They are more valuable not as classificatory but rather as operational concepts. “This concept does not describe a logical class of similar individuals but rather a phenomenon, which in its reality must be continuously re-established.” The “typological concepts” that thereby emerge “are blurred in definition, because the various factors and characteristics cannot always unambiguously indicate whether a given individual falls within the contours of this concept.”⁸⁹

That they do not have the same concepts in mind when dealing with the Avars, Slavs, or Romans is a first difficulty in the communication among historians and is all the more true for interdisciplinary cooperation: a person who is a Slav for a linguist, because he/she spoke Slavonic or had a Slavic name, may have seen himself/herself as thoroughly Avar and may also have been buried in Avar attire. On the other hand, people buried in what for the archaeologist is an Avar grave may have regarded themselves as Slavs or Gepids, or may even have been members of the Byzantine army. This is particularly true when an ethnic classification is based on only a few criteria. There are some Avars who are more Avar than others. In any case, a history of the Avars must simultaneously be a history of the non-Avars, a history of the (territorial and social) space in which Avars became politically active.

The historian has no other recourse than to employ historically grown concepts with their charge of both contemporary and modern shadings. Where possible, the use of early medieval terminology can help to avoid modern overtones. The early medieval shades of meaning that one still has to reckon with at least have the advantage of being more or less part of the object of study. The matter is further complicated by the fact that many Byzantine historians prefer laborious, antiquarian circumlocutions to current terminology. Political semantics are then an important component of all historical research into the early Middle Ages.

By way of clarification, I would like to offer a brief commentary on the choice of terms employed. For the modern notion of a “people” or “ethnic group” medieval

Latin mostly employed the terms *gens*, *populus*, and *natio*. Their meanings overlap, and they were sometimes used interchangeably. *Natio* mostly emphasizes individual origin in a particular country, city, or people and is relatively rarely applied to a collective. *Populus* emphasizes a political or Christian community as constituted by law, shared political responsibility, or religious commitment—above all, the people of Rome.⁹⁰ *Gens*, by contrast, was supposed to be constituted by birth and common origin and could refer to a people, tribe, or even dynasty. In the early Middle Ages, the distinction, never quite clear-cut, was blurred further. This was also due to political change: among the Goths, Franks, or Lombards the two forms of organization, *populus* and *gens*, gradually merged. In any case, the gradual distinctions between the three terms, *populus*, *gens*, and *natio*, are impossible to render in English. The old-fashioned translations using “race” for *gens* and “nation” for *natio* can still be found today but are misleading at best. It does not make sense to call the Avars a “race” or a “nation,” and contemporaries certainly did not have anything like these concepts in mind when they called the Avars *gens* or *natio*.

The concept of “tribe” that is associated with supposed primitiveness will only sparingly be used here. The Avars were a vertically organized macrofederation that controlled vast territories. Like many premodern peoples, they may have comprised a number of tribes or tribal bands. Such tribes are, however, scarcely known, and their political field of play was slight. The situation of the early Slavs was different, and emerging regional groups could perhaps be regarded as “tribes.” I will mostly resort to relatively neutral terms such as “group” or “polity.”

Substantially more expressive is the concept of “barbarian.” The term is problematic because it is charged with prejudices, but so far has proved indispensable in order to identify the multiform host of non-Romans on both sides of the old frontiers of the empire. On the other side we have the “Romans.”⁹¹ If the Greek-speaking Byzantines are often called “Romans” in these pages, this is in accord with their conception of themselves. They saw themselves as *Rhomaioi* or Romans and their Greek language as the Roman language in distinction to Latin. Their political organization was the empire (*imperium*), and on the other side of the frontier stretched the barbarian lands (*barbaricum*), in which the *gentes* (or in Greek, *ethnē*) lived. Roman provincials who no longer (or only nominally) lived under imperial rule (as in the Alps) are also called Romans, although contemporary usage of the term had become fuzzy. Unlike the German language, which allows a differentiation between *Römer* (the citizens of the empire) and *Romanen* (a population preserving some Roman culture and perhaps their Latin language, under barbarian rule), this English translation calls both “Romans.”

Generally speaking, conventional designations as found in the sources are usually used for the names of peoples and tribes. It is self-evident that the Croats,

Bulgars, and Turks of the early Middle Ages are not identical to the present-day nations with these same names. For this reason, artificial terms such as “Proto-Bulgars” will be avoided, just as no one would consider identifying Socrates or Pericles as “Proto-Greeks.” The same is true of the central Asian Turks of the sixth and seventh centuries. The Moravians of the ninth century are often called “Great Moravians” in modern historiography. For the Franks, they simply were *Marahenses* or similar. Only the tenth-century Byzantine author Constantine Porphyrogenitus, according to the usual terminology (*Scythia minor* on Roman territory, *Scythia maior/Megalē Scythia* beyond it) calls their country *Megalē Moravia* as distinct from the land along the Serbian Morava River, which once belonged to imperial territory. The translation “Great Moravia” adds no greater precision but rather invites misunderstandings. But in the case of the “Megalē Bulgaria” of Kuvrat, this same qualifier will be allowed to stand, albeit in quotation marks, because (unlike in the Moravian case) it does assist in establishing a distinction with other politically relevant Bulgarian realms of the period.

In geographical references the use of modern political terminology often cannot be avoided, especially where they do not clearly correspond to a delimited natural landscape or ancient entity. This may call up undesirable national associations but facilitates the easy location of the region in question on a modern map, even though Austria and Hungary, Slovakia and Transylvania, Croatia, Serbia, and Romania did not exist in the period. The same applies to the use of modern place-names, where an English translation is not available, though with a few exceptions. The “treasure of Nagyszentmiklós” has found a home in scholarly literature under its Hungarian designation and will be so named in what follows, even though the place of discovery presently lies in Romania (called Sânnicolau Mare), and the treasure itself in Vienna. The Russian name Malaja Pereščepina for the rich burial site associated with Khan Kuvrat now in the Ukraine (called Mala Pereščepino in Ukrainian) is also still often used in scholarship.

Barbarian organizational forms are difficult to grasp. I will call the Avar Empire, after the title of its ruler, a khaganate. The “khagan” (never, in the contemporary sources, called “khan”) when employed without an attribute (as is common in the sources) always stands for the ruler of the Avars. Turkish and other khagans will be designated as such. Much less clear is the terminology in our sources for Slavic rulers. The leaders of small Slavic communities are often described in rather vague fashion. In Greek sources, the Latin loan word *reges* or *archontes* or *phylarchoi* are used. In the Latin sources, on the other hand, the title *rex* is first used for Samo; Slavic princes are otherwise called *duces*. In this book reference will generally be to princes or leaders, unless the terminology of the sources is used.

What has been said of ethnic names applies even more to personal names. With barbarian names, the Latinized or Grecized version of the sources will be preferred to hypothetical Slavic, Turkic, or Germanic forms, although Greek or Latin endings will generally be dropped. Many spellings are still disputed. Whether Greek *chaganos* and Latin *caganus* are best rendered with *khagan*, *chagan*, *qagan*, or even *qayan* is a matter of philological debate. In such cases the most established spellings (in this case, *khagan*) will usually be preferred. The same goes for the reproduction of Greek names; in most cases, English-style Latinization of Greek names is used here. As with all other non-Latin scripts, I have transcribed Greek terms or short quotes in Latin. Transcriptions of Byzantine Greek are, however, deceptive as concerns phonetic valence; the emperor Heraclius was spelled in the classical manner as *Herakleios*, but pronounced as *Iraklios*. A phonetic rendering of Greek is, however, used for barbarian names: otherwise we would have to call the Avars *Abars* and the Slavs *Sklab(ene)s*. For transcriptions of Chinese names, I have had to switch from the old Wade-Giles system to simple Pinyin, without diacritic signs. Still, spelling and choosing the right name form always implies controversial choices. The same goes for many aspects of writing a book, and I hope for the readers' understanding wherever they would have decided differently.

THE AVAR MIGRATION

Avar history in Europe began with an embassy sent to Constantinople from the steppes north of the Caucasus in the winter of 557/58. The emperor Justinian, who had successfully governed the Roman Empire for more than thirty years, gave them a friendly reception. They arrived in a situation in which the Balkan provinces had come under pressure from a number of barbarian peoples living beyond the northern frontiers, so that the Avars were regarded as a valuable ally. This chapter discusses where they had come from and under which circumstances; and it recounts the story of their advance in eastern Europe until their final settlement in the Carpathian Basin.

2.1 Constantinople 558

The first thing that struck the Greeks about the Avars was their long pigtails, dirty and braided *à la chinoise*. In the metropolis of Constantinople, where foreigners from every country came and went, the appearance of the first Avar delegation drew a crowd. “The whole city ran up to see them, since they had never seen such a people before. For they wore their hair very long in the back, tied with ribbons and braided, while their other clothing was similar to that of the other Huns,” reports Theophanes. This occurred in or around January 558.¹

Their hairstyle is also the only feature that the contemporary Agathias communicates about the Avars in his detailed history of the years 552–59. The

Frankish kings, he states, let their hair grow long. “It is not, however, like that of the Turks and Avars, unkempt, dry and dirty, and tied up in an unsightly knot.”² From this limited interest one almost gets the impression that the arrival of the newcomers from the east was an occasion for gossip rather than for high-level politics. Initially the Byzantines probably underestimated the significance of these exotic strangers, who “in flight from their country” had come to the frontiers of the empire, as Theophanes mentions. The political background of the entry of the Avars on the scene is explained by Menander. “After many wanderings they came to the Alans and begged Sarosius, the leader of the Alans, that he bring them to the attention of the Romans. Sarosius informed Germanus’s son Justin, who at that time was general of the forces in Lazica, about the Avars, Justin told Justinian, and the Emperor ordered the general to send the embassy of the tribe to Byzantium.”³ The Avars were then encamped in the steppes north of the Caucasus and established contact through the Alans who lived in the Caucasus region. After some bureaucratic delay, the ambassadors under Kandikh could set out for Constantinople.

If we may trust the account of the chronicler, the ambassador then boasted before the emperor as coming from “the bravest of all peoples.” He made no mention of the fact that his army had crossed half the Asian continent in flight and offered the emperor an alliance with the “unconquered” Avars. They could exterminate all the enemies of the empire, but obviously only on the condition that they receive “the most valuable gifts, yearly payments and very fertile land to inhabit.”⁴ The emperor, after consultation with his privy council, accepted the offer. “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.” With final agreement on the alliance, Justinian sent a certain *spatharius* Valentinus to the Avars, who was to incite them “to war against the enemies of the Romans.”⁵

This procedure was in no way exceptional. Almost all barbarian peoples were associated with the Roman Empire in similar fashion. Annual payments from Byzantium permitted both lesser and greater “Scythian” military leaders to consolidate their authority in return for military support or a suspension of plundering. Thus, imperial diplomacy was able to create a complex system of power groups in competition with one another on the northern frontier. This did not prevent recurrent raids into the empire. Yet, since the fall of Attila’s empire roughly a century earlier, none of the barbarian kingdoms had been able to establish hegemony over the northern barbarians and pose a real threat to Byzantium. The sons of Attila, Goths, Bulgars, Cutrigurs, Utigurs, Antes, and Slavs had succeeded one another in incursions into Roman territory. But when one of the adversaries threatened to become too

dangerous, imperial diplomacy always succeeded in stirring up other groups against it.

With this low-profile policy on the northern frontier it proved possible for Justinian to free up money and troops for his ambitious plans for the west. While Roman armies conquered Vandal North Africa, Ostrogothic Italy, as well as portions of Spain, and in the east fought against the Persians, the Balkan Peninsula remained the preferred target of barbarian depredation: in 540 and 544 by the Bulgarian “Huns,” in 545 by Slavs, who again made incursions in 548 and 550–52, at one occasion with the aid of the Gepids. In 551 the Cutrigurs invaded.⁶ The emperor reacted to this with the construction of fortifications at a forced pace. In particular, the frontier forts along the Danube were reinforced. Here, excavations reveal that barbarian federates were often responsible for the defense of the provinces. The composition of the garrisons reflects two centuries of shifting history.⁷ Between Singidunum/Belgrade and the mouth of the Danube lay, according to Procopius, over a hundred towns and fortresses, a previously unmatched concentration, with a distance of four to six miles between posts. Even toward the close of the sixth century Theophylact mentions the names of twenty-four such fortified sites in the course of recounting events of the war.⁸

The outcome of this kind of defense was a stalemate. The barbarians scarcely succeeded in occupying fortresses along the frontier (*limes*), let alone important towns in the interior of the provinces. On the other hand, Roman life in the Balkan Peninsula was under pressure because of the frequent incursions. Thrace, once one of the most important areas for imperial troop recruitment, lost significantly in population and economic power. “Illyria and all of Thrace, that is, from the Ionian Gulf to the suburbs of Constantinople, including Greece and the Chersonese, were overrun by the Huns, Slavs and Antes, almost every year, from the time when Justinian took over the Roman Empire; and intolerable things they did to the inhabitants. For in each of these incursions, I should say, more than two hundred thousand Romans were slain or enslaved, so that all this country became a desert like that of Scythia.” So wrote Procopius in his *Secret History*.⁹ Even if hatred of “the prince of demons” prompts the author to gross exaggeration, the hinterland of the imperial capital had indeed become the target of repeated barbarian attacks.

At the end of his reign, when Justinian had realized almost all his foreign policy objectives, the price of his success became ever more apparent. Procopius’s devastating account in the *Secret History* is only one expression of the growing criticism, which also left traces in other historians. Agathias deplores the decay and dispersion of the Roman army that the aging emperor had permitted. Instead of more than six hundred thousand men, only some 150,000 were then under arms, neglected and malcontent, because the emperor

preferred to pacify the barbarians with diplomacy and gifts. Jordanes concludes his *Roman History* with a reference to the everyday incursions of the “Bulgars, Antes and Slavs” and with a resigned recollection of past glories.¹⁰ In similar fashion, although with more respect, Menander accounts for the alliance with the Avars: “Now he [Justinian] was an old man, and his bold and warlike spirit had become feeble, and he sought ways other than war to ward off the power of the barbarians.”¹¹

However, the reasons for the decline of the Balkan provinces lay deeper. The age of Justinian had indeed brought a certain prosperity. Not only fortified walls but also huge churches and other buildings were erected. The cities suffered less from the barbarian assaults than the hinterland. Still, the weakening of the rural regions had economic consequences. The small farmers had to struggle desperately for their survival. Justinian’s legislation sought to protect them against the great demesnes, which still threatened their existence in many regions. In the Danube provinces the villa organization of late Antiquity was already in the process of dissolution.¹² The great property-holders were affected by an increasing shortage of labor. These troubled times favored the flight of slaves and colons, and social tensions became more acute. Runaway slaves, dispossessed peasants, poverty-stricken townspeople, rebellious soldiers, and scattered barbarians formed bands of *scamarae*, armed robbers.¹³ This *ataktos bios*, unregulated life, against which military measures were to be mounted through a decree of 569, undermined Roman order and furthered the gradual barbarization of the countryside.

Since the middle of the sixth century there had also been the plague, which visited the empire in cycles: a demographic shock that spurred depopulation.¹⁴ In this situation the late Roman apparatus of state tended to become counter-productive. The decimated populace, struggling with economic difficulties, was exposed to increased pressure of taxation. Military expenses grew as the empire sought to keep things under control. Occasional tax and debt relief after devastating invasions could not check this cataclysmic downward spiral.

That a barbarian incursion may have been seen by many as more tolerable than the appearance of a tax official is a point made by John the Lydian.¹⁵ Procopius worried that Roman citizens would sooner cross over to the barbarians than pay their taxes. Pope Gregory would later make the same observation.¹⁶ During Maurice’s Balkan wars the residents of Asemus expelled the emperor’s brother from the city, when he tried to raise troops there.¹⁷ Obviously it should not be concluded from such cautionary examples that the inhabitants of the Balkan provinces in general would have preferred barbarian rule.¹⁸ Yet for many under these circumstances there may have been little motivation to defend Roman order on the Danube at all costs.

The weakness of the Roman position in the Balkans became evident in events of the year 559, when the Avars were still encamped on the steppes beyond the Caucasus. For seven years relative peace had reigned in the Balkan provinces; at least no information has come down on any larger barbarian incursion during this period. In the winter of 558–59 the Cutrigur Huns under Zabergan and some Slavic bands crossed the Danube. While part of the invaders turned toward Greece, Zabergan's army marched on Constantinople and established itself on the outskirts of the capital. The emperor did not have a sufficient number of troops at his disposal to drive off the pillaging barbarians. Finally Belisarius, the aged victor over the Vandals and Goths, had to march out against the barbarian horsemen with a small elite troop and a host of peasants. But neither his victory nor some further successful skirmishes were sufficient to drive the Cutrigurs off. Justinian finally had to secure their withdrawal with gold.¹⁹

The emperor now turned to the neighbors of the Cutrigurs, the Utigurs under Sandilkh, likewise a Hunnic people, and tried to incite them to an attack on Zabergan.

Justinian added to his messages to Sandilkh that if he destroyed the Cutrigurs the Emperor would transfer to him all the yearly tribute-monies that were paid by the Roman Empire to Zabergan. Therefore, Sandilkh, who wished to be on friendly terms with the Romans, replied that utterly 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. Nevertheless, we shall deprive the Cutrigurs of their horses and take possession of them ourselves, so that without their mounts they will be unable to pillage the Romans." This Justinian had asked them to do.²⁰

In Agathias's account Sandilkh has less compunction in attacking his Cutrigur neighbors. "And so from that time onwards both peoples continued to make war against each other for a very long period of time and they became increasingly hostile as a result. On some occasions they would confine themselves to predatory incursions, on others they would resort to open warfare, until they have so weakened themselves and their numbers have become so seriously depleted that they have lost their ethnic identity. The scattered remnant of these Hunnic tribes has in fact been reduced to servitude in the lands of other peoples whose names they have assumed."²¹ The time had come for the Avars, who in 559 apparently did not yet figure in the calculations of the besieged emperor.

2.2 The Empire and the Steppe Peoples

The realms of the Scythians, which Herodotus had described, had long since disappeared from the steppes on the northern shores of the Black Sea. Yet a millennium after the classical geographer the Byzantines still viewed the inhabitants of the lands beyond the *Pontos Euxeinos* as Scythians, which had become an ethnographic umbrella term. Sarmatians, Goths, and Huns had succeeded one another in ruling over parts of the vast steppes of present-day southern Russia and Ukraine. They had rarely managed to unify the European steppes in one empire; in that respect, Attila's empire had been the exception, not the rule. After its fall in 453–54, no power succeeded in winning a position of preeminence on the northern Roman frontier. While conditions were stabilizing farther west with the rise of the Frankish kingdom, a multitude of short-lived barbarian kingdoms competed north of the lower Danube.

It appeared even to Roman observers that the “Scythians” were in reality a host of different peoples that contended with each other for the best launching point for raids into imperial territory.

All these peoples were referred to by the general name of Scythians or Huns, whereas individual tribes had their own particular names, rooted in ancestral tradition, such as Cutrigurs, Utigurs, Ultizurs, Burugundi and so on and so forth. . . . But their stay was destined to be a brief one, and at the end of it they vanished without leaving a trace of themselves. This fact is illustrated by the case of the Ultizurs and the Burugundi who were well-known right up to the time of Emperor Leo [457–74] . . . but whom in our day and age we neither know nor, I imagine, are likely to, since they have either perished or migrated to the ends of the earth.²²

Procopius, the historian of Justinian's wars, concludes his depiction of the Black Sea peoples with the statement that he had not been able to indicate exact distances. Beyond the Black Sea lived great hosts of barbarians, of whom only a few were known to the Romans as a result of embassies. Neither was more precise information to be found in the older geographers.²³ Yet in Justinian's time there flourished ethnographical digressions that attempted to label the multiplicity of barbarian peoples for the readers of historical works. More or less extensive ethnographical descriptions are preserved in Jordanes, Procopius, Agathias, Evagrius, and the so-called *Ecclesiastical History of Zacharias Rhetor*, written in Syriac in the 560s. Much of this is based on information that had been obtained through diplomatic exchanges. From a remark by Procopius we may assume that the names of the Cutrigurs and Utigurs were first heard in Constantinople in 547–48, and this via an embassy from the Crimean

Goths.²⁴ Some information came from the accounts of eyewitnesses. An artisan from Anatolian Amida, who had been bought by north Caucasian “Huns” after the conquest of his town by the Persians, supplied the author of the *Ecclesiastical History* with material for one such ethnographical digression. Additional material was drawn by this author from unknown written sources, in particular, a list of sixteen peoples on the far side of the Caucasus: “And beyond the [Caspian] Gates are the Burgar, a pagan and barbarian people with their own language, and they have cities. There are the Alans, who have five cities. There are the people of the region of Dadu, who live in the mountains and have fortresses. There are the Onogur, a tent-dwelling people, the Ogur, the Sabir, the Burgar, the Khorthrigor, the Avar, the Khasir, the Dirmar, the Sarurgur, the Bagarsik, the Khulas, the Abdel, the Ephthalite: these thirteen peoples are tent-dwellers, living on the meat of cattle, fish and wild animals and by weapons.” Beyond them, the text enumerates the tribes of the pigmies, of the dog-men, and the Amazons.²⁵ This disputed catalog of peoples illustrates the difficulties with which any historical ethnography of the steppe zone must contend. The passage is preserved in the Syriac translation of a Greek chronicle compilation going up to the end of the 560s, which in turn built on the fifth-century *Ecclesiastical History* by Zacharias Rhetor. It was even hypothesized that the Greek original goes back to the Middle Persian version of an even older Greek text. If we reflect on how many variants of Hunnic or Turkic names even relatively well-transmitted Greek texts offer, we will use this valuable source with caution. Much material is Justinianic, and the list of peoples certainly reflects the situation in the mid-sixth century.²⁶

Modern research strives meticulously to reconcile the often contradictory statements of individual authors. Even a critical review of the dispersed source material that has been preserved in a dozen languages has required enormous scholarly effort.²⁷ Yet until now scholars have not fully succeeded in clarifying the identity, relationships, and distinctiveness of the peoples whose names are known; debates continue. This difficulty becomes evident in a consideration of those Huns whom the Avars encountered on the Black Sea. Most of them bore similarly constructed names; along with the previously mentioned Cutrigurs and Utigurs we know of Onogurs, Saragurs, and Ogurs, and to these are added some similar names that are not unambiguously classifiable.²⁸ In addition there are the Bulgars, whose close association with the “Ogur” peoples is known from a series of texts. According to Theophanes, Khan Kuvrat ruled in Pontic “Great Bulgaria” over the Onogur-Bulgars and the related tribe of the Cutrigurs.²⁹ Soon, of all these names only that of the Bulgars would remain in the European consciousness.

From a later perspective, the *-gur* peoples on the Black Sea thus have been considered as part of the early history of the Bulgarians. When at the end of the

fifth century the Byzantines first had to deal with the Bulgars, the latter by no means had a comparable significance. They caused Theoderic some difficulties before he became known as “the Great,” and their bands crisscrossed the Balkans as affiliates of the Roman army or, more often, as pillagers.³⁰ It is curious that it is above all the Latin sources that frequently employ the name of the Bulgars for this period, among them, Ennodius in his panegyric for Theoderic, Jordanes in his *Getica*, and the *Chronicles* of Cassiodorus and of Marcellinus Comes. In the Ostrogothic kingdom, people seem to have been well informed about their former opponents. On the other hand, the Greek chroniclers usually speak generally of “Huns.” Only John Malalas and John of Antioch, and a few later Greek histories, mention the name of the Bulgars in the sixth century, while Priscus, Procopius, Evagrius, and Agathias do not employ it.³¹ When the last-named authors look for greater precision than that offered by the collective term “Huns,” they speak of Cutrigurs, Utigurs, and similar peoples.

After the fall of Attila’s empire and the withdrawal of the Goths toward the West, the name “Huns” became increasingly synonymous with the older “Scythians” as a general designation for the steppe peoples. In fact, there is probably no more accurate term for the Pontic steppe warriors in the age of Justinian than simply to call them “Huns.” In Ostrogothic Italy matters were simpler, since the Bulgars were clearly the only group from the steppe apart from Attila’s Huns with which the Goths had come into closer contact. The well-informed historians of the East knew that they were dealing with a variety of shifting groupings.

Behind all this, there was a relatively homogeneous stratum of warriors, who were the agents in the formation of the various powers. They had coalesced in the second half of the fifth century from three groups. The first was those Huns of Attila who had turned back from the Carpathian Basin to the Black Sea, initially under the leadership of the sons of the great king of the Huns. Jordanes knew of such a return migration. The later Bulgarian tradition counted Attila’s son Irnik/Ernak among the first Bulgarian princes.³² Secondly, newcomers arrived from the east in the 460s. A fragment of Priscus recounts: “About that time the Saragurs, Ogurs, and Onogurs sent envoys to the eastern Romans. These peoples had been driven from their homeland after a battle with the Sabirs, who in turn had been displaced by the Avars.” In the forest belt of southern Russia the Saragurs encountered the Hunnic Akatzirs, erstwhile subjects of Attila, and subjugated them after lengthy battles.³³ All the peoples implicated in these migrations appear in Priscus for the first time and are not named again for quite some time. We will return to the question of the Avars, most probably understood here as the central Asian Rouran.

Thirdly, Procopius emphasizes the continuity of “Hun” settlement on the Maeotis, the Sea of Azov, so that it cannot have been only migrants from the east

who had an impact on the new ethnic landscape in the region. This corresponds to the archaeological evidence, at least west of the Maeotis, as summarized by Florin Curta: “The archaeological evidence suggests that the sixth- and early seventh-century burials in the Black Sea lowlands were not of nomads coming from afar, but of members of the communities that occupied the settlements at the interface between the steppe and the forest-belts.”³⁴ The *-gur* groups from the east were, however, the name-giving element, even though it would not be until the middle of the sixth century that the bearers of such names became politically active on a large scale. Those Huns who contributed to the instability of the Balkan provinces into the third decade of the sixth century were called Bulgars. Sometime before 547–48 the Cutrigurs assumed the initiative. At about the same time, before 552, the Onogurs made their presence felt by a raid on the Caucasus region. Somewhat later, in 568, a Byzantine envoy encountered Ogurs on the lower course of the Volga who were subjects of the Turkish khagan.³⁵ Conversely, we hear little of Bulgars in this region.

The three lists of peoples that were compiled after the middle of the sixth century supplement this picture, albeit in quite contradictory fashion. Among the “numerous Hunnic peoples” north of the Caucasus near the Sabirs, Procopius mentions only the Utigurs, who lived east of the Sea of Azov, and the Cutrigurs who had crossed to settle on the other side.³⁶ Besides these, he knows of the Antes in the northwest and the “Tetraxitic” Goths who lived in the Crimea and on the Kerch Peninsula. Substantially more detailed is Jordanes. Between the Dniester and the Dnieper, he writes, live the Antes, north of them the Akatzirs already known from Attila’s time.³⁷ Beyond these, north of the Black Sea, are the Bulgars. In the region around the Crimean port of Cherson are the Hunnic Altziagirs; on the Sea of Azov, the Hunugurs, of whom Jordanes has a bit to say, above all that they once dwelled in the Balkan provinces. However, this may also refer to the (Crimean) Goths named in the same context. The Sabirs complement this rather hard-to-follow digression in Jordanes’s Gothic history.³⁸ The list by the so-called Zacharias Rhetor is little more than a directory of steppe peoples. The *Bwrggr*/Bulgars are mentioned twice north of the Caucasus, both among town dwellers and among nomads. Also to be counted among the latter are the Onogurs, Ogurs, Sabirs, Cutrigurs, and Saragurs.³⁹ The Utigurs seem to have been left out.

The three lists are not easy to harmonize. For example, the identification of the Hunugurs in Jordanes with the Onogurs is debatable. By the Sea of Azov one would actually expect Cutrigurs and Utigurs. Or are these hidden behind the Bulgars of Jordanes? It is customary to resolve this puzzle by viewing the Onogurs and usually also the Cutrigurs and Utigurs as Bulgars or at least Bulgar tribes. On the other hand, some scholars have classified the Bulgars as a

tribe in the Onogur federation.⁴⁰ The catch in all these identifications is that they project the conditions of the seventh century back onto the sixth. What Theophanes wrote in the ninth century about the Bulgars of the seventh reflects a change in circumstances. The second Bulgar ethnogenesis, after the end of Avar and Turkish hegemony in the seventh century, united some of the barbarian groups that had remained north of the Black Sea under Khan Kuvrat's rule. In Justinian's time neither "Bulgar" nor "Onogur" is attested as an umbrella term. Jordanes names the Bulgars and Onogurs as next to each other; Zacharias adds the Cutrigurs and others. All these peoples were commonly regarded as Huns. While in the course of the seventh century the multiplicity of similar names in the Black Sea steppes disappeared again, it persisted in the central Asian steppe. Over time Toquz-Oguz, Oguzes, Uyghurs, Ghuzz, and others appeared on the scene.

It is evident that these peoples drew on a common set of traditions. For the Cutrigurs and Utigurs there is evidence that they saw themselves as allied and speaking the same language, and believed they had been separated from a greater alliance to which they had once belonged.⁴¹ Most striking is the shared system of denomination and the often regular construction of *-gur* names. The first part of the compound is often a number or color word. The Onogurs were then the "ten Ogurs," Utur-gur could be understood as "thirty," Kutur-gur and Toquz-Oguz as "nine Ogurs," Saragurs as "white Ogurs."⁴² The collective suffix *-gur*, or rather *-ghur*, is very frequent among ancient Turks.⁴³ The alternative endings, *-gur* and *-guz*, correspond to two linguistic groups of the Turkic language, Oguric and Common Turkic. Most scholars agree that *ogur* meant something like "tribe." Sometimes the word is connected to Turkic *oq*, "arrow," which seems to be confirmed by the Chinese *Tang shu*: "The khagan divides his realm into ten tribes; each tribe has a leader to whom he sends an arrow. The name [of these ten men] was 'the ten shê'; they were also called 'the ten arrows.'"⁴⁴ Archaeological observations have been interpreted to indicate that the arrow served as a symbol of rank among the Avars.⁴⁵

What explains these striking commonalities of *-gur* peoples? The identity or nonidentity of all these peoples (and others, for instance Hungarians and Ugrians) was affirmed in ever new combinations and as promptly rejected by others.⁴⁶ These various attempts cannot be treated here in detail. Yet even peoples with similar or corresponding names can often hardly be associated, for instance, the Onogurs of the Greek sources and the On oq of Turkic inscriptions. The former, who played a secondary role in the Caucasian foothills in the sixth century, became part of the Bulgar realm during the reign of Kuvrat. The On oq appear in the Orkhon inscriptions as enemies of the west Turkish khaganate, were conquered, "settled and organized," and thereafter

passed as part of the “united Turkish peoples,” as one of the Turkish khagan’s “own peoples.”⁴⁷ The Oguz and Toquz-Oguz in the north were also defeated but continued to be distinctive entities. This multitude of similar names could be interpreted as pointing to a consistent tribal grouping. However, “Ogur” does not usually appear as a common denominator for all these peoples; the Ogurs are rather mentioned as one people among others, for instance, in Priscus and Menander.⁴⁸ Rather, the *-gur* peoples belonged to different empires, federations, or loose groupings; Peter Golden has described them as “stateless nomads,” with little propensity for constructing strong realms of their own. They may well have emerged from the loose grouping called Tiele (T’ie-leh) in Chinese sources.⁴⁹ In eastern Europe, they were regarded as “Huns” in the sixth century, and sometimes as “Bulgars” in the seventh. They also appeared in the Common Turkic form (*-guz*) in Turkish realms; with the Uyghurs, their onomastic principle finally became imperial.

This spread of a narrow set of ethnic names in ever-new but similar variants, often under foreign leadership, is remarkable. The name “Hun” was diffused through several powerful states or empires that bore that name between Mongolia, the northern periphery of Persia, and the eastern European steppes.⁵⁰ “Ogur” groupings, on the other hand, are attested in all the known steppe empires of the period, usually without assuming supreme power. Rather, they represented a looser form of cohesion typically organized in regional polities. They could also relatively easily be integrated into emerging empires. The spread of “Ogur” names can thus be explained by the success of a flexible mode of organization and identification that was compatible with various political contexts, much better than by some common ethnic origin. North of the Black Sea, it seems that like so many other steppe peoples in that region, the *-gur* peoples had arrived as fugitives from central Asia, and they certainly did not constitute a politically active tribal confederation. As we will see, perhaps untypically, their traces disappear rather quickly in the Avar Empire.

The question of identification of people with similar names in different regions or periods is, in any case, often unsolvable. When are similar-sounding names variants of the same name? When do they denote different tribes? The problem lies in establishing analogies between Turkic names and their representation in texts in many languages that adapt them to their phonetic system, in particular, Chinese. To take just one example: the Romans were generally called *rōm* or *rūm* by their Eastern neighbors, which turned to *hrōm* or *frōm* in Middle Persian, and was then taken over as *purum* by the Turks and as *fulin* by the Chinese. Additionally, the Chinese often sought to translate names into their language, or replaced them with a similarly sounding Chinese word that seemed to fit: for instance, the Rouran were also called Ruanruan,

“wriggling worms.” Besides, these Chinese name forms may also differ widely between different texts.⁵¹ And if we can establish an equation, when does the same name also signal political or ethnic continuity? Static models of classification or ethnic genealogies cannot describe such a dynamic and often ambiguous reality. Thus, the historian cannot assume that a given name always designates the same people. Even more than with single tribes or peoples, the umbrella terms employed in Greek and Byzantine literature, such as “Huns,” represent an abstraction: “The names of alliances of a higher order (Galatians, Thracians, Scythians, etc.) emanate from reality but at the same time serve more frequently than those of individual tribes as typological concepts in the service of classificatory order. For that reason they more easily distance themselves from reality and their use also becomes a basis for speculation,” as Dieter Timpe describes the methods of ancient ethnography. One and the same name can now serve as the proper name of a people, now be employed to identify an ethnographic ideal type.⁵² Still, this rather flexible and often disorderly matrix of social identity and difference did serve to distinguish between collective actors, both in self-definitions and outside perceptions. This was what I would call ethnicity: a system of establishing cognitive distinctions between collective social actors understood as natural communities. Ethnic identities were then created by a series of self- and outside identifications in a circuit of interaction and communication.⁵³ There is no “real” ethnicity behind ethnonyms in our sources that could be objectively defined by modern categories of common blood, genes, or language.

Of the Black Sea peoples we can thus only say this: In the sixth century the Onogurs were just as little a Bulgar tribe as the Bulgars an Onogur tribe. Which peoples considered themselves related, or at least were considered as such, can be determined in only a few cases (Cutrigurs and Utigurs in the sixth century, Bulgars, Onogurs/Hunnogundurs, and Cutrigurs in the seventh century). It is possible that this was an expression of a parallel descent from “ogur”-organized groups, but we have no proof for that. In any case, they represent a common model of midrange political organization and often appear as subject groups of a more powerful empire. They could keep their identity in foreign empires; however, in the long run many of these names disappeared under Avar and Turkish rule. Agathias says about Utigurs and Cutrigurs, weakened by their conflict, that “the scattered remnant of these Hunnic tribes has in fact been reduced to servitude in the lands of other peoples whose names they have assumed.”⁵⁴ The multiplicity of names of the sixth century gradually disappeared north of the Black Sea. In the seventh century the name “Bulgars” became common among them, or at least that is the retrospective impression we gather from the mostly later sources.⁵⁵

2.3 Fugitives from the East

Who were the pigtailed aliens from the steppe who wanted to do business with the aging emperor Justinian? The Byzantines did not fail to gather information about where they had come from. At that time contacts with the east were quite intense. Constantinople had long sought dependable allies behind the back of its archenemy, the Persians. Long-distance trade also mattered. The Persians controlled a stretch of the Silk Road, and by the first half of the sixth century, they had succeeded in driving up the price of the precious fabric considerably. This is one reason why the central Eurasian steppes became so important for the Byzantines, and we have much more information about them in the historiography of the sixth century than in most classical centuries; the Byzantines also sought direct contacts with India, to which the geographical work by Cosmas Indicopleustes attests.⁵⁶

For some time in the fifth and sixth centuries, the dominating power in central Asia were the Rouran (spelt Juan-juan in older literature), known from Chinese sources. After the dissolution of the Han Empire in China, they ruled the steppes of Mongolia and the region around the Tian Shan and Altai Mountains, and thus controlled the trade routes of the Tarim Basin, much as the Xiongnu (Hsiung-nu) had done before them. They confronted the Chinese Empire of the Northern Wei, itself founded by steppe warriors, the Tuoba branch of the Xianbei (Hsien-pi). From the Xianbei, the Rouran rulers had adopted the sublime title khagan, which soon became a mark of distinction in the steppe. It is very likely that they called themselves, or at least were called, Avars, but this is not consensual.⁵⁷

The legend about the origin of the Rouran transmitted in the Chinese *Wei shu*, the official history of the Northern Wei dynasty, is derogatory to say the least and probably goes back to Tuoba contempt for them.⁵⁸ A former slave, called Mugulü because of his bald head, was to be decapitated and fled into the desert. “He assembled more than a hundred fugitive slaves and they attached themselves to the tribe of Hetulin. After Mugulü died, his son, Cheluhui, who was a rugged man, began to acquire his own tribal horde who called themselves Rouran, but they were subject to the Tuoba Xianbei. Later Emperor Shizu [of Northern Wei, 424–51] considered that they were ignorant and shaped like worms, and so changed their name into Ruru.” They were “mixed barbarians from outside the barrier,” as the *Nan Qi shu* (History of the Southern Qi Dynasty) states.⁵⁹ As Peter Golden argues, “the Rouran were undoubtedly polyglot and their ‘empire’ contained a variety of peoples.” Their name “was not an ethnonym but a sobriquet . . . that the ruling house took and which was picked up and used as an ethnonym.”⁶⁰

After times of inner conflict, Anagui Khagan, undisputed ruler from 521, restored Rouran power. A legend tells how he arrogantly refused a marriage



MAP 1. The Eurasian Steppes



alliance with his Turkish subjects, who consequently rose against him; the khaganate of the Rouran fell in 552–55, after crushing defeats against the Turks. Their empire, and their elites, disintegrated into various groups who opted for different strategies of survival; but most of them met a violent end. The account found in the *Bei shi* (History of the Northern Dynasties) provides an instructive example for the demise of a steppe empire. In 552, “Anagui was destroyed by the Tujue (T’u-küe)/Turks and killed himself. Having the support of the horde, the crown-prince, Anluochen, together with Dengzhu, Sili, Anagui’s younger male cousin, and Kuti, the son of Dengzhu, fled to the Northern Qi dynasty. The remnant forces established Tiefu, the second son of Dengzhu, as lord.”⁶¹ In 553, the Qi emperor sent Kuti back, and Tiefu was killed by the Khitan, who installed Dengzhu as the ruler. He was killed in turn by the aristocratic opposition and succeeded by his son Kuti. In the same year, the Turks attacked again, and Kuti fled once more to China “with his entire people.” The Northern Qi emperor sent an army northwards to push back the Turks, dethroned Kuti, and put Anluochen in his place. He promptly rebelled against the Chinese but was defeated: “Anluochen, with his wives, sons, and over thirty thousand followers were captured alive,” and the Chinese also defeated further remaining Rouran groups. In the meantime, Anagui’s uncle Dengshuzi had been raised by yet another part of the Rouran, was defeated by the Tujue, and fled to the Western Wei; but the Turks required them to be killed, whereupon three thousand men including Dengshuzi were slaughtered.⁶² The last resistance was quelled in 555; a small group of Rouran remained under Turkish rule. The rather tedious narrative of inner conflict, desperate resistance, military disasters, and cruel massacres makes it clear that *the Rouran/Avars* cannot have migrated to Europe in any sufficient strength to establish themselves there. Their hordes were scattered, and most prominent members of the ruling dynasty were dead. The title khagan passed to the Ashina clan, rulers of the Tujue. What is remarkable is that unlike other steppe peoples, the name quickly disappeared after the fall of the Rouran empire, just as it happened after the dissolution of the Avar realm a quarter of a millennium later.

The new Turkish power quickly outdid their previous masters, swept to the southwest, and around 560 also destroyed the kingdom of the Hephthalites, a “Hunnic” dynasty that ruled over the Sogdian lands between the rivers Oxus/Amu Darja and Jaxartes/Syr Darja. Thus, they had controlled a number of flourishing trading cities at the hub between China, India, Persia, and the West, and lived in a succession of conflicts and alliances with the Sassanian rulers of Iran. Whatever the origin of this people, they “made use of the old imperial name of Huns” and were generally regarded as such by contemporary authors; Procopius called them “White Huns.”⁶³

Byzantium had hopes for an alliance with the new Turk Empire against the Persians, and diplomatic contacts were close. "In this way the Turkish people became friends of the Romans and established these relations with our state," as Menander summarizes.⁶⁴ The Turks also informed the Byzantines about their views on the Avar migration. For decades the Turkish khagans were to consider the Avars, whom they called Varchonites, as their rightful subjects. As late as the 570s Turxanthus accused a Roman envoy of having signed a pact with his runaway slaves, the Varchonites.⁶⁵ In 568 Justin II asked the Turkish envoy, the Sogdian Maniakh, how many Avars had absconded and how many remained under Turkish rule. "There are some who still adhere to us; those who fled number, I think, around twenty thousand," he replied.⁶⁶ Unlike many fantastic numbers in our sources from the period, the Sogdian's information seems rather plausible. That the Avars were not quite so unconquered as Kandikh asserted before Justinian was widely known in Byzantium and was repeatedly thrown back at them. The envoy Comentiolus told the khagan to his face in 584 that his Avars had initially been accommodated by the Romans as refugees, "when your part split off and separated from the original eastern tribe."⁶⁷ The khagan became so enraged over this awkward truth that he almost had the envoy executed. At the end of the century, the military commander Priscus still seized on this old accusation. In Theophylact we find an explanatory digression at this point, which will be dealt with below.⁶⁸ Evagrius Scholasticus, whose *Ecclesiastical History* was finished in ca. 592, also states: "The Avars are a Scythian people, one of the wagon-dwellers who range across the planes over there beyond the Caucasus; they had fled en masse from their neighbours, the Turks, after being ill-treated by them, and had come to the Bosphorus."⁶⁹ Theodore Syncellus also wrote in 626 that the Avars under Baian had come to Europe as fugitives.⁷⁰

There can be no doubt that the "Avars" who were encamped in the Caucasus region in 558 had fled from the Turkish expansion in central Asia. In so doing, they had split their group, which was called *Uarkhonitai* by the Turks, and many had remained behind under Turkish rule. There is also evidence that shortly after 580 more Varchonite tribes left the east for Europe and joined the Avar khaganate.⁷¹ The circumstances of the Avar migration are described in a little-noted fragment from Menander in the *Excerpta de sententiis*. "When Sizabulus, the leader of the Turks, learned of the flight of the Avars and the damage they had caused to Turkish possessions at their departure," he declared that the Avars would not escape the Turkish swords. "When I have ended the war with the Hephthalites, I shall attack the Avars and they shall not escape my might."⁷²

The refugees had thus used the war of the Turks against the Hephthalites to escape from the sphere of Turkish power. This means that even before the destruction of the Hephthalite polity they had been Turkish tributaries. Whether

they defected from the Turkish army or broke out from the hinterland in the latter's absence cannot be determined. The Turks were clearly resentful that the Varchonite tributaries had made off at such a decisive moment. Turxanthus threatened to crush them like ants beneath the hooves of the Turkish horses, and the Avars themselves were apparently not comfortable with thoughts of their former masters.⁷³

The flight from the Turks was not, however, the first that the West had heard about "Avars." Nearly a century earlier Priscus mentions them as a link in the chain that had pushed the Ogurs and other peoples toward the Black Sea. Two variants complicate this account. In the *Excerpta de legationibus* we learn only that the Avars, driven off by the peoples by the ocean, came up against the Sabirs.⁷⁴ The entry for the "Avars" in the *Suda Lexicon* that was compiled about the year 1000 contains another version of Priscus's text, which gives the story a mythological turn: The peoples that lived by the ocean shore were driven off by a multitude of man-eating griffins and by the fog that rose from the ocean, and as a consequence occupied the land of the Avars.⁷⁵ This story of remote mythical horror picks up elements from an ancient Scythian tale that Herodotus had already told of the Hyperboreans who lived by the northern sea.⁷⁶

2.4 Avars or Pseudo-Avars?

If we only had the above cited sources on the migration of the Avars, we would still know more about their origins than is the case for many other peoples that suddenly appeared on the frontiers of the empire out of unfathomable Scythia. Yet Theophylact, who wrote more than two generations later with the aid of excellent sources (although he was often unsure of their correct order), has passed along substantially more information. His "Scythian digression," in which he seeks to explain the flight of the Avars from the east, is as rich in detail as it is in obscurities and is consequently much debated. The red thread in the digression, more confused than clarified by the author's interpolations, is a letter that a Turkish khagan (unnamed in the text) sent to Emperor Maurice to report his victory in a civil war. Theophylact inserts the letter into his narrative of 595, "when summer had arrived in this particular year." Scholars have tried to connect the events referred to in the text to what we know about the Turks from Chinese sources. But an inscription on the memorial statue of the Turkish khagan Niri (Nili in Chinese sources) at Xiao Hongnahai/Mongolküre, near the modern Chinese-Kasakh border, has made a more plausible interpretation possible, proposed by Étienne de la Vaissière: Niri had written the letter after a victory over his rival Dulan, called Turum in the letter, when the latter had

proclaimed himself grand khagan of the Turks, the event mentioned in the inscription.⁷⁷ The letter also contained a brief narrative of the victories of the Turkish khagans over their enemies, which Theophylact erroneously ascribes to the one who had dispatched the letter. It presents no chronological account but supplies the rationale for the fact that the grand khagan could now call himself “ruler over seven peoples and lord of the seven zones of the earth.” Similar but more extensive lists of subjugated peoples are found in two Orkhon inscriptions from the second Turkish khaganate.⁷⁸

In the sequence reproduced in Theophylact the victory dispatch of the otherwise unnamed Turkish khagan reads as follows: First the Hephthalites (or *Abdeloi*) were conquered, then the Avars, of which a part fled toward *Tabgast* and another to the *Mukri* in the same region. Then are listed the Ogurs settled on the “black river” *Til*, some tribes of which are called *Var* and *Chunni*. Lastly, the *Kolch* are conquered in a bloody war.

Identifying these names still poses problems, despite a series of attempts undertaken with great erudition. The *Tabgast* to which a portion of the defeated Avars fled certainly refers to the empire of the Tuoba Wei in northern China; China is still called *Tabghach* in the Orkhon inscriptions, which refer to Chinese emperors as “khagan of the *Tabghach*.” Theophylact probably confuses it with an otherwise unknown Bactrian city, allegedly founded by Alexander the Great. The people called Avars must be the Rouran, and according to this account the greater part fled eastward, to China and to the neighboring (Korean or perhaps Manchurian) *Mukri*.⁷⁹ The “black river” could be the Volga, Menander’s “*Atil*.” The *Kolch* were probably the *Choliatai* among whom the companions of the ambassador Zemarchus were waiting for his return from the Turkish war against the Persians in 570.⁸⁰ Because Theophylact, on the basis of the letter, believed that all these triumphs had been Niri’s achievement, he dates them to the reign of Maurice. Of the victory over the Avars he therefore explains: “But no-one should believe that we have given a false account of the events, if he knows that the barbarians who have settled in Europe and Pannonia are Avars, whose arrival dates to before the time of Maurice. The barbarians in the Danube region are wrongly designated Avars.”⁸¹

This is the core statement in Theophylact’s digression on the origin of the Avars: It is not the Avars whom the Turkish khagan defeated who are the ancestors of the European Avars, but those Ogurs who were named—“supposedly after two mythical kings”—*Var* and *Chunni*.

During the imperial rule of Justinian a small portion of the original tribe withdrew from these *Var* and *Chunni* and invaded Europe. These people called themselves Avars and designated their leaders with the

title *khagan*. How their name came to be changed we shall now tell. . . . When the *Barselt* and Onogurs and Sabirs and other Hunnic peoples of the region saw that a part of the *Var* and *Chunni* had fled into their districts, they became greatly afraid, since they assumed that the invaders were Avars. They honored the refugees with fine presents and believed that they would remain unharmed in return. When the *Var* and *Chunni* saw how successfully their flight had begun they made their own the error of those who had been sent to them and called themselves Avars. Among the Scythian peoples it is in fact said that the Avars are a people of great skill.⁸²

Theophylact's bold assertion that the European Avars were in reality false Avars, *Pseudabaroï*, has been variously interpreted. That the true Avars of his account represent the Rouran is plausible. The list of victories of the Turkish khagan would be incomplete without a mention of the Rouran, with whose defeat Turkish dominion began.⁸³

The name Avars, or similar, appears in the steppe zone in several variants. As early as in Herodotus we find a Scythian Abaris myth recounted. Its hero was the Hyperborean Abaris who traversed the world on an arrow.⁸⁴ "Aparnoi" are mentioned in Dagestan in Strabo's *Geography*. The city of Nishapur, or another city in Khorassan, was sometimes called Abar-šahr.⁸⁵ Yet the name really spread only in the late sixth century. Chinese sources repeatedly mention a people by the name of Aba (A-pa). In the year 585 they rebelled against the Turkish khagan Shabolüe.⁸⁶ Shortly after 600 they again took part in an insurrection by the Tiele federation against Turkish rule.⁸⁷ Perhaps the name "Apar" in the Kültegin inscription is a reference to them, if the traditional reading is correct.⁸⁸ The Avars occur in the list of peoples beyond the Caucasus in the *Chronicle* of Pseudo-Zacharias Rhetor, compiled in 568/69.⁸⁹ Theophylact apparently thought the Avars had been former neighbors of the Persians, when he writes of the flight of the chief shaman Bookolabras (around 580) to "his" Huns, "whom many also call Turks, nearby to the Persians."⁹⁰ Flavius Corippus also alludes to Persian-Avar relations. The Persians had initially feared the Avar khagan and had to treat for peace.⁹¹ The fact that even today there are Avars in the Caucasus, who were already documented there in the Middle Ages, is part of this west Asian name tradition. An Ossete epic recounts that one could make one's fortune in the land of the Avars.⁹² Yet as proofs of a consistent tradition of Avars north of Persia, these references are too scattered spatially and chronologically.⁹³

Etymological interpretations of the name *Avar* are so speculative that they can scarcely be used as arguments for the origin of the European Avars. This is also true of the derivation from Mongolic *abarga*, "worm, snake," which may be

linked to the derogatory Chinese variant of the name Rouran: Ruanruan, “worms coiled about themselves.”⁹⁴ Like the Turkish etymology of *avar* as “rebellious, disobedient,” it would not explain the name’s Scythian past.⁹⁵ The success of the name *Avar* may be connected with the fact that it resonated in so many languages. As opaque as the name Avar itself are the two components of the name of the Varchonites. *Chunni* and *Ch(i)onites* are variants of the ethnonym Hun, whose extremely varied use precludes any more exact ethnic classification.⁹⁶ *Uar*, which according to Theophylact was the name of one of the Avar tribal ancestors, could simply be a variant of the name *Avar*. But clearly contemporaries did not view the two names as identical. In the Iranian languages, the word means “broad, wide” and was frequently used in the names of great rivers. The Huns took over *Var* as the name for the Dnieper.⁹⁷ Perhaps this is reflected in the information in the *Suda Lexicon* that the Avars initially set out from the banks of the Dnieper.⁹⁸ Half a millennium later there was a Mongol tribe called the *Varguni*.⁹⁹ Even if this name should be analogous to the Varchonites, it tells us nothing about the bearers of the name in the sixth century.

Due to this complicated evidence, the theories about the origins of the European Avars are multifarious. As early as the eighteenth century, Joseph de Guignes conjectured that despite Theophylact’s assertion, Baian’s Avars were descended from the Rouran, and this thesis became generally accepted, even though critical voices were raised against it here and there. The chronology seemed to support this proposition. Of both peoples it was known that they braided their hair in pigtails.¹⁰⁰ Theophylact’s history of the Pseudo-Avars was frequently interpreted as a topos.¹⁰¹ Michael Whitby dismissed it in rather wholesale fashion: “Theophylact’s personal speculations about Avar origins are historically worthless.”¹⁰² And Peter Golden concludes: “The Pseudo-Avars may be safely removed from historical analysis. What remains are the Rouran (and variants) and the Abar/Avar/Awar. These are clearly one and the same people in Central Eurasia.”¹⁰³

Theophylact may have made many mistakes in his digression, but he had good information at his fingertips, and the central point he made was by no means his “personal speculation”: the contention that the European Avars were not really Avars was the official diplomatic position of the Turks in their contacts with Byzantium, as incontrovertibly emerges from Menander’s reports. One might still argue that the Turks lied, although they certainly knew better. But dismissing Theophylact’s explanation altogether would be the wrong start.¹⁰⁴ A detailed critique of the identification of Rouran and European Avars was published by Yu Taishan in the 1980s, but hardly noticed in the West.¹⁰⁵ He argued that it would have been hard for remnants of the Rouran to escape westward where not only the Turks but also other former enemies blocked the way. Rather, he