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**The Black Cauldron, a Curtain of Fire, and the Sword of the War God: Connections
Between Nomadic Populations on the Ancient Eurasian Steppe**

By Shawn Armistead

Accepted in Partial Completion
of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts

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Master's Thesis

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**The Black Cauldron, a Curtain of Fire, and the Sword of the War God: Connections
Between Nomadic Populations on the Ancient Eurasian Steppe**

A Thesis
Presented to
The Faculty of
Western Washington University

In Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts

by
Shawn Armistead
August, 2023

Abstract

Cultural connections between the ancient Xiongnu and the Huns have been disputed for over a century. This disputed topic has been approached in the fields of history, anthropology, linguistics, genetics, and archaeology. Though evidence for previous claims to connections between the two groups of nomadic pastoralists has been scant, research into the topic over the last 20 years has been robust. New evidence for connections between them has come from the previously listed disciplines, but rarely in an integrated form. By taking a multidisciplinary approach to this research question, this paper attempts to integrate the results into a cohesive narrative to not only provide evidence of the existence of these cultural connections but also to provide a means by which those connections took shape. Beginning with a previously overlooked interpretation of the works of Roman diplomat Priscus produced in the year 448/449 C.E., this work incorporates available evidence from outside of the field of history with this new interpretation. This work then analyzes the available body of outside evidence through the lens of Priscus' intended definition of the term "Scythian" to demonstrate that cultural connections between the two groups exist in the forms of language, material culture, and genetic relations. Furthermore, this work elaborates on the nature of aristocratic hierarchy on the ancient Eurasian Steppe to show that a mobile elite chosen from a small group of family lines linked individual groups through dynastic association. These links demonstrate the wider impact and importance of Steppe nomads in ancient history to the transmission of culture between the power centers of the ancient world. By integrating evidence from a multidisciplinary perspective with the evidence that can be extracted by careful examination of ancient textual sources, this project proves that links between the ancient Xiongnu and Huns can no longer be disputed. This opens the door to future research elaborating on the nature of dynastic power of the cultures and peoples on the ancient Eurasian Steppe.

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Introduction

“History is written by the victors” is a pithy quote often attributed to Winston Churchill, as most pithy quotes of the twentieth century are. This quote is used so often, even in the halls of academia, that it seems to have been internalized in the popular consciousness as a truism. The reason for that is simple; historical research relies heavily on textual sources. This statement agrees with our intuitions, but is it actually true? The reliance on historical texts is crucial to the credibility of the field, but I often wonder if the reliance only on the written word obscures the importance of pre-literate peoples in the ancient world. The fabled “lost city” of Troy was presumed to be a product of mere myth. This all changed in 1870 when archaeologist Heinrich Schliemann discovered not just evidence, but overwhelming evidence that the Troy of *the Iliad* was a real city that existed in the ancient Hellenic world.

The city of Troy was not simply real, but excavations unearthed the remains of a ruined city of which the descriptions in the Homeric myths were remarkably accurate in both temporal and physical descriptions of the city. The two longest enduring textual stories in Western civilization had long been established as having roots in a much earlier oral tradition. Our contemporary understanding of the power and purpose of oral traditions has undergone a shift in the last few decades and historians are finally accepting that oral traditions change less than previously assumed through transmission over time. And why shouldn't they? Many historians of the ancient world are finally giving credit to oral traditions for achieving much of the same cultural function that texts do. The use of poetic rhythms and formal techniques for the telling of these stories is then not only an artistic concession, but also a memory aid. Classical oral traditions were not only important cultural performances, in pre-literate societies they serve

precisely the same purpose as textual traditions; mythic oral traditions were an information retention device.

Due to a reliance on texts, ancient China and Rome loom large in the history of the ancient world. As the most dominant ancient states in the east and west respectively, these empires generated mountains of texts. The governance of an empire requires records, and the cultural unity of an ever-expanding land empire requires artistic works for cultural unity. Thus, the historical traditions of the East and the West appear sometimes to be nothing more than Chinese history and Greco-Roman history. Putting aside for a moment the overlook of the important post-Bronze age contributions from the Near East, South Asia, and Africa, there was a vast swathe of land between the two great empires; the Eurasian Steppe. Though sparsely populated in comparison to their sedentary neighbors, the Steppe lands contained a diversity and complexity of cultures that often gets obscured due to their nomadic nature. Nomadic pastoralism was a way of life that birthed a myriad of related cultures that appeared entirely alien to their sedentary neighbors. This, in addition to the fact that these nomadic cultures were often successful for decades at a time at establishing dominance over their settled neighbors leads to an obvious cultural bias against them when they appear in the texts of the literate societies of the past. These nomads presented the ideal other. They existed only on the periphery of the sedentary world, they practiced a lifestyle that appeared bizarre and incomprehensible to their less mobile contemporaries, and most importantly; they possessed no written language. The nomadic empires that have occasionally sprung up on the Steppe throughout history couldn't defend themselves in the historical record, not because they were any less advanced or important than their sedentary rivals but because they couldn't speak for themselves. I suggest we repurpose that

famous quote about who writes history. In the ancient world, history isn't written by the victors, history is written by the literate.

In the following pages, I have attempted to establish connections between the two most successful of these nomadic empires of the ancient world; the Xiongnu and the Huns. Due to the limitations I have outlined, I have taken a truly multidisciplinary approach to this research. All the textual sources we have about these two nomadic societies were produced by their sedentary rivals. This necessitates the use of evidence from archeological, genetic, linguistic, and even climate science sources to offer a check on the biases of a textual history that comes to us exclusively from their enemies. Ironically, the centerpieces of my argument are two textual sources; the writings of Sima Qian and Priscus. Sima Qian was an ancient Chinese historian who spent nearly ten years embedded with the Xiongnu and gives us our primary textual source on their history and culture. Priscus was a diplomat who met with Attila, leader of the Huns, on behalf of Rome and wrote about his experience. Sima Qian's *Records of the Grand Historian*, or *Shiji*, is by far the greatest source of information we have on the Xiongnu and its inclusion should come as no surprise. However, the writings of Priscus are often crowded out by the more extensive writings of ancient historians such as the Gothic Jordanes or the Roman Ammianus Marcellinus. However, I have given a new interpretation of Priscus' account of his visit to the court of Attila. Following the throughline of new information gained from this interpretation, I then check my interpretation of Priscus against the prevailing information we have available from modern non-textual sources.

Though much information about the connections between the two nomadic peoples comes to us from several different fields, in my research I rarely see them integrated and compared against one another. I have attempted to gather together the evidence from a variety of

fields and compare them against ancient historians as well as each other. Following a logic gained from my novel interpretation of what can be learned from Priscus, I will then try to construct a narrative by which connections can be established between the Xiongnu and Huns. While by no means a definitive account of how the Xiongnu became the Huns, I have tried to show not only that connections do exist, but how and why. Within this small corner of the historical world, any connection between the two groups has been, and remains, hotly contested. Though my pathway for linking the two groups may be theoretical and tentative, I believe I have definitively shown that the two *are* connected in various non-trivial ways. I hope that by drawing on multiple disciplines to show that the ancient Xiongnu and Huns are related to one another, we can bring the debate to a close and begin focusing research on exactly how.

Historiography

The Xiongnu were an ancient tribal confederation of nomadic raiders who occupied the area northwest of ancient Han Chinese controlled settlements along the Yellow River. They show up first in Chinese sources in the *Records of the Grand Historian* Sima Qian in 252 BC. The tribe, named one of China's ancient "five barbarian tribes" that sacked settlements along Han borders, were a threat until they are recorded as being driven out of their reported homeland in the foothills of what is now Manchuria. Sources indicate that they travelled deep into the interior of the Central Asian Steppe, a vast band of rolling grasslands that ranges from modern day Ukraine in the West to what is now Mongolia in the East. This eco-region necessitated a lifestyle of nomadic equestrianism which made tracking migration challenging as it lends itself to a high

degree of physical mobility but perhaps more importantly, this mobility lends itself to a high degree of intermixing of cultures and languages. The Xiongnu lost a war decisively to the Chinese in the year 272 AD and a large majority of their population migrated away from the Manchurian foothills and into the Central Asian interior. Those who remained became vassal states of the Han before eventually splintering into irrelevance. Where the Xiongnu finally settled after being ousted by the Chinese remains contested in the field of ancient Eurasian history.¹²

The Huns, a similarly equestrian nomadic raiding people, emerged from their purported home “beyond the Maeotic sea”. This term was used to denote something originating far afield from Rome by Roman historians and combined with Gothic reports of the Huns “frozen wasteland” origins can be assumed to have arrived from somewhere very distant and very far North of Rome.³ In the historical record they show up in Roman geographical tomes starting in the year 370.⁴ The Huns won early battles with Rome and even entered a tributary relationship with Rome as the subordinate power. The Huns lack of manpower and lack of experience in siege warfare led to their relevance fading before they retreated to their Pontic-Caspian Steppe homeland and would leave Rome to face other barbarian menaces. The Huns were eventually absorbed into the nomadic confederations of the neighboring Turks, Persians, and Uyghers.⁵⁶

¹ Golden, Peter B. “Some Thoughts on the Origins of the Turks and the Shaping of the Turkic Peoples.” *In Contact and Exchange in the Ancient World*, ed. Victor H. Mair. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2006: 136–157.

² Some Xiongnu remained in Manchuria, but a sizable portion of the population migrated towards the Tarim Basin and an even larger portion towards Xinjiang. The CCCP uses alleged ancient historical violence by the Xiongnu and other barbarian tribes that occupied Xinjiang to justify the modern-day oppression of the Uygher population. This, admittedly, is only used to underscore their primary concern about the Uyghers; their practice of Islam.

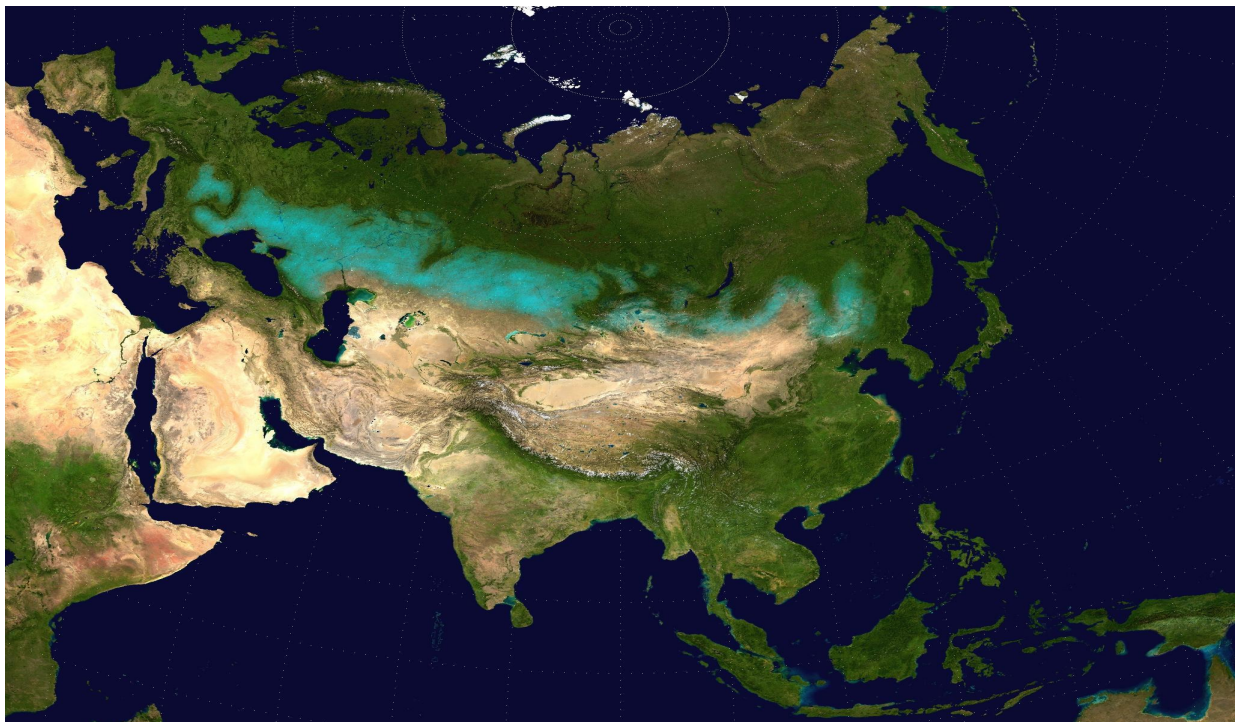
³ Minns, Ellis Hovell. *Scythians and Greeks*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 2012.

⁴ Xu, Jiyu 徐繼畲. *Yinghuan Zhilue 瀛寰志略*. Shanghai Shudian Press, 2001. Pp. 21–43

⁵ Cunliffe, Barry. *The Scythians: Nomad Warriors of the Steppe*. Oxford: Oxford University Press. 2019. 8-24

⁶ Today the Huns are concurrently claimed by Hungarians, Bulgarians, and Turks as their progenitors. This is the accepted national myth of Hungary and more contested in the other two. Making historical claims about connections to ancient people is dubious, but they are likely all three correct. No one near the Black Sea wants to share the Huns, apparently.

I contend that the Huns that violently showed up on Rome's doorstep in the late fourth century were remnants of the same cultural group that had departed lands North of China a half century previous, the Xiongnu. Though highly contested on both sides, I believe that enough evidence exists that some elements of this question can now be resolved. Building upon the work of previous historians and anthropologists such as Marija Gimbutas, Joseph De Guignes, Barry Cunliffe, and Peter Golden, I intend to use evidence from a broad range of fields to build upon the theory that the Huns and Xiongnu were closely related. If further research yields the opposite conclusion this would work to the advantage of the project as well by driving further debate in this contested area of Steppe history towards consensus.⁷



(The Eurasian Steppe. A large unbroken band of grazable flat rolling prairie with a temperate climate. Highly suitable to the herding of domesticated horses. Subgroups, east to west; the Eastern Asian Steppe, the Western Asian Steppe, and the Pontic-Caspian Steppe. Image source: *Encyclopedia Britannica*.)

The Debate

⁷ I will be using modern Pinyin for rendering names when possible but will default to the Wade-Giles system for older translations.

The nature of the historiography of Steppe migration has its roots in many disciplines due to the complex nature and types of sources involved to understand how sources from different fields have shaped the debate. Works of academic scholarship on Steppe cultures take place across disciplines and have a small group of dedicated scholars researching the topic. Nearly all questions about the Steppe must be answered through a truly multi-disciplinary lens due to scattered textual sources.⁸ History writers must then import sources from anthropology, archaeology, linguistics, geography, and most recently, genetics. The textual sources historians employ provide us with an indication of what we are looking for but untwisting the tangled knot of linguistic-ethnic groups that migrated frequently while remaining in close cultural contact with their grassland neighbors. To answer the broad central question of which people on the Steppe were, where, and at what times, we must look at the individual contributions made to each field separately over time. Following that, I will pay attention to the way that these contributions were then employed when interacting with related fields. I intend to synthesize the available historical evidence and build upon historian Peter Golden's theory of a Xiongnu-Hun connection.⁹ Golden's work begins to develop this theory through textual sources, and I intend to use evidence from the sources outside of the history field to further develop this theory.

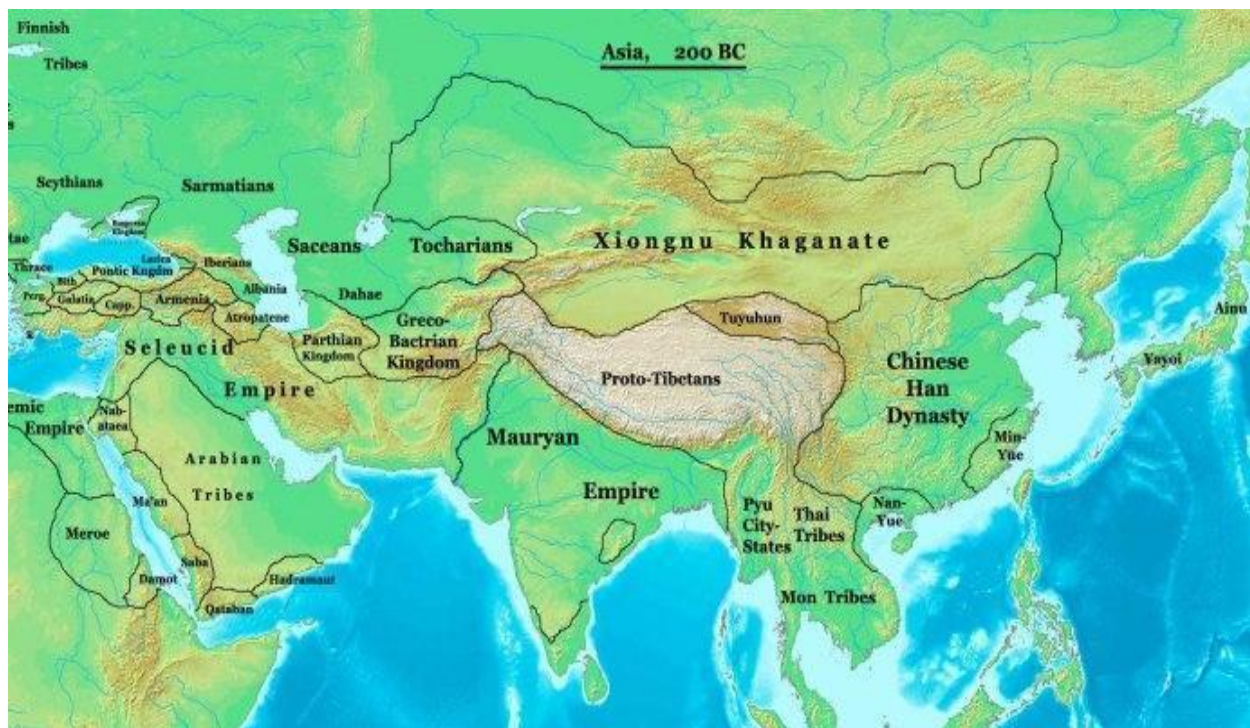
The Xiongnu entered the historical record through references to the "five great barbarian tribes" (later the "seven great barbarian tribes") in the early works of famed ancient Han Chinese historian Sima Qian in his own *Records of the Grand Historian (Shiji)* in 91 B.C.¹⁰ The Huns

⁸ The Eurasian Steppe is dominated by two language families: Turkic and Mongolian. Neither group were literate until the 6th century in the case of the Turkic speaking people, and not until just prior to Genghis Khan's Imperial period in the case of the Mongols.

⁹ Golden, Peter B. *An Introduction to the History of the Turkic Peoples: Ethnogenesis and State Formation in Medieval and Early Modern Eurasia and the Middle East*. Wiesbaden : Harrassowitz. 1992, p.99

¹⁰ Sima Qian, approximately 145 B.C.-approximately 86 B.C. *Records of the Grand Historian*. Qin Dynasty. Hong Kong : New York :Research Centre for Translation, Chinese University of Hong Kong ; Renditions-Columbia University Press, 1993.

enter the historical record through Roman historian Ammianus Marcellinus later in 391 A.D. when the historian recalls their defeat and expulsion of the Gothic people from their homelands,¹¹ pushing them towards Rome's hinterlands. Both groups are claimed to derive their cultural origins from earlier Scythian people which are first recorded in Neo-Assyrian sources as far back as 680 BCE,¹² despite “Scythians” being a Greek applied moniker.¹³ Complicating matters is that it is still debated by linguists whether Greek and Roman sources refer strictly to the tribes occupying or originating from Scythia to the northeast of Greece,¹⁴ or if they employed the term as a blanket term for all equestrian nomadic people.



(Xiongnu controlled territory prior to migration. Image source: www.theparapet.wordpress.com)

¹¹ Marcellinus, Ammianus. Trans. by Walter Hamilton and Andrew Wallace-Hadrill. *The Later Roman Empire* (A.D. 354-378). London: Penguin Classics. 1986.

¹² Cunliffe, Barry. *The Scythians: Nomad Warriors of the Steppe*. Oxford, United Kingdom: Oxford University Press. 2019.

¹³ Luckenbill, Daniel David. *Ancient Records of Assyria and Babylonia*. 2 vols. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1926–1927.

¹⁴ Cunliffe, Barry. *By Steppe Desert or Ocean*. Oxford, United Kingdom: Oxford University Press. 2014, 44

Early Anatolian sources refer to the Scythians and later Huns as coming from “the northern lake” or “the frozen ocean”, terms generally used to denote things thought of to be from beyond the edge of the known world.¹⁵ The placing of the Xiongnu in *Records of the Grand Historian* is much more concrete. Sima Quan identified the Xiongnu as being on the hinterlands of Han lands both north in the rugged mountains of Manchuria as well as to the west in the grasslands of Inner Mongolia (named “inner” due to its relative proximity to Chinese territory).¹⁶ While both sources point to an emergence from a similar region, they are still lacking in detail and do not give absolute answers.

The idea that the barbarian tribe being written about in China as the Xiongnu and the people referred to in later Roman sources as the Huns may be related was first suggested in 1756 by French Orientalist Joseph de Guignes.¹⁷ De Guignes first proposed that the Xiongnu were defeated by the Qin and shortly after were further defeated by Asian steppe tribes such as the Xianbei. He suggests that at least a portion of the surviving body of the tribal confederation were forced westward where a century later they emerged on the Roman doorstep in the form of the Huns.¹⁸ Given contemporary available evidence, this was a reasonable, even likely proposition. However, the debate would bifurcate the small community studying this region and the debate rages to this day.

With sparse textual references, and certainly lacking any texts at all that state this connection outright for obvious geographical reasons, the hypothesis suggested itself to de Guignes based on the similarities between the spoken ethnonyms of both groups as well as some

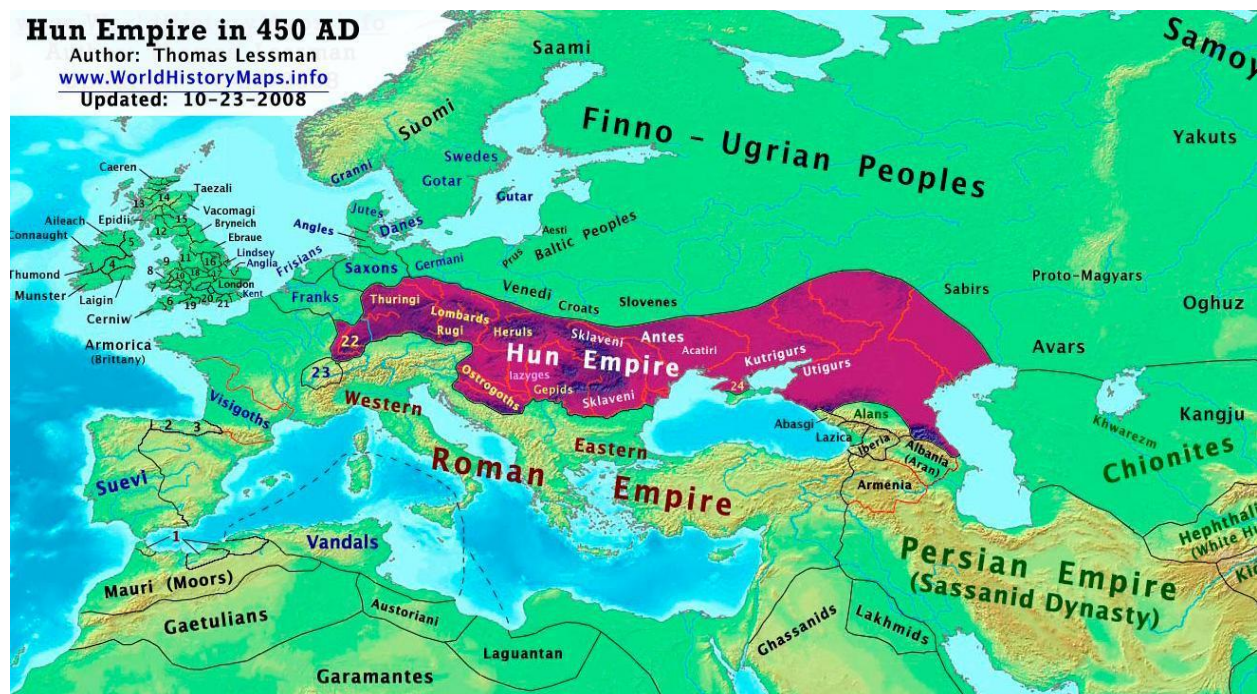
¹⁵ Minns, *Scythians and Greeks*, 26

¹⁶ Sima Qian, *Records of the Grand Historian*, 31

¹⁷ Beckwith, Christopher I. *Empires of the Silk Road: A History of Central Eurasia from the Bronze Age to the Present*. Princeton: Princeton University Press. 2009.

¹⁸ Beckwith, *Empires of the Silk Road*, 42-56

broad shared cultural traits. The hypothesis found adherents very early. Most famously, British historian Edward Gibbon asserted this hypothesis in the seminal *History and Decline of the Roman Empire*, the first volume of which was published in 1776.¹⁹ With such an influential voice definitively declaring the hypothesis as a known fact, it became widely accepted in the field for nearly a century until historians started attacking the theory as being based too loosely based on textual sources. This was certainly a founded criticism from historians but it reignited interest in both sides of the theory.



(Hunnic controlled territory at the Empire's extent, 450 AD. Map source: Thomas Lessman.)

In the late 1800's a German Sinologist known as Friedrich Hirth weighed in heavily on the matter. Hirth asserted that he had discovered incontrovertible textual evidence that proved the connection between the Xiongnu and the Huns.²⁰ Hirth made a compelling textual argument that both groups defeated the Steppe tribe, the Alans. Hirth argued that a passage in the *Weishu* can

¹⁹ Gibbon, Edward. *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*. Vol. II. Cambridge. 1781

²⁰ Hirth, Friedrich. "Über Wolga-Hunnen und Hiung-nu." *Sitzungs-berichte der. Philosophischen und historischen Classe, Akademie der Wissenschaften* (Phil.- Hist. Classe), II, 1899: 245-78

be interpreted such that the ancient toponym Sute was also referred to as Yancai in ancient times. He goes on to assert that passages from the *Hou Hanshu* and *Weilue* then can be interpreted as claiming that the people of Sute, identified as Xiongnu in later texts,²¹ conquered a tribe referred to as A-Lan²², often interpreted as the Eastern European Alans, or Strabo's famous Aorsii.²³²⁴ Gothic historian Jordanes refers to the conquering of the Aorsii (nearly unanimously identified with the Alans in modern study)²⁵ by the Huns before their emergence on the doorstep of the Empire.²⁶ Since these two events occurred nearly simultaneously in both Western and Eastern sources, Hirth claimed that this connection was enough to prove that the Hunnish and Xiongnu conquerors of the Alans were one and the same.²⁷ Though gaining widespread popularity at the time, this theory attracted many detractors. The connections were still said to be too evidentially tentative by critics like historian and anthropologist Otto Maenchen-Helfen.²⁸

While the historians debated, the linguists went to work trying to make phonological connections between the languages of the two groups. Based on a very limited set of words for both Hunnish and Xiongnu, these linguists made little headway until an important discovery at a Sogdian border wall in 1907.²⁹ British-Hungarian archaeologist Sir Aurel Stein unearthed from remains of barracks within a section of one of these walls a trove that would come to be known

²¹ Hirth, "Über Wolga-Hunnen und Hiung-nu.", 245

²² Alans were Steppe Nomads (along with allied agrarian settlements) who occupied the far western portion of the Pontic-Caspian Steppe

²³ Strabo, an early Greek historian, was stunned by a land of people on horseback. The Aorsii were the first equestrian nomads mentioned by Greek sources and if not the Scythians, it was likely the Aorsii that gave birth to the myth of the centaur.

²⁴ Strabo's *Geography* in three volumes as translated by H.C. Hamilton, ed. H.G. Bohn, 1854– 1857, vol 2., 154

²⁵ Minns, 212

²⁶ The Goths were pushed into German lands after being run off the Eurasian Steppe by an Atilla-led Hunnic army.

²⁷ Hirth, "Über Wolga-Hunnen und Hsiung-nu.", 7

²⁸ Maenchen-Helfen, Otto J. (1944-45a). "Huns and Hsiung-Nu." *Byzantion*, vol. 17, pp. 222–243

²⁹ The Great Wall was not built to its current dimensions until the medieval period. It is a popular misconception that the wall was built to keep Mongols out. It was built waist high in most sections and was to prevent the advance of grazing herds and thus preventing the taking of the territory but did little to stop the advance of raiding expeditions. Not only that, but it was also not only designed to thwart Mongols, but China has also faced numerous horse-mounted tribal attacks from several competing groups throughout their history.

as the “Sogdian Letters”,³⁰ referring to Strabo’s Sogdiana.³¹ This site was suspected by a Russian archeological team led by explorer Pyotr Kuzmich Kozlov of being occupied by Xiongnu based on material artifacts found at the location.³² Linguist W.B. Henning went to work deciphering these letters and made an incredible leap forward for the supporters of the Xiongnu-Hun hypothesis.³³ These letters, found to be in either a dialect or closely related language to Xiongnu and linguistic analysis revealed that the people rendered themselves phonetically as “xwn”.³⁴ Phonetically identical to the European “hun”, this discovery vastly bolstered the popularity of the hypothesis and won over many converts from the world of anthropology.³⁵³⁶

Though the ethnonym firmly established a connection, it did not solve the puzzle of exactly how to classify the linguistic families of either language. The most popular opinion was that the Hunnish language was likely Turkic in origin and Xiongnu likely from an indeterminant language family that had historical interactions with Turkic. This notion was put forward by archaeologist Barry Cunliffe in his many works on the Huns and Scythians. Though the classification of the languages of both groups are still contested, the world of anthropology maintains Cunliffe’s linguistic paradigm.³⁷

Anthropologists of a more material focus now had the evidence they needed to undertake the project of connecting the Xiongnu to the Huns. It was widely reported in primary sources that the Huns practiced artificial cranial deformation, or the practice of flattening the skulls of

³⁰ Gharib, B. *Sogdian Dictionary: Sogdian-Persian-English*, Tehran, Iran: Farhang Publications, xiii–xxxv. 1995.

³¹ Strabo, *Geography*, vol.2, 31

³² Johannesson, Eric G. “Grave matters: Reconstructing a Xiongnu identity from Mortuary Stone Monuments,” In *Xiongnu Archaeology: Multidisciplinary perspectives of the First Steppe Empire in Inner Asia*, ed. Ursula Brosseder and Bryan K. Miller. Bonn Contributions to Asian Archaeology, vol. 5, 2011: 201-212.

³³ Henning, W.B. “Huns and Hsiung-nu.” *Turkic World*. Collected in *Acta Iranica*. New York: Brill. 1972. 16-24

³⁴ Mitteliranisch, in Spuler et.al. *Handbuch der Orientalistik I Bd. IV I*, 1958

³⁵ Atwood, Christopher. *Philology of the Grasslands*. New Jersey: Brill. 2012. 24

³⁶ Atwood used the rendering, “Xwn”, in his own work published as recently as 2012.

³⁷ Cunliffe, Barry. *The Scythians: Nomad Warriors of the Steppe*. Oxford, United Kingdom: Oxford University Press. 2019. 214

growing infants by strapping them to a flat board as they grew. This was later confirmed in the 19th and 20th centuries by archeological finds in mass burial sites.³⁸ Later finds from Xiongnu burials confirm that that group did not engage in this highly visible practice. Building upon Marija Gimbutas' widely accepted "Kurgan Hypothesis"³⁹, which places the iron age ancestral homeland of all steppe cultures to be in the Bug-Dnieper region of what is now Ukraine in a culture Gimbutas dubbed Yamnaya.⁴⁰ This theory was based on the shared practice of horse burial mounds, or kurgans, on both the Eastern and Western Steppe with its greatest concentrations in the Pontic-Caspian Steppe, near to the Ukrainian homeland. Miklós Érdy,⁴¹ a Hungarian-born archaeologist and antiquarian argued that the shared practice of kurgan burials accompanied by a similarly rich tradition of smithing and metalwork did indeed link the two cultures.⁴²

The nineteenth century saw another development in the field when native Chinese historians began to contribute to international science and humanities research. These invaluable researchers were able to give us more accurate translations of the original texts as well as viewing the ancient evidence through a cultural lens that provides insight into the East Asian perceptions of Steppe society. In 1849 Ji Yu Xu, the most prominent Chinese voice in the field at the time, released his work, *Yinghuan Zhilue*.⁴³ This body of history on the topic of Chinese borderlands and interactions with the greater Steppe world allowed Ji Yu Xu to illustrate that at

³⁸ Gimbutas, Marija. Ed. *Journal of Indo-European Studies*. Vol. XVII. 2011. 264

³⁹ Gimbutas proposes that all equestrian nomads were originally Indo-European speaking people originating from what is now Ukraine. "Kurgan" refers to the name of the type of mounded horse burials that allegedly marked this original population. The hypothesis is that all Kurgan burials were originally by the Indo-European Ukrainian population and that later cultures came to adopt the practices of this unnamed group.

⁴⁰ Gimbutas, Marija. *Bronze Age Cultures in Central and Eastern Europe*. London: Mouton Publishing House. 1965. 23-28

⁴¹ Érdy, Miklós. *The Sumerian Uralaltaic Magyar Relationship a History of Research a Sumir Uralaltaji Magyar Rokonsag Kutatasanak Tortenete*. Studia Sumiro-Hungarica. 2012. 24

⁴² Gimbutas, Marija. *Journal of Indo-European Studies*. Vol. XVII, 276

⁴³ Xu Ji Yu. 徐繼畲. *Yinghuan Zhilue* 瀛寰志略. Shudian Press. Shanghai. 2001.

minimum, a small branch of Xiongnu had migrated and established dominion over territory in what is modern day Hungary.⁴⁴ He posited that in the Xianping era of the Song dynasty, 998-1003 AD, Song expansion pushed cascading waves of individual tribes westward in successive pushes.^{45,46} Though Peter Golden later proved Jiyu Xu was incorrect in his interpretation of where the Xiongnu ended their migration, his knowledge of the greater Steppe world and establishing its material and linguistic geography during the Song era pushed research forward.⁴⁷ This idea was already firmly entrenched in Chinese academia, and it was exactly during this contact with colonial European intellectuals that led to a collaboration with Song diplomatic envoy to Europe, Hong Jun. Hong Jun introduced the works of Jiyu Xu and his acolytes and the idea of a Xiongnu migration to Eastern Europe became entrenched in works on both sides of the Caucasus. This idea would not go unchallenged for long.⁴⁸

Historian Yao Congwu, through Beijing's colonial connection to Germany became the first historian of Chinese descent employed by a German university. In 1922, Yao Congwu wrote on the complicated ethnic identities and self-appellate names of the Steppe societies. Being the first historian to view the source material that was fluent in both German and Chinese, Yao Congwu was able to contradict some of the earlier claims of a connection by publishing works that focused on the individual identities of tribes. This new methodological approach allowed Congwu to construct a map of ethnic-linguistic groups through careful examination of the source material that reinterpreted Jiyu Xu's earlier theories and placed the arrival of the Xiongnu much

⁴⁴ Xu Jiyu, *Yinghuan Zhilue*, 137

⁴⁵ This played out as a ripple-effect stretching from East to West. Similar to the much more thoroughly covered European migration period, each new tribe or band would move into a territory and push the previous tribe further east. It is mere speculation, but the original Hun displacement of the Goths seems to have kicked off the migration period in Europe and this push itself may be an echo of the original westward push that originated with the migration of the Xiongnu or their northeastern neighbors. This is just outside the range of this paper but demonstrates the far-reaching effects of rapid migration in nomadic societies.

⁴⁶ Xu Jiyu, *Yinghuan Zhilue*, 44

⁴⁷ Golden, Peter. *Nomads and Their Neighbors on the Central Asian Steppe*. Brill. New York. 2011. 136–157.

⁴⁸ Xu Jiyu, *Yinghuan Zhilue*, Forward (non-numbered).

further to the east in what is now Turkmenistan and was then controlled by the nascent Uygher empire.⁴⁹ Yao Congwu also changed methodology in the field to be more rigorous. Yao Congwu was careful to note linguistic differences or differences in cultural practices but did not tie the tribes to race, a concept he believed there was simply not enough evidence to speculate on.⁵⁰ As this became the dominant paradigm, Steppe historians were able to avoid dicey nationalistic political debates, but the move also postponed speculation about genetic connections between people on the Steppe until genetic sampling became available and the field was largely able to escape the Eurocentric assumptions that plagued most American and European institutions in the 19th and 20th centuries.⁵¹

In the late 20th century, it was Chinese historian Qi Sihe who shaped the modern split paradigm as to the origins of the Huns and Xiongnu. He was able to trace through additional new Chinese, South Asian, and Arabic sources at least four stages of migration as the Xiongnu fled west in late antiquity. Sihe and his followers were in direct interaction with European academia at the time and these ideas were merged into the dominant European idea of a shared identity.⁵² Though immersed in Hirth's view which had found its way into Chinese orthodoxy on the subject, the Chinese scholars then entered debate with European academics. Louis Hamblis posited a partial compromise in 1947 when he theorized that while the Xiongnu migration

⁴⁹ Yao Congwu 姚從吾. "The Study of European scholars on the Xiongnu (Ouzhou xuezhe duiyu Xiongnu de yanjiu 歐洲學者對於匈奴的研究)." *Beijing daxue guoxue jikan* 北京大學國學季刊, *dierjuan disanhao* 第二卷第三號, 1930. Pp. 56–70

⁵⁰ And he's correct. At this time and place in history, the modern Western concept of race does more to obscure the facts than anything else. Race will only be mentioned in this paper in reference to textual references or more broadly to speak of its uselessness as a concept in ancient history.

⁵¹ Yao Congwu, "The Study of European scholars on the Xiongnu (Ouzhou xuezhe duiyu Xiongnu de yanjiu 歐洲學者對於匈奴的研究).", 28

⁵² Qi Sihe 齊思和. "Xiongnu migrating westward and its activities in Europe." (Xiongnu Xiqian jiqi zai ouzhou de huodong 匈奴西遷及其在歐洲的活動." *Lishi Yanjiu* 歷史研究, 1977. 126–141.

happened much the same fashion as the original proposition, the Huns and the Xiongnu were separate linguistically and philologically. His proposition was that Ji Yu Xu's assessment of the migrations was correct. He agreed with Hirth in most respects but added a new theory to complicate the debate. Hambis proposed the novel idea of a two-pronged conquering of the Alans either simultaneously from opposite directions, or that the invasions were separated temporally but in rapid succession.⁵³

In 2006, Chinese historian Yiken Jia released a journal article that engaged directly de Guignes' and Hirth's sources as well as the most modern Chinese sources. Though Yiken Jia did not propose his own theory of either Hun or Xiongnu ethnogenesis, he did thoroughly criticize Chinese scholars for accepting the Hirth hypothetical connection unquestioningly and injected a healthy dose of skepticism back into the debate, putting a direct connection back on the table as a possibility.⁵⁴ With no definitive paradigm on the Xiongnu-Hun question, the field was open to speculation and reinterpretation.⁵⁵ Research based on the work of anthropologists like W.M. McGovern and Barry Cunliffe were joined by Central Asian historian Peter Golden to reexamine the origins of the Huns, Xiongnu, and their likely progenitors, the Scythians.^{56,57} Though some, like Golden left open the possibility of a Xiongnu-Hun connection, Yiken Jia's criticisms opened the field back up to opposing voices. Western scholars such as Louis Hambis and Otto

⁵³ Hambis, Louis. "Le Probleme des Huns." *Recherches historiques* 220, 1958: 249-70.

⁵⁴ Jia Yiken. 賈衣肯. "A summary of studies on the westward movement of Xiongnu (Xiongnu xiqian wenli yanjiu zongshu 匈奴西遷問題研究綜述)." *Zhongguo Shi Yanjiu Dongtai* 中國史研究動態, 2006.

⁵⁵ Jia Yiken, "A summary of studies on the westward movement of Xiongnu (Xiongnu xiqian wenli yanjiu zongshu 匈奴西遷問題研究綜述)." 14

⁵⁶ Golden, Peter. *Central Asia in World History*, Oxford-New York: Oxford University Press. 2011. 78

⁵⁷ McGovern, William Montgomery. "The Early Empires of Central Asia: A Study of the Scythians and the Huns and the part they Played in World History, with Special Reference to the Chinese Sources." Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1939.

Maenchen-Helfen wrote works putting forward the view that there was no connection between the Huns and the Xiongnu.⁵⁸⁵⁹

Luigi Luca Cavalli-Sforza's pioneering work in genetic sequencing also began to populate anthropology literature in 2005, simultaneous to the published works of Yiken Jia. The introduction of genetic sequencing of individual DNA, in combination with a large worldwide sample base, allowed Cavalli-Sforza to track ancient migrations and created the scientific field of population genetics.⁶⁰⁶¹ This type of genetic sequencing gave researchers from all fields an invaluable tool to track early human migration with such accuracy that ancient historical work that relied heavily on tracking migrations got a shot in the arm.⁶² The field was reenergized, and the debate began anew. Historians and anthropologists waited on bated breath to see which hypotheses could be confirmed or denied. Linguists waited for connections between population movements and language change. While academia had expected population genetics to provide a

⁵⁸ Hambis," The Early Empires of Central Asia: A Study of the Scythians and the Huns and the party they Played in World History, with Special Reference to the Chinese Sources. " 249-270.

⁵⁹ Maenchen-Helfen, 'Huns and Hsiung-Nu.', 222–243

⁶⁰ This is nothing like "23 and me". Scientific population genetics simply traces the movement of genetic markers along the (most likely Y) chromosomal lines from a large sample of modern people with those of ancient remains. In this way scientists can trace mutations along the line to give approximate dates. This is the same technology used to track migrations of animals in the wild over generations. That's how the field began, in fact. Because genetic information has over two decades been found to correlate extremely well with the movement of language and to the movement of material culture to a lesser degree. Thus, it is invaluable in the study of migrations of ethnic groups. What does it tell us about race? Nothing. The concept does not apply here. If anything, population genetics illustrates how genetically similar humans are in comparison to other animals and illuminates how genetically humans exist on a continuum and that the concept of "race" is a socially constructed category, not a biological one.

Those "genetic ancestry" type of sites use the world genetic code that Cavalli-Sforza's team made public for research use. Those sites, by contrast, use autosomal DNA to track individuals. Not only that, when they compare it against the genetic code there is interpretive work behind the scenes based on grandparent's country of origin that it makes the whole process suspect. If he hadn't sadly passed away recently, Cavalli-Sforza himself would tell you what an absurd use of his pioneering work was. Modern ancestry tracking websites have little to do with his work, other than vaguely having to do with genetics. Scientific population genetics has its basis in biology where it was first used to track migrations of insect populations, and rather accurately at that. This is the *raison d'être* of population genetics: tracking migrations of animals (of which humans count themselves a member, however reluctantly). Other uses of this technology are frivolous and not related to the scientific field of capital P "Population genetics".

⁶¹ Cavalli-Sforza, Luca Luigi. *Genes, People, and Languages*. Stanford, California: Stanford University Press. 1991, XI

⁶² Cavalli-Sforza, 13

fine grain tool for tracking ancient migrations, Steppe researchers found the information to raise further questions.⁶³ Though some Steppe hypotheses were outright proven or destroyed in the process, the Xiongnu-Hun question simply became more complicated.

Science Brings History Back to Life

Cavalli-Sforza's world gene sequencing, built upon by his followers in this brand-new scientific field, seemed to demonstrate that both sides of the argument could be correct. While it was demonstrated that some geneflow did prove a detectable Xiongnu migration to the west at some point in their history, it also showed the Huns (DNA extracted from skeletal remains) and modern Hungarians showed a higher degree of Eastern Steppe genes than other Europeans.⁶⁴ However, the amount of European genetic contribution found in the Eastern Steppe was not insignificant, but a much smaller contribution than expected. The backflow of genes from Siberia and Manchuria certainly bolstered the hypothesis, but the discovery of Steppe genes found in modern Scandinavian populations complicated matters.⁶⁵ It was discovered that the highest degree of Eastern Steppe collections of maternal DNA lay not in modern Hungarians, but rather modern Norwegians.⁶⁷ Not only that, but the data also seemed to indicate a much higher level of

⁶³ The Steppe results were initially incredibly confusing due to the diversity in the samples as well as the directions and distances of migrations. Over time they found that this was true in all nomadic populations as compared to their settled brethren. Turns out you can move fast on horseback across wide flat grassland.....in both directions no less!

⁶⁴ Cavalli-Sforza, 48

⁶⁵ Both Eastern Steppe Nomad and Western Steppe Nomad (as they were dubbed by researchers) mitochondrial DNA markers were found in high concentrations in Iceland, Norway, Sweden, and Finland.

⁶⁶ Cavalli-Sforza, 348

⁶⁷ There are clusters of mitochondrial DNA markers that appear together so frequently they are given a named type. In this case the most frequent place of division is between what geneticists dub "ESN" and "WSN" respectively, for the east and west division of distribution of mutations. The presence of Eastern Steppe genes in high frequency in Norwegians means that at some point in (recent) prehistory there was a large migration of Y-Chromosomes carried by men into Norway from the Pontic-Caspian Steppe, birthplace of the ESN (Eastern Steppe Nomad) chromosomal package. They can trace the direction of gene-flow by comparing it against surrounding populations and from what they learned based on the number of accrued mutations that occurred since that populations departure from its eastern steppe origins.

population intermixing than cultures in the rest of the world and seemed to indicate so many individual migrations that historians and anthropologists had entirely new dragons to slay.⁶⁸ The Xiongnu-Hun question seems to have been left alone since the introduction has led researchers in the field in novel directions.

The problem with this development is that it took attention away from the Xiongnu and Hunnic origins and new researchers seemed to ignore the question due to the conflicting nature of the evidence. This is the present state of Steppe studies as they relate to the ethnic links between the Xiongnu and the Huns.⁶⁹ While further work on establishing links between the Xiongnu and the Huns went unexplored, further data was coming in from the worlds of archaeology and genetics. New linguistic interpretations were made using a more rigorous system of peer-review.⁷⁰ New archaeological discoveries containing Xiongnu grave goods were found in the Xinbei cave north of Beijing as recently as 2019.⁷¹ With its tangled web of migrations, the Steppe has attracted much attention from the field of population genetics as it remains its most complicated region to research. Historians putting the question on the back burner did not stop new archaeology and especially new genetic data from coming in. In 2011, a team in Germany even completed a complete gene sequencing of equine DNA and are now able to track the movements and places of origin even of individual horse breeds⁷². With the steps the modern Chinese government have taken to engage more directly with the rest of the world, new texts from PRC archives previously inaccessible to Western scholars become available for use.⁷³

⁶⁸ Cavalli-Sforza, XVII

⁶⁹ The definition I will be using for the term ethnicity is based on accepted practices in anthropology and will be further elucidated in the final project. It is a working definition, given the dynamism of the field and subject to change as the project demands.

⁷⁰ Gharib, B. *Sogdian Dictionary*, 48

⁷¹ Johannesson, Eric G. "Grave matters: Reconstructing a Xiongnu identity from Mortuary Stone Monuments," 204

⁷² Oke, Stacy. "Quarter Horse Genome Sequenced". *The Horse*. Blood Horse Publications. 2012-02-17.

⁷³ Anthony, David. *The Horse, the Wheel, and Language*. Princeton University Press. New Jersey. 2015. 29

With this as our current academic situation, I believe that a syncretic approach combining the data from historical texts, archeological finds, linguistic analysis, and genetic sequencing can give us a much more solid answer to the question of the ethnic origins of the Xiongnu and the Huns. Steppe historian and linguist Peter Golden expressed as recently as 2011 his belief in the possibility of a Xiongnu-Hun ethnic overlap.⁷⁴ However, in addition to two decades of accumulated archeological finds from Xiongnu (and to a lesser extent, Hun) sites, there is another advantage a modern historian tracking the question could surely employ; autosomal maternal Y-chromosome DNA sequencing, Cavalli-Sforza's population genetics.⁷⁵

Why Now?

While the Xiongnu-Hun question has been a topic of debate among Steppe antiquarians for over two centuries, significant scholarship specifically addressing this topic has received little new scholarship to push the consensus in one direction or the other. Despite a steady trickle of new evidence trickling in from all disciplines involved, a significant effort to combine the work within these fields has not been undertaken in nearly two decades. The most recent Chinese scholarship by Jiyu Xu focused strictly on textual sources.⁷⁶ The valuable contributions made by preeminent Steppe historian Peter Golden have provided solid evidence towards his belief that the connection exists, but Golden does not employ equine archaeology analysis⁷⁷ and more

⁷⁴ Golden, Peter. *Central Asia in World History*, 48-50

⁷⁵ See note above for my use of scientific "population genetics" and how it is purposed towards my argument.

⁷⁶ Jiyu Xu, *Yinghuan Zhilue*, XI

⁷⁷ There is extensive research from the scientific world about the domestication of the horse, its many uses by humans and adaptations to them that seem to all point to large migrations. There's more to Steppe equine archaeology than most would expect.

importantly, genetic analysis.⁷⁸ This leaves the current state of the question in a suspended state of debate. Over the last two decades enough new sources have been unearthed and new theories put forward demonstrate that the topic deserves a new truly multi-disciplinary approach.

The news today is rife with political stories coming out of Central Asia. Though situated in the ancient past, these questions still have relevance in the political negotiation of modern identity. Nationalists of all stripes repurpose these types of inquiries to give legitimacy to their claims to power or territory. The war in Ukraine has its roots in the relationships between medieval Novgorod, Kyiv, and the Golden Horde.⁷⁹ The origin of modern Hungary's name derives from the root "Hun" in an attempt to connect the small nations' position in Europe to a more powerful historical narrative. The modern government of China argues on state television that their oppression of the modern Uygher people of Xinjiang is justified by the Chinese state based on attacks from the province in the early Middle Ages.⁸⁰ These types of questions in ancient history have a way of reaching into the present. People imbue stories from the past with power, hence their lasting impact. They connect themselves to this power to feel a part of something bigger than their present allows. Even if it is a pernicious practice, agents in the present use these narratives from the past to justify all manner of behavior from oppression to war. If modern nationalists are going to be fighting over stories anyhow, shouldn't the stories they fight over be as accurate and complete as possible?

Methods and Goals

⁷⁸ Once again, this is group autosomal maternal Y-chromosome DNA analysis. This research uses genetic information from the World Genome Project and can test DNA samples from ancient remains and compare them to modern populations to track migrations in the past. The process uses genetic markers and applies it to accumulated mutations to determine age. Comparing it to modern populations gives us a clearer understanding of where cultural groups came from. First used on animals, it was later applied to humans when it was found to correlate nearly one-to-one with language movement.

⁷⁹ Golden, *Central Asia in World History*, 338

⁸⁰ Beckwith, *Empires of the Silk Road*. This has happened as recently as 2012!

Admittedly, this is an ambitious project. However, I believe previous scholars have laid enough groundwork to build from that it is technically feasible. The historical work involved compiling and synthesizing work from various fields from the last two decades more than it does inventing new theories whole cloth. Research into all sources will be required and reinterpreted where necessary. My own original contribution to the topic in addition to textual research will largely be building upon Peter Golden's proposed theory for a plausible Xiongnu-Hun connection. I hope to elaborate on Golden's proposed connections using evidence from fields the historian did not as well as employ newer research based on analysis of historical texts.

I will address the holes in previous theories by importing Cavalli-Sforza's inspired field of work in tracking genetic migrations and show how these migrations map directly to the linguistic analysis that continues to evolve. By incorporating genetic-linguistic data as well as new archeological finds that have occurred since most of the historians involved originally published their work on the matter, I will attempt to elaborate and build upon Golden's original analysis. I believe the research I have already conducted bolsters previously established proposed groundwork for a Xiongnu-Hun connection. This evidence, synthesized with previous historical work on the question, would likely be enough to change the conversation and give a synthesis for scholars interested in establishing a connection.

One of the more persistent criticisms against a Xiongnu-Hun connection lies in physical descriptors in textual sources. Roman Gothic historian Jordanes stresses multiple times that the Huns were "short of stature", "had tanned skin and round, shapeless heads", as well as an inability to grow facial hair.⁸¹⁸² Meanwhile, early Han historian Zheng Zang describes the

⁸¹ Mitteliranisch, *Handbuch der Orientalistik*, 324-329

⁸² Jordanes. *Getica*. Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge Classics. 2001, 121

Xiongnu as being “tall with large round heads, barrel shaped bodies and beards that often stretched from ear to ear.”⁸³ Historians have often interpreted those descriptions to indicate the Huns being of Asian ancestry while conversely the Xiongnu are assumed to be of European ancestry. It is this assumption that led me to my interest in this question in the first place due to its immediate peculiarity. The two main problems with it are that it lies entirely on modern assumptions about race and more importantly that it’s not even the most plausible interpretation of the limited textual evidence. One of my aspired contributions to the field by this work will be examining accepted interpretation through a transnational lens. Put simply, inarguably both the Huns and the Xiongnu had Central Asian or Siberian origins, making this is a matter of relative perspective. Central Asian people in that past, as is the case in the modern day, had a genetic admixture of maternal genetic lines that drew upon in varying proportions the contributions from the eastern and western edges of the Steppe. Viewed from the perspective of Europeans these people would appear to have more Eastern features yet when looked at from the perspective of Han Chinese people they would appear to have more Western features. This reevaluation of the paradigm assumption about physical descriptors by employing the evidence given to us by modern advances in genetic sequencing or in archaeological analysis should hopefully render some of these longstanding unfounded assumptions about the way we interpret the historical record moot.

To the end of reexamining previously held assumptions about the historical record, I base my argument about the cultural connection between the Xiongnu and the Huns largely by questioning an assumption that survives and is perpetuated in the historiography of the question. The overwhelming majority of scholars in the historiography of the Huns make a specific

⁸³ Qi, Sihe. “Xiongnu migrating westward and its activities in Europe“

interpretation of the work of Priscus, the Thracian ambassador dispatched by Theodosius II in 448 A.D. to the court of Attila.⁸⁴ Without citing sources, scholars typically present the terms “Hun” and “Scythian” used by Priscus in his report of his experiences meeting Attila in his court as interchangeable.⁸⁵ However, I believe there is evidence for a more likely alternative way to interpret Priscus' use of the terms. It is entirely possible that the way by which the diplomat employs these terms is entirely deliberate. If this were so, it would enable his writing to be interpreted in such a way that it establishes a blanket term for peoples that existed on the Steppe and practiced a nomadic lifestyle. By connecting this alternative understanding of the work of Priscus with the broader contemporary scholarship concerning nomadic steppe pastoralists, I hope to demonstrate that the dynamics of Steppe interethnic politics provides a likely means by which elements within the Xiongnu confederation could become incorporated in the later European Hun confederacy. A direct migration of the people that made up the Xiongnu confederation to Eastern Europe, and their direct ancestors being the people that made up the Huns that Priscus would encounter is impossible to prove, and that is not my intention. I do, however, think that by integrating evidence from several fields outside of strict textual history it can be demonstrated that a portion of the Xiongnu aristocracy would become the direct ancestors of the same aristocracy that would lead the nomadic confederation that Priscus met in his diplomatic mission to Attila's court.⁸⁶

Combining evidence from across multiple disciplines is not just an underutilized approach to demonstrating connections between the Xiongnu and the Huns, it is a necessary one. One commonality between the Xiongnu and the Huns is they did not generate a textual literary

⁸⁴ Priscus. Edited by John Given. *Attila, the Huns, and the Roman Empire*. Merchantville, New Jersey: Evolution Publishing. 2015. 14

⁸⁵ Beckwith, 129

⁸⁶ Priscus, *Attila, the Huns, and the Roman Empire*, 41

tradition of their own. Text sources are limited to those written by sources from outside the Xiongnu or Hun worlds. Archaeology can only inform us about material culture. Linguistics has an incomplete dataset to employ to answer these types of questions. Genetic analysis is only useful in history if you have other sources to compare it with. Physiological evidence can only be obtained through inference. This is a complex question that requires a complex solution. Attempts have been made by every field involved to contribute to a conclusive answer, but no large-scale attempts to synthesize them academically have been undertaken. My aim is to not only to supply supporting evidence for future claims about Hun or Xiongnu origins and any connections they may have, but also to demonstrate the strength of a syncretic approach to answering ancient historical questions.

What's in a Name: Where Did the Huns Come From? Where Did the Xiongnu Go?

Section I- What's in the Texts? Evidence From Textual History

The sources on the Hun/Xiongnu conundrum immediately present a problem when it comes to accuracy and detail; neither group had a written script that we are aware of at this time. From the point of view of writing their history, pre-literate societies have the disadvantage of not letting those societies speak for themselves in their own words. Every textual source we have on the pre-Chinggisid Steppe originates from a neighboring sedentary culture.⁸⁷ We can check the sources against one another to triangulate, but the vast diversity of languages and ethnicities coupled with the sheer geographical size of the Steppe makes these sources both biased and

⁸⁷ Anthony, 8

uninformed. However, on the topic of the Xiongnu we have considerably more in-depth sources despite being written about earlier. The Xiongnu were a confederacy of peoples that had occupied Han China's doorstep since the dawn of recorded history and had been in close contact with their sedentary neighbors.⁸⁸ Grave goods show this relationship going back millennia before being committed to text. Sima Qian in the *Shiji* was writing about a people that he had direct experience with and relied primarily on testimony from Han admirals with whom the Xiongnu had directly engaged.⁸⁹ The historical tradition in China has more linear continuity and the sources remain more consistent over time. However, this tradition of Han historians to incorporate the Xiongnu into Chinese history comes with its own biases.⁹⁰ Nonetheless, it presents us with our entry point for the Xiongnu into the textual body of written history. That tradition begins in the *Shiji* with its chapter "Account of the Xiongnu" in which Sima Qian gives us the following account in his most succinct summary;

"The ancestor of the Xiongnu was a descendant of the rulers of the Xia dynasty by the name of Chun-wei. As early as the time of Emperors (Kings) Yao and Shun and before, we hear of these people, known as Mountain Barbarians [Shan-rong], Xian-yun, or Hun-zhou, living in the region of the northern barbarians and wandering from place to place pasturing the animals. The animals they raise consist mainly of horses, cows, and sheep, but include such rare beasts as camels, asses, mules, and the wild horses known as tao-tu and tuo-xi. They move about in search of water and pasture and have no walled cities or fixed dwellings, nor do they engage in any kind of agriculture. Their lands, however, are divided into regions under control of various leaders. They have no writing, and even promises and agreements are only verbal. The little boys start out by learning to ride sheep and shoot birds and rats with a bow and arrow, and when they get a little older they

⁸⁸ Golden, *Nomads and Their Neighbors*, 14

⁸⁹ Sima Qian, *Records of the Grand Historian*, 87

⁹⁰ Golden, *Nomads and Their Neighbors on the Eurasian Steppe*, 38-42

shoot foxes and hares, which are used for food. Thus all the young men are able to use a bow and act as armed cavalry in time of war. It is their custom to herd their flocks in times of peace and make their living by hunting, but in periods of crisis they take up arms and go off on plundering and marauding expeditions. This seems to be their inborn nature. For long-range weapons they use bows and arrows, and swords and spears at close range. If the battle is going well for them they will advance, but if not, they will retreat, for they do not consider it a disgrace to run away. Their only concern is self advantage, and they know nothing of propriety or righteousness. From the chiefs of the tribe on down, everyone eats the meat of the domestic animals and wear clothes of hide or wraps made of felt or fur. The young men eat the richest and best food, while the old get what is left over, since the tribe honors those who are young and strong and despises the weak and aged. On the death of his father, a son will marry his stepmother, and when brothers die, the remaining brothers will take the widows for their own wives. They have no polite names but only personal names, and they observe no taboos in the use of personal names.The Xiongnu make it clear that warfare is their business. And since the old and the weak are not capable of fighting, the best food and drink are naturally allotted to the young men in the prime of life.”⁹¹

Clearly, elements of what would become central aspects of the nomadic pastoralist culture appear in Sima Qian’s account. This seems to be where disagreements about a shared identity arise in the historical debate. Though much of the historian’s account simply describes nomadic pastoralism in a broad sense, there are elements even within this short passage that appear to be unique to the Xiongnu. Appeals to an inborn nature of violence aside, not all Steppe states throughout history are reported as such. Perhaps this is simply due to the martial success of the Xiongnu against the Han or perhaps it is a shared fear of the unknown but these accounts,⁹² taken at face value, are remarkably similar to descriptions of the later Huns.

⁹¹ Sima Qian, *Records of the Grand Historian*, 78-79

⁹² Golden, *An Introduction to the History of the Turkic Peoples*, 122

Marriage practices are one of the areas of culture with a great deal of variation among Steppe cultures. The statement that the sons, upon death of their father, will inherit the marriages of the forebears demonstrates a practice of levirate marriage and is consistent with what we know about the Huns. Attila ascended to the throne upon the death of his father Mundzuk. Mundzuk, additionally, was the brother of previous co-regents Octar and Rugila as reported by Priscus.⁹³ Attila led with his brother Bleda until Bleda's death in 445, upon which his wives became married to Attila.⁹⁴ Levirate marriage is not a practice within all Steppe cultures but may simply apply to the system of rule within the Steppe aristocracy rather than a broad cultural practice amongst the constituents of the Xiongnu confederation.⁹⁵ The static nature of aristocratic culture is on display here as this same system would come to be upheld by the later Chinggisid family in the Mongol Empire.⁹⁶ As far as continuity within the Xiongnu and Hunnic worlds, these were exactly the succession and marriage practices that later led to Attila's ascendancy to the mobile throne. Attila would go against his culture when he murdered his brother,⁹⁷ but royal subterfuge was almost a Steppe tradition unto itself, for "they know nothing of propriety or righteousness", according to Sima Qian.⁹⁸ Given the perspective Sima Qian was writing from, it could be expected of him to ignore that particular quality in Han court rulers as well.

This passage from the *Shiji* also describes the system of tribal confederacy in general, and it is noteworthy that Sima Qian points out in the previous passage that the Xiongnu only came under the greater command of the aristocracy in times of war. So little is known about the Huns prior to the migration period that it is unknown if this was an element of Hunnic culture but

⁹³ Maenchen-Helfen, *The World of the Huns*, 74

⁹⁴ Maenchen-Helfen, *World of the Huns*, 40

⁹⁵ Anthony, 247

⁹⁶ Anthony, 278

⁹⁷ Maenchen-Helfen, *World of the Huns*, 89

⁹⁸ Sima Qian, *Records of the Grand Historian*, 79

given the fragmentation of the alliances formed in Attila's lifetime upon his death, it is highly probable that this is how that group operated as well. The Xiongnu were just the first in a series of Steppe confederacies that periodically came together and collapsed.⁹⁹ These confederacies practiced a type of unique hierarchy that was contextually dynamic.¹⁰⁰

The dynamic hierarchy practiced allows for a flexible conception of leadership roles, determined by immediate demands. Anthropologist John Gledhill summarizes in simplified form; "The nomad chiefdoms [of Inner Asia] were organised into a structure of clans whose segments were ranked. Although the powers of the chiefs were limited in peacetime, the hierarchical order of a chain of command was present in embryo in this political organisation . . . it enabled the nomads to achieve rapid consolidation of administrative control over the territory they conquered."¹⁰¹ The anthropologist begins to capture the flexibility of Steppe hierarchy but does fall short in his reliance on the term "clan." Formally, the clan is a lineal descent group that forms a larger collective,¹⁰² this is the point where divergent Steppe-Sedentary conceptions of kinship come into play. Lineal familial organization in Steppe confederacies were not considered an important identifier, except among the nobility.¹⁰³ Familial lineages, even today, are demonstrably fictional despite most nomads being able to trace genealogy back generations. When observed in practice though, these lineages include mythological fictions as well as a political identity.¹⁰⁴ The military confederacies of the Steppe have codified Anderson's "imagined communities" of nationhood in a very literal manner.¹⁰⁵ Lineage was fungible to

⁹⁹ Golden, Peter. *Cambridge History of Inner Asia*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University. 2011, 39

¹⁰⁰ Sneath, David. *The Headless State*. New York: Columbia University Press. 2007, 65-68

¹⁰¹ Gledhill, John. *Power and It's Disguises; Anthropological Perspectives on Politics*. London: Pluto Press. 2000, 94

¹⁰² Weber, Max. Translated by A.M. Henderson, Edited by Talcott Parsons. *Theory of Social and Economic Organization*. Eastford, Connecticut: Martino Fine Books. 2012, 179

¹⁰³ Sneath, *the Headless State*, 69

¹⁰⁴ Sneath, *the Headless State*, 19

¹⁰⁵ Anderson, Benedict. *Imagined Communities*. New York: Verso Books. 1983, 71-76

facilitate a rapid mobilization of various ethnicities in response to collective profit or defense. “Family” on the Steppe is closer to our concept of political affiliation as much as it is related to genealogical descent. This has everything to do with the mixed role of the family and military unit. Every herder was a soldier and his family, admittedly people of his very close community, were not necessarily related by blood.¹⁰⁶

A couple of other distinct elements in the previous passage from the *Shiji* point to similarities between the unique culture of both the Huns and the Xiongnu. The mention of Xiongnu naming conventions also implies a connection with the Huns, at least at the level of the aristocracy. The name Attila has long been agreed by historical linguists as being Gothic in origin, likely the lingua franca of the Hunnic confederation.¹⁰⁷ Attila derives from the Gothic or Gepidic root “atta”, meaning father. In this case, it is likely to mean father in the regal sense rather than strictly familial. The second half is simply diminutive. Thus, the derived meaning of Attila’s “impolite” name comes to mean something like “little king” or “little chief”. Bleda, for his part, is believed to have his name derived from a Gothicized root of a Turkic word for “wise”.¹⁰⁸ Why these names would be Gothic in character when the Huns were likely a Turkic speaking group makes sense when one considers that the names enter the historical record via Gothic peoples that were pushed West prior to the full Hun invasions.¹⁰⁹ This point of entry is attested by many ancient authors writing about the Huns, Jordanes not least among them.¹¹⁰ Regardless, it demonstrates that the Huns “have no polite names but only personal

¹⁰⁶ Sneath, *the Headless State*, 64-71

¹⁰⁷ Maenchen-Helfen, *World of the Huns*, 18

¹⁰⁸ Maenchen-Helfen, *World of the Huns*, 66-69

¹⁰⁹ Maenchen-Helfen, 'Huns and Hsiung-Nu.', 222-243

¹¹⁰ Jordanes, *Getica*, 84

names, and they observe no taboos in the use of personal names”¹¹¹ as in Sima Qian’s account of the Xiongnu.

A more unusual connection that can now be made could not have been by historians in the past. One would expect Sima Qian’s reference to presumably Bactrian camels to refer to the long-established role that Central Asian traders had in control of the camel caravans of the Silk Road routes.¹¹² No part of the historical record equates the Huns of Europe with camel caravans. However, recent archaeological evidence suggests that camels may have been bred and kept in and around the Carpathian basin in the ancient past. Paired with ecological evidence that the Hun push west was driven by the traditional pastures of the Huns being drier due to a century-long drought,¹¹³ and it becomes a distinct possibility that the more arid climes that supported the Bactrian camel may themselves have been pushed west as well. It also would give explanation to the fact that the Xiongnu would have had to push past so much of the inner core of Central Asia in any hypothesized migration towards Eastern Europe. The land was either unusable or unsuitable for the Xiongnu traditional methods for exploiting the Steppe environment.

On the other side of this migration the Huns emerged in the historical record in the resolutely anti-barbarian writings of Ammianus Marcellinus of Antioch. In his work *the Later Roman Empire*, written between 380 and 400 CE, the Huns retain much of the character previously summarized from the *Shiji*. The Huns, ““moving without encumbrances and consumed by a savage passion to pillage the property of others.””,¹¹⁴ descended upon the lands on the western extent of the Steppe previously occupied by the Germanic Goths.¹¹⁵ Marcellinus

¹¹¹ Sima Qian, *Records of the Grand Historian*, 169

¹¹² Golden, *Central Asia in World History*, 321

¹¹³ Hakenbeck, Elizabeth. “The Role of Drought in the Hunnic Incursions of the Central Asian Steppe.” *Journal of Roman Archaeology*, Dec 2022; 1-21

¹¹⁴ Marcellinus, *Later Roman Empire*, 142

¹¹⁵ Maenchen-Helfen, *World of the Huns*, 77

gives a Western reflection of the same initial passage given to us by Sima Qian when he records the following;

“The people of the Huns, who are mentioned only cursorily in ancient writers and who dwell beyond the sea of Azov (Palus Maeotis) near the frozen ocean, are quite abnormally savage. From the moment of birth they make deep gashes in their children's cheeks, so that when in due course hair appears its growth is checked by the wrinkled scars; as they grow older this gives them the unlovely appearance of beardless eunuchs. They have squat bodies, strong limbs, and thick necks, and are so prodigiously ugly and bent that they might be two-legged animals, or the figures crudely carved from stumps which are seen on the parapets of bridges. Still, their shape, however disagreeable, is human; but their way of life is so rough that they have no use for fire or seasoned food, but live on the roots of wild plants and the half-raw flesh of any sort of animal, which they warm a little by placing it between their thighs and the backs of their horses. None of them ploughs or ever touches a plough-handle. They have no fixed abode, no home or law or settled manner of life, but wander like refugees with the wagons in which they live. In these their wives weave their filthy clothing, mate with their husbands, give birth to their children, and rear them to the age of puberty. No one if asked can tell where he comes from, having been conceived in one place, born somewhere else, and reared even further off. You cannot make a truce with them, because they are quite unreliable and easily swayed by any breath of rumor which promises advantage; like unreasoning beasts they are entirely at the mercy of the maddest impulses. They are totally ignorant of the distinction between right and wrong, their speech is shifty and obscure, and they are under no restraint from religion or superstition. Their greed for gold is prodigious, and they are so fickle and prone to anger that often in a single day they will quarrel with their allies without any provocation, and then make it up again without anyone attempting to reconcile them.”¹¹⁶

Historians have often written off the proposed places of origin of Steppe nomads from

¹¹⁶ Marcellinus, *The Later Roman Empire*, 141-142

Herodotus down the line as being poetic to the point of being interpreted as fantastical. The faraway descriptions of a homeland refer to “frozen seas” (Herodotus on the Scythians)¹¹⁷ or “distant darkness” (Marcellinus on the Huns).¹¹⁸ Though these references could be products of the literary traditions of the cultures that generated them it is nonetheless possible that they refer to exactly where they both describe; Siberia. In addition to additional Kurgan sites being unearthed every day, this is precisely the indicated home of the Northern Xiongnu in Sima Qian’s work. Though some scholars of note, particularly Di Cosmo attribute varying areas of origin.¹¹⁹ Additionally, post-*Shiji* ancient Chinese historians note the cultural differences between the Northern Xiongnu, which would have described the entire body of the confederation at the time Sima Qian was writing, and the Southern Xiongnu that arose when a portion were brought into Chinese control upon surrender, and this is reflected in later archaeology.¹²⁰ Being of differing language groups based on differential analysis of the construction of a Xiongnu lexicon from names of leaders in the historical record, both contingents remained united when the *Shiji* was written and contributed to the war effort against the Han. Presumably ruled by an additional ruler subordinate to Modu Shanyu, leader of the Xiongnu at the time Sima Qian was writing, these Siberian Xiongnu would necessarily rely upon the border fringes to obtain Chinese luxury goods. Being the home of some of the largest raw ore deposits in the ancient world, in which the northern contingent likely would have traded indirectly via the southern connection.

In addition to the elements of Marcellinus’ descriptions that directly refer to the trappings of nomadic pastoralism, there are obviously a few unique oddities. Foremost among those oddities is the practice of cutting of cheeks, which contributed to what in Marcellinus’ estimation

¹¹⁷ Herodotus. *Histories*. New York: Norton. 2014, 176

¹¹⁸ Marcellinus, *Later Roman Empire*, 178

¹¹⁹ Di Cosmo, Nicola. *Ancient China and Its Enemies*. Cambridge, United Kingdom: Cambridge University Press. 2013, 101-103

¹²⁰ Johannesson, “Grave Matters: Reconstructing A Xiongnu Identity From Mortuary Stone Monuments”, 201-212

was an alien appearance. This practice is also explicitly not a part of the Greater Steppe Culture at any period in history but is attested here and confirmed by other sources to be a chief identifier of Huns in Roman times. Jordanes makes multiple references to the practice, stating that the Huns “grew old beardless and their young men were without comeliness, because a face furrowed by the sword spoils by its scars the natural beauty of a beard” and “made their faces hideous with deep wounds.”¹²¹ It so happens that these practices do present themselves in Xiongnu culture as well. When the Later Han general Geng Bing died in 91 CE, to commemorate him the Xiongnu leadership “cut their faces until they bled”¹²² The later Mongolic speaking Xianbei,¹²³ inheritors to Steppe power after the disappearance of the Xiongnu, also on rare occasions practiced face cutting as part of their funerary rites.¹²⁴ This is not a widespread cultural practice and implies a cultural continuity at the very least among the aristocratic classes of all three groups. This cultural continuity, if not the practice itself, is a continuity that is established between the Xiongnu and the Xianbei.¹²⁵

Not only does Marcellinus attest to cultural connections that can be made by other sources, but he also explicitly states the generational mobility of the Huns; “No one if asked can tell where he comes from, having been conceived in one place, born somewhere else, and reared even further off.”¹²⁵ This would imply not a seasonal movement between areas of pasture, but a migration of the Huns. The Huns could only have existed in areas after the displacement of the Ostrogoths, unless the Goths were hiding them among their numbers without knowing it. Thus, within their time known to the Germanic tribes, approximately 50 years at the time this was

¹²¹ Jordanes, *Getica*, 66

¹²² Shimunek, Andrew. *Languages of Ancient Southern Mongolia and North China*. Wiesbaden, Germany: Harrazowitz. 2017, 185

¹²³ Linghu Defen. Shu Jing(ed.) *Book of Zhou*. Chinese Classics in English. San Francisco. 1978, 56

¹²⁴ Thompson, E.A. *A History of Attila and the Huns*. Clarendon Press. Oxford. 1948, 145

¹²⁵ Marcellinus, *The Later Roman Empire*, 141

written, the Huns likely migrated a great distance. This would explain how their origins in the historical record are as sudden as their place of origin is shrouded in mystery.

Though scarring from facial cutting may have led to an agreed-upon beardless appearance of the Huns and Xiongnu, all sources agree upon their long hairstyle. The Xiongnu preferred male hair is attested to in ancient art from both the Han and the Xiongnu. The hair depicted is long in the back/top and shaved or plucked in the front. This hairstyle is known in the present day as the “queue”. It is documented in the *Shiji* that on the birth of one of his daughters, the Chanyu¹²⁶ was given a golden comb to straighten his queue. This would also heavily imply a Northern origin for the Chanyu, as this was the traditional hairstyle of the later Jurchen and Manchu people, but explicitly demarcated in the *Hou Hanshou* as a deviance from the Xianbei and Wouhan.¹²⁷ The Tungusic language-family speaking Jurchen have their origins in Siberia, based on linguistic analysis, and archaeology suggests an origin in Manchuria and the Korean peninsula.¹²⁸ The Xianbei took power after the Xiongnu absence, but their leadership was of a different aristocratic faction.¹²⁹ However, at the Noin Ula burial site in Mongolia, thought by archaeologists to be a tomb for Xiongnu aristocratic elite, definitive evidence for the queue is found.¹³⁰ This was a cultural practice that distinguished the Xiongnu from their temporal and geographic neighbors. Menschen-Helfen argues that the Huns that stormed Europe could not have sported queues because this spectacular hairstyle is not mentioned directly by ancient Greek sources, who had much opportunity to observe their appearance but in the same breath noted a

¹²⁶ Leader of the Xiongnu confederation. The term is linguistically connected with the later more widely used, “Khan”

¹²⁷ Linghu Defen, *Book of Zhou*, 78

¹²⁸ Golden, *Central Asia in World History*, 278

¹²⁹ Pulleybank, Edwin George. *Central Asia and the non-Chinese People of Ancient China*. Aldershot, United Kingdom: Ashgate. 2002, 87-89

¹³⁰ Johannesson, “Grave Matters: Reconstructing A Xiongnu Identity From Mortuary Stone Monuments”, 201-212

Greek source commenting about their hair “for otherwise they were like other Huns”.¹³¹ This suggests a differentiation, perhaps among the elite class only. Priscus attempted to ape Hunnic fashions, including hair, by wearing his hair “neatly clipped all round his head” when visiting the court of Attila.¹³² In Procopius’ later *Secret History*, refers to a Byzantine political faction who “clipping the hair short on the front of the head down to the temples, and let it hang down in great length and disorder in the back, as the Massagetae do. This weird combination they called the Hun haircut.”¹³³ Though a century after the Huns disappeared, this was the hairstyle attributed to the Huns in the popular imagination. This practice seemed unique to both the Huns and the Xiongnu to the point that it was a reference to differentiate the two groups from other members of their respective tribal confederacies.

Finally, we come to the case of Priscus and his account of being received by the royal court of Attila in 448/449 CE. This passage is key in establishing the root of my argument that there existed a term or set of terms employed to refer to Steppe nomads in the broad sense used by sedentary cultures that interacted with them. This term was likely used internally on the Steppe and then diffused across Europe and Asia via interactions between settled and nomadic groups. Priscus gives the historical record an eyewitness account of Attila, as part of Priscus’ diplomatic mission on behalf of the Roman state. It should be noted that Priscus himself hailed from Pannonia and would presumably be more familiar with the nomadic people residing just outside of its borders than some of the more insulated reports from the core center of Roman power.¹³⁴ Perhaps more importantly, as evident by the fact that he met the leader of the Huns in person, would be more intimately familiar than the earlier Herodotus with the customs and

¹³¹ Maenchen-Helfen, *World of the Huns*, 121

¹³² Priscus, *Attila, the Huns, and the Roman Empire*, 171

¹³³ Procopius, and Richard Atwater. *The Secret History of Procopius*. Delhi Open Books. (Kindle Edition) E-Book. 2021, 47

¹³⁴ Priscus, *Attila*, XI

culture of the nomadic people they were writing about. Much ballyhoo has been given to Priscus' use of the term "Scythian" throughout his account. This fact is typically hand-waived away by Roman historians as simply an anachronistic use of the term derived from the earlier work of Herodotus.¹³⁵¹³⁶ It is ironic that the same historians who so vehemently argue against previous attempts by de Guignes to link the Huns and the Xiongnu as resting on mere speculation would so readily speculate that Priscus used the terms "Scythian" and "Hun" interchangeably.¹³⁷ It is not so easy to explain away why he would have done so. It appears to me that Priscus chose to employ each term very deliberately as we will see upon analyzing the following passage from the short chapter on his meeting with Attila;

"When I arrived at the house, along with the attendants who carried the gifts, I found the doors closed, and had to wait until someone should come out and announce our arrival. As I waited and walked up and down in front of the enclosure which surrounded the house, a man, whom from his Scythian dress I took for a barbarian, came up and addressed me in Greek, with the word Xaire, "Hail!" I was surprised at a Scythian speaking Greek. For the subjects of the Huns, swept together from various lands, speak, besides their own barbarous tongues, either Hunnic or Gothic, or--as many as have commercial dealings with the western Romans--Latin; but none of them easily speak Greek, except captives from the Thracian or Illyrian sea-coast; and these last are easily known to any stranger by their torn garments and the squalor of their heads, as men who have met with a reverse. This man, on the contrary, resembled a well-to-do Scythian, being well dressed, and having his hair cut in a circle after Scythian fashion. Having returned his salutation, I asked him who he was and whence he had come into a foreign land and adopted Scythian life. When he asked me why I wanted to know, I told him that his Hellenic speech had prompted my curiosity. Then he smiled and said that he was born a

¹³⁵ Thompson, *A History of Attila and the Huns*, 70

¹³⁶ Maenchen-Helfen, "Huns and Hsiung-Nu.", 222–243

¹³⁷ De Guignes, Joseph. *Histoire Générale Des Huns, Des Turcs, Des Mogols, Et Des Autres Tartares Occidentaux, Avant Et Depuis J. C. Jusqu'à Présent*. London: Forgotten Books. 2018, 201

Greek and had gone as a merchant to Viminacium, on the Danube, where he had stayed a long time, and married a very rich wife. But the city fell a prey to the barbarians, and he was stripped of his prosperity, and on account of his riches was allotted to Onegesius in the division of the spoil, as it was the custom among the Scythians for the chiefs to reserve for themselves the rich prisoners.”¹³⁸

It is clear in this section of his account that the two terms are not being employed interchangeably by Priscus. Most importantly he speaks about the Scythian dress of the Greek speaking man and explicitly refers to the man as Scythian. The very next sentence opens “For the subjects of the Huns, swept together from various lands, speak, besides their own barbarous tongues, either Hunnic or Gothic...”. If in the previous sentence he had referred to the man himself as Scythian, and he goes on to establish the man’s Scythian character later in the passage, why would Priscus suddenly revert to referencing Huns? He then refers to the Scythians being made up of a collection of numerous conquered or subject peoples, of which the Greek man is evidence. It seems to me that even a cursory reading of the passage would indicate that the Scythians to which Priscus refers are themselves subjects of the Huns. The Huns would then be the ethnic group within the larger Scythian body that were able to seize control of the larger group. Priscus in that same short passage refers to the Hunnic language but never refers to a Scythian language. Additionally, Priscus regularly refers to Attila and members of his royal court as Huns, but never the common people. I believe Priscus’ words were employed with the intent to convey that Scythian was his term for all Steppe nomads and their collective culture. This would be what I have dubbed the Greater Steppe Culture. Within that broad Scythian group, the Huns were either the ruling elite or an ethnicity that embodied the Scythian lifestyle that were able to take control of the larger confederation. When read in this way it becomes apparent that

¹³⁸ Priscus, *Attila, the Huns, and the Roman Empire*, 108

he only uses Hun in a very specific sense, and Scythian to refer to any person of nomadic descent. In Priscus' account, every Hun is a Scythian, but every Scythian is not a Hun.

The terms being employed in this manner would not only suggest a deliberate demarcation by the historian but would also open the possibility that the Huns who came to rule the Scythians came from outside the local area. Priscus himself denotes that they were made up of varying ethnic groups. He never makes such an assertion about Huns, using that to only refer to Attila and his retinue. There is no Scythian language mentioned, but there is a Scythian style of dress, which would be consistent with this interpretation. The Greek man's ability to become Scythian, yet not become a Hun only makes sense when interpreted this way. Though I have been making the argument that "Hun" was used as a broad identifier for Steppe people to many of their neighbors, Thompson argues that the term was not yet in widespread use in the Roman world, and that Priscus would appeal to the terminology established by Herodotus for a blanket term for all nomadic groups.¹³⁹ The anachronistic term used for all Steppe nomads by Herodotus was "Scythian."¹⁴⁰ I would go further and argue that that is the only interpretation under which the passage just analyzed makes sense.

The Xiongnu and Huns would then be linked by the fact that Onegesius, the man responsible for guiding Priscus' visit, is "seated on a chair to the right of the king" during ceremonies and negotiations. Given the organizational principles of the ruling Xiongnu elite that were established in accounts by Sima Qian, it would fit their scheme of organizing a Khan of the right and Khan of the left. When oriented South, as the worldview of Xiongnu was according to Sima Qian, this would place Onegesius as the Khan of the West, with Attila as the head. This interpretation is further supported by the fact that Onegesius was returning from a hunt with

¹³⁹ Thompson, *A History of Attila and the Huns*, 80-84

¹⁴⁰ Herodotus. *Histories*, 74

Attila's son, an activity reserved in Steppe societies for the aristocratic elite when given a ceremonial character. Altheim and Stiehl have even interpreted the etymology of Onegesius' name as being derived from the Turkic *on-iyiz*, meaning "he who commands ten", which would be an obvious reference to the Xiongnu decimal unit of leadership.¹⁴¹ Roman historians have interpreted Onegesius' power being "Second only to Attila", according to Priscus, as him being an advisor or military leader operating under Attila. However, that would involve Attila taking up Roman customs when it comes to the representation of leadership. This would be highly uncharacteristic, and it would be far more likely that Onegesius was Attila's Western ruler, in accordance with Steppe traditions.¹⁴²

The textual references to the Huns in the historical record are often sparse, and I believe misinterpretation abounds. These misinterpretations are in the original sources due to the tendency of ancient historians to conflate different ethnicities under the same umbrella term. This gets compounded when modern historians then attempt to correlate an established culture in the archaeological record with those from historical sources. Additionally, Roman historians often have a massive blind spot when it comes to Steppe culture and its subtleties. All these confounding variables come together in one example that will be expounded upon in the following section; artificial cranial deformation. This practice is attributed to the Huns of Attila that fought Rome due to misapplying previously held attributions to archaeological findings based on this Steppe blind spot. I will show how fundamental misunderstandings of history then

¹⁴¹ Frye, Richard N. "Franz Altheim and Ruth Stiehl, *Geschichte Mittelasiens Im Altertum* (Berlin, 1970). Pp. x 811; 10 Illustrations." *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 5, no. 1 (1974): 114–16.

¹⁴² Another derivation of Onegesius' name is rendered "Hunnigensius". If Hunnic was related to Oghuz Turk, his name was likely an honorific title and could be reconstructed linguistically to mean something like "in covenant with Huns" or to make the relationship clearer in modern English; "Hun sub-contractor". Source: Maenchen-Helfen. *World of the Huns*.

become further compounded in archaeology using the example of “Hunnic skull shaping” and the Alchon Huns.

Section II- What’s in the Ground? Evidence From Archaeology

The archeological record has given us more information about the life and times of the Huns than text-based history has in the last century. As more finds are added to the archaeological record, they show the connections between Attila’s Huns and the larger world referred to collectively. However, this interaction also creates further misunderstandings when trying to link texts with material culture. This is made most clear by one of the more famous aspects of Huns in the field of archaeology; artificial cranial deformation, or head shaping.

The practice of artificial cranial deformation certainly isn’t exclusive to the Huns, nor invented by them. In fact, recent evidence places the earliest recorded forms of the practice 10,000 years ago in Northeast Asia, right in the heart of later Xiongnu territory.¹⁴³ This could easily be a product of a lack of early discoveries of the practice or entirely coincidental. However, the practice being attributed to the specific group of Huns that attacked Europe is not only unfounded, but it is almost entirely erroneous. When archaeological digs began unearthing large amounts of artificially shaped skulls from sites around the Carpathian basin beginning in the 19th century, these skulls were assigned to the historical Huns of Europe. They are found with Hunnic material culture and to assume these groups themselves contributed to the larger confederate is sound. However, these skulls were not found in every “Hun” site, even within the

¹⁴³ Klyashtorny, SG. “Landscapes of Eurasian Steppes as the object of historical steppe science.” St Petersburg University. *Geography and Natural Resources*. September 2009. 221-227

Carpathian basin. When they were, they often were only found associated with female skeletons. With what we now know of Steppe culture and given the mobility and migrations involved, simply finding an artificially deformed skull and assigning it the cultural identifier “Hun” loses the distinction it means to create. There obviously existed many different groups of Huns and they all existed within the larger framework.¹⁴⁴ However, there are no references to skull shape among the European Huns in any textual source. Due to the geography of the sites and Marcellus’ description of the Huns as “misshapen”, his equating the two was enough to earn them being connected in academia with the more specific Huns of Attila.¹⁴⁵ “Misshapen” could easily have been lobbied as an insult, as was most certainly the case with other aspects of their appearance. One would assume Roman writers like Priscus or the Gothic Jordanes, upon encountering such dramatically alien looking skull shapes would think that bears mentioning, especially given the Roman tendency to dramatize what they perceived as the more inhuman aspects of the Hun people. Yet again, there is no explicit mention of skull shape in the entire European textual tradition dedicated to such practice. There are numerous historical references to the practice in the Near East, India, and Tibet, however.

The most prominent source we have attesting to cranial deformation in ancient times comes from the coins minted by the Alchon Huns. This group earns its name due to the inscription “Alchon” that can be found on many of the coins. Conjecture abounds but it is uncertain which historical group produced such coins, only that they originate from the area around Samarkand. They were produced in what is likely only a three generational reign of a Bactrian ruling dynasty beginning with a figure known as Kinghila, based on inscriptions on the coins. The text is Sanskrit and the coins were produced in copper, gold and silver varieties. The

¹⁴⁴ Golden, “Some Thoughts on the Origins of the Turks and the Shaping of the Turkic Peoples.”, 136–157

¹⁴⁵ Maenchen-Helfen, *World of the Huns*, 78

Alchon Huns enter the historical record in the fourth century in Indian and Persian sources. The coins were likely minted by the rulers of a short-lived confederation operating out of Bactria but lacking a textual history in this era in Samarkand, it is unknown. The Alchon Huns themselves are name checked in the sources, but due to the tendency of sedentary sources to conflate nomadic groups, their exact source cannot be pinned down. The reason these coins are prominent in the archeological history of the Huns is due to a feature the depictions of the Kinghila dynasty all bear; a clear and distinctly shaped skull.¹⁴⁶

These Huns over time become conflated with the European Huns contemporaneous with Rome due to the problems created by historical references to Hun groups. However, it is highly likely that while these Huns retained their own cultural identity, they would have made up a part of the larger confederacy reported in Roman sources. These coins later became linked with the larger group of Huns. Combined with the previous problem of simplification that leads to the practice of skull shaping to be associated with Attila, these coins become representative of a Hun-wide practice. However, even within the sites with the highest concentrations of shaped skulls, only about 50% of the population had shaped skulls. These were not limited to elite graves and in some cases outright were exclusively in subordinate people. These shaped skulls also face the problem of being found in such geographically disparate regions as France and Xinjiang. Their distribution has perplexed archaeologists, but it becomes obvious when Steppe organization and mobility are taken into consideration. Though associated with Huns of all varieties, this practice was limited to an initial group or groups within the larger whole. The fact

¹⁴⁶ Kumar, A. The Huns (‘Hūṇas’) in India: A Review. *Studies in People’s History*, 8(2), 2021, 182–196

that these skulls are most often found in association with female skeletons also gives away the process by which they came to be dispersed.¹⁴⁷

Mayall, in analysis of the sites in Germany and Lombardy where deformed skulls were found notes “the practice was likely adopted [from the Huns] at a later time.”¹⁴⁸ However, just as the Huns were more tribal confederation than tribe proper, such is true of the Germanic tribes. The Goths and Gepids were not only pushed west by the incoming Huns, but many of their numbers were also absorbed by the larger tribal confederacy. The solution of Steppe confederate culture to the problem of creating bonds of peace between ethnically disparate groups was by linking them through intermarriage. Specifically, as detailed by the *Shiji* among many other sources, they did so by the offering of princesses as part of gift exchange between conquering Steppe people and those they conquered. When the skulls are predominantly female, we can presume then that they were given as offerings to the greater Steppe Horde and taken on as wives and occasionally slaves. It would only have taken a small contingent of head shapers to seed a group that could have (and chronologically would have) started in Tibet and made their way in only a generation as far away as France. MtDNA analysis of the skulls found in Germany show exactly such an expected origin in the East. In fact, in the large German sample, the females contained high Steppe admixture whereas the males were representative of other local samples.¹⁴⁹ The simplest interpretation would be to imagine a group of conquered women who retained this cultural practice while also being imported into Europe for service as bridal peace offerings. Over time, the practice died off with assimilation into the new culture. Given the just

¹⁴⁷ Mayall P, Pilbrow V, Bitadze L. “Migrating Huns and modified heads: Eigenshape analysis comparing intentionally modified crania from Hungary and Georgia in the Migration Period of Europe.” *PLoS ONE* 12(2): e0171064.

¹⁴⁸ Mayall et al., “Migrating Huns and Modified Heads”, 2

¹⁴⁹ Schmid, Clemens and Stephan Schiffels. “Estimating human mobility in Holocene Western Eurasia with large-scale ancient genomic data”, *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, 120, 9, (2023).

two century span of Western European examples of the practice, this is likely. The confusion and conflagration of associating it as a broader trend from the Hun world stems from underestimating the geographical speed of the spread of Steppe groups. This practice does not have any examples in presumed Xiongnu sites, and certainly is not attested to in historical sources from China. However, it does serve as a demonstration of how misunderstandings between disciplines cause previously held assumptions to compound over time in matters of the ancient Steppe. Though definitive links cannot be established that trace a direct line of the practice to the Xiongnu, archaeologist Elizabeth Hakenbeck notes; “The practice first arose west of the Tianshan mountains in the 2nd c. BCE, spreading westwards to the northern Black Sea region at the turn of the millennium and reaching central Europe by the 5th c. CE.”¹⁵⁰ This indicates that these people were at least moving in the right direction at the right times for my proposed framework. She concludes her summary in a way that is suggestive, but not conclusive; “While archaeological evidence does not support the idea of large-scale, rapid movements of people from central Asia into Europe in the early centuries of the 1st millennium CE, it nevertheless suggests extensive connections across Eurasia. Belt sets, bronze mirrors, cauldrons, and occasionally silk, among other items, are evidence of enduring long distance communication and trade between the Black Sea and Mongolia, and even as far as northern China. Skull modification was also a part of this.”¹⁵¹ However, even if Steppe brain vessels show no uniformity across the Steppe, the same cannot be said for their cooking vessels.

Brass cauldrons of a remarkable uniformity are found Steppe-wide. The cauldrons are distinctive enough from other cultures yet uniform to one another to the point they are the primary identifier of Yamnaya-derived archaeological sites. Hakenbeck and her team used

¹⁵⁰ Hakenbeck et al., “The Role of Drought in the Hunnic Incursions of the Central Asian Steppe.”, 1-21

¹⁵¹ Hakenbeck et al., “The Role of Drought in the Hunnic Incursions of the Central Asian Steppe”, 20

skeletons from grave sites across the Steppe but separated time into epochs. The samples from the second to fourth centuries indicate that there was more millet and animal fat being consumed by those in the Carpathian basin at this time and that the levels were both “higher than those in neighboring Germanic populations” and “in line with samples of Central Asian pastoral samples”,¹⁵² showing that there was an increase in pastoral activity (or at least pastoral eating habits) in the Carpathian basin at the expected time of an arrival of peoples from the east. However, this only proves that the pastoral diets of the people there intensified at this time, not that they had origins in the Xiongnu. Additionally, the same study found that people in the region likely changed subsistence patterns several times even over the course of a single lifetime. Another interpretation of this, given that they were of elite graves, is that those individuals that comprised the aristocracy of the Huns had traveled between multiple bioregions in a single lifetime before coming to rest in Hungary. If the Xiongnu had originated using mixed subsistence patterns on the Chinese agricultural hinterlands and then passed through the temperate and desert Steppe before returning to pastoralism at the terminal point in their journey, this pattern would be expected. Though the Steppe pastoralism subsistence package remained remarkably static, it did not comprehensively allow for regional variation.¹⁵³

If the Xiongnu, or one particular group of descendants of the Xiongnu elite, were to go on to become the European Huns in some way, given the importance of domesticated animals to the pastoral lifestyle, they would have brought with them the same types of domesticates. The most important was the horse, which did undergo a genetic change in the corresponding period originating in the East.¹⁵⁴ However, the Xiongnu employed large caravans of Bactrian camel to make the desert journeys along the silk road. “Mules, donkeys, and camel enter the frontier in

¹⁵² Hakenbeck, et al., “The Role of Drought in the Hunnic Incursions of the Central Asian Steppe”, 10-11

¹⁵³ Anthony, *The Horse, the Wheel, and Language*, 178-181

¹⁵⁴ Oke, “Quarter Horse Genome Sequenced”

unbroken lines.” an unnamed Chinese border official states on the Xiongnu control of the silk road in the *Hou Hanshou*.¹⁵⁵ While we know of mules and donkeys in the Carpathians, given that they still exist in modern day Hungary and are not of recent import, camels are currently not found there. However, it is quite possible that camel raising only died as a practice upon the full sedentarization of the region in the medieval period. In the historical record king Bela III is recorded as presenting incoming crusaders camels to make the Syrian desert crossing. In addition, Leo VI the Wise’s military treatise reports “The Turks are followed by a huge number of cattle, horse and beasts of burden, partly in order to provide food and milk to drink, and partly to make their numbers look greater.” and a contemporaneous painting of the conquest of Vienna clearly depicts camel among the menagerie of animals in the procession.¹⁵⁶ Recent evidence finds bones unearthed in both Roman Pannonian provinces that indicate large numbers of camels among the livestock. The earliest evidence for camels among livestock in the region dates to the fourth century and was found near the Roman settlement of Valcum.¹⁵⁷ The timing and placement of this find places it just prior to the historical arrival of Huns in the area.

Environmental conditions in Central Asia have long been suspected as a contributing factor for motivating the Huns to descend on Roman territory in late antiquity. Recent work in ecological science has pinpointed the time and mechanism for such.¹⁵⁸ Not only does the drought that caused this push coincide with the arrival of Huns in Pannonia, but it also coincides with an additional migration of a population away from what is modern day Xinjiang. It is perhaps coincidence, but this is the very region from which Hakenbeck reports the original evidence for the practice of skull shaping among Central Asian people. Jianhua Yang elaborates on the

¹⁵⁵ Fan Ye. Trans. By David Curtis Wright. *Book of Later Han (Houhanshu)*. Boston: Brill. 2022, 40

¹⁵⁶ Darozki-Szabo, Laszlo. “Recent Camel Finds From Hungary” *Astrozoologica*, 49(2), Dec 2014. 265-280.

¹⁵⁷ Darozki-Szabo, “Recent Camel Finds From Hungary”, 267

¹⁵⁸ Hakenbeck, “The Role of Drought in the Hunnic Incursions of the Central Asian Steppe.”, 1-21

importance of the region for connecting the Eastern and Western cultures of the Steppe; “Cultural exchange between the Northern Zone of China and the Eurasian Steppe had existed since the Shang dynasty, with the Xinjiang area north of the Tianshan Mountains an important channel for the exchange of eastern and western cultures”.¹⁵⁹ If a migration was forced by military defeat, it does not imply a collapse of the social systems, merely the economic. This is especially true on the Steppe, owing to the mobility afforded by it. Previously, in the section on the textual tradition, I established the larger social structure at play in Steppe civilization and its reliance on the aristocracy as the “glue” that held together the superstructure. So, while military defeat may have driven a migration away from East Asia and into Xinjiang in the second century, it was an environmental defeat that led to a migration from Xinjiang into the Western Steppe in the third and fourth centuries. If the elites remained in power over the migrating groups, the material culture could have changed while the social structure remained. Li and Ge’s climate history of Xinjiang then lays out how the social structure was maintained during climate-driven migrations:

“It has recently been emphasized that the concept of social resilience can be usefully deployed in some historical contexts (Haldon and Rosen 2018). Among the five patterns of the impacts of climate change on civilization summarized by Fang and Zhang (2017), only one is socio-cultural collapse while the other four are different types of resilient continuous cultures and transformations of socio-cultural systems. It is a normal phenomenon in the Silk Road areas that a group of people (e.g. nomadic tribes) migrate to another area after consuming the resources of one area. This kind of migration is not a manifestation of social system collapses. On

¹⁵⁹ Yang, Jianhua. *The Metal Road of the Eastern Asian Steppe*. New York: Springer Nature. 2020, 595

the contrary, it is the performance of the social system with resilience and adaptability.”¹⁶⁰¹⁶¹

Archaeological analysis of Steppe Migrations can be a notoriously fruitless endeavor. The variables of seasonal movements combined with the subtleties of Steppe societal superstructure work to confound identification of cultures at sites in the more remote portions of the Steppe. The sedentary bias of archaeology as a field of study works to identify sites with people based on geography. The tendency of anthropological practices wanting to establish ethnogenesis is rendered moot by the dynamic hierarchies found in Steppe cultures. This section provides some means through which archaeology could support a migration of some portion of the Xiongnu, predominantly the aristocracy, from the Northwestern borders of ancient China into the Central Asian hinterlands. From there, a more established historical migration is evident, but it is nearly impossible to determine the ethnicity of those making it. The culture of the constituents of Steppe confederacy through voluntary association and fictive kinship asserts itself on the evidence through its inclusive nature. Hakenbeck sheds light on the multiethnic character of Hun burial sites; “There is no distinct material culture that would allow us to identify ordinary, lower ranking Huns. Cemeteries in the Pannonian provinces and beyond, to the north and east of the Danube, are characterized by heterogeneity and a hybridity of material culture and burial traditions.”¹⁶² This archeological connection is likely the most tenuous connection due to these limitations. The preceding was only meant to sketch how such a movement of people could be possible as well as giving some supporting evidence. The nomadic pastoral lifestyle comes with few trappings, a virtue to minimalists but a frustration to researchers in archaeology. Fortunately,

¹⁶⁰ Li, Yanpang and QuanShang Ge. “Climate change, migration, and regional administrative reform: A case study of Xinjiang in the middle Qing Dynasty (1760–1884)”. *Science China Earth Sciences*. Vol. 60. 2017. 1328-1337

¹⁶¹ Yang, Liang Emlyn with Hans-Rudolf Bork, Xiuqi Fang, and Steffan Mischke. *Socio-Environmental Dynamics along the Historical Silk Road*. Cham, Switzerland: Springer Nature. 2019.

¹⁶² Hakenbeck et al., “The Role of Drought in the Hunnic Incursions of the Central Asian Steppe.”, 8

we have other disciplines that have contributed to the discussion over the last century and last two decades, respectively; those of comparative linguistics and population genetics.

Section III- What's in a Word? Evidence From Linguistics

Unfortunately, some of the worst atrocities in world history can give birth to its greatest innovations. This is especially true in the case of linguistic analysis of the Indo-European language group. The abhorrent beliefs of the National Socialist leadership of Germany leading up to the second world war led to an increased interest providing connection between the various “Aryan” groups. This did nothing to establish evidence for the racial superiority the Nazis believed in, but it did lead to more attention being paid to Indo-European linguistic connections. Like the case of dynamite, tragedy and war bore innovation. The resulting discoveries led to the establishment of the Indo-European language group, the largest in the world both in geography and number of speakers. Additionally, Marija Gimbutas’ kurgan hypothesis was both accepted as the standard model and elaborated upon.¹⁶³ It all began prior to that with de Guignes’ observation of the similarity between the words Xiongnu and Hun.¹⁶⁴ The real kickstart to the renewed interest in the connection came with the discovery of the Sogdian Letters in 1907. Philologists and etymologists analyzed the letters and found the word for the Southern Xiongnu was rendered as “xwn”, a phonological equivalent of “Hun”.¹⁸⁶ Atwood later connected both terms philologically to connect the terms in five different language renderings of the group name; Chinese Xiongnu, Sogdian Xwn, Sanskrit Hūna, Greek Ounnoi, and Latin Hunni.¹⁶⁵ Though,

¹⁶³ Gimbutas, Marija. Ed. *Journal of Indo-European Studies*. Vol. XVII. 2011. Champaign & Urbana, Illinois: University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 321-348

¹⁶⁴ De Guignes, *Histoire Générale Des Huns*, 49

¹⁶⁵ Atwood, *Philology of the Grasslands*, 47

more recently de la Vaissiere cautions against all of Atwood's proposed group connections, he does make an argument for both a connection of the terms Hun and Xiongnu and their widespread use among Steppe groups as a play for political legitimacy.¹⁶⁶

Maenchen-Helfen stated in opposition to arguments in favor of shared terminology that it “does not prove the identity of language, economy, social institutions, religion, or art.”, which is true, however, it does provide further evidence for connecting the two cultures in some way.¹⁶⁷¹⁶⁸ The etymological derivation of the terms for each nomadic group did raise questions about the nature of the connection between these groups, but a connection of some variety was definitively established. As to my larger argument, I have never proposed that the Xiongnu or Huns are connected monolithically, simply that elements of the broadly shared practice uniting Steppe nomads bind the groups together in a connected superstructure. The connection between the terminology used by sedentary people to refer to their nomadic neighbors provides that connection with some solid evidence. However, Maenchen-Helfen's point still stands. The words, like the way Priscus employed the word “Scythian”, may simply have described a blanket term for horse riding nomads without differentiating between groups. Sinor, in his rebuttal to Maenchen-Helfen, underscores the core of my broader argument within this specific context; “the flaw in this argument is its disregard of the fact that the name Hun has been used consistently as a generic for many barbarian or barbarous peoples – for example in Byzantine sources in which Hungarians or Ottomans are called Huns.”¹⁶⁹

¹⁶⁶ De la Vaissiere, “Sogdian Traders: A History”, 48-52

¹⁶⁷ Maenchen-Helfen, “Huns and Hsiung-Nu.”, 224

¹⁶⁸ Penn, Julia M. *Linguistic Relativity Versus Innate Ideas*. Berlin: De Gruyter. 2006.

¹⁶⁹ Sinor, Dennis. “Aspects of Altaic Civilization.” *Medieval History Journal*, vol 62. 1990. 82-87

Étienne de la Vaissière undercut that argument while still supporting a broad connection; “Sinor does not run a great risk of being denied because he is indeed perfectly clear that the word Hun has become generic. The whole problem is to specify when. To convince, Sinor should have invoked generic uses of the term Hun before the 4th century.”¹⁷⁰ This is a weakness of connecting the cultures more broadly, but Sinor also imported evidence from archaeology to bolster the connection; namely, Xiongnu and Hunnic cauldrons. The similarity of these cooking vessels is probably a derivation from a broader convention adopted from their shared Yamnaya predecessors, however, that simply underscores the cultural connections that do exist between the groups. Though I believe the cultural connection strictly based on cooking vessels to be rather weak, the argument for a linguistic connection has been further developed in recent years. As the lexicons of the Xiongnu and Hun language reconstructions are built, the arguments became more nuanced. Though clearly related in some way, the question remained of which language or proto-language gave a basis for such a connection.

I believe the most likely interpretations thus far are those that propose a connection to the Yeniseian or Turkic language groups. Though Turkic languages would be spoken by the general body of the group, Yeniseian languages would remain in use among some families of the nobility. Modern Hungarian, purported on tenuous grounds the successor of the Hunnic language remains an oddity in Europe and shows heavy interaction with Indo-European and Turkic languages throughout its history, yet remains Uralic in morphology and the underlying structure and an unlikely candidate for being related to Hunnic.¹⁷¹ Given the Siberian origins of Yeniseian language groups and their deep historical connection to the Turkic groups it would be hard for me to put one ahead of the other as the closest relative to the language of the Xiongnu. But it is

¹⁷⁰ De LaVassiere, “Sogdian Traders: A History”, 187

¹⁷¹ Gao, Jingyi. “Huns and Xiongnu Identified by shared Yeniseian and Hungarian etymologies.” *Central Asiatic Journal* vol. 56. 2013.

quite probable that both language groups, and likely more, were spoken by large portions of the confederation. The language of the European Huns remains a mystery as well. Mongolic languages do not have a prominent place in Steppe political history until the medieval era,¹⁷² which makes that family an unlikely progenitor of the languages spoken by the ancient Xiongnu or Huns. The people most often interacting with the historical sources from either Hun or Xiongnu are the elite ruling class. Therefore, it is assumed that those sources would then only reflect the lingua-franca of that class, which due to the nature of Steppe confederacy, did not always or even often represent the language of the subordinate groups that constituted the rank and file of the confederation.¹⁷³

In the work of Priscus, Hun attendants of Attila reportedly read a list of condemned names from a list in a non-Latin script. If not a surviving script scheme,¹⁷⁴ this script had a couple of likely candidates. The *tamgas* are an ancient form of brand or rune that was used in historic times as a cattle brand and clan identifier. Those who study them have interpreted them as having connections to the Orkhon inscriptions of the old Turkic languages in the Orkhon river valley and to later Norse runes in Scandinavia. In attested usage, they were employed as clan identifiers but historic examples in the Bosphorus also include an associated king's representative tamgas. They fall out of usage in the areas of the Steppe where people become sedentarized as they lose their purpose as a distinguisher of nomadic pastoral tribes to distinguish herd ownership.¹⁷⁵ I believe the appearance of the unifying king in earlier tamgas represents the subordinate voluntary associative character of Steppe cultural unity. Clauson states that the

¹⁷² Anthony, *the Horse, the Wheel, and Language*, 271

¹⁷³ Sneath, *Headless State*, 184-186

¹⁷⁴ Such as Sanskrit or if Priscus had failed to link it with Roman script in his writing.

¹⁷⁵ Clauson, Gerard. *Etymological Dictionary of pre-thirteenth century Turkish*. Oxford: Clarendon. 1972, 60

tamgas have a connection with and may be a precursor to the Orkhon valley inscriptions, which are inscrutably of an early Turkic script. The stele that bore these inscriptions were at the heart of the homelands of the inheritors of Xiongnu power and were placed by the Turkic-led confederations that succeeded to Xiongnu.¹⁷⁶ The earliest attested use of the script originates in the late fifth century. The stele are exceptional, as the diffuse nature of nomadic power would be expected to prevent large scale public works projects. Using commissioned (or perhaps coerced or enslaved) Han artisans for the actual rendering of the script, they could only have been made during the ascendancy of one of the Steppe confederate periods.¹⁹⁶ Given the timing of the larger and most numerous Stele, that would make the candidates the Turkic confederations that followed the Xiongnu.¹⁷⁷ I would argue that it is not only possible, but probable that the transition from the representational tamgas to a full Turkic script would be lost to archaeology as they were not captured in stone. If we know that Norse runes fell out of favor when the Germanic tribes began to have extensive contact and territorial intrusions from the Romans and that the tamga suffered a similar fate, it can be presumed that the practice fell out of favor in Hunnic territory in the period following the Roman conquer of Pannonia. The later Stele use the Turkic script to render the early Mongolian language when the Mongols began to dominate Steppe power.¹⁷⁸ It is possible that they could be adapted to represent the language of the Huns as well. If the Orkhon script was retained by the Mongols and given the uniform nature of shared deep-time cultural elements on the Steppe, it is possible the script was employed by the Huns as well. However, their rapid ascent and decline leaves us with only a small window for this to be captured in the archaeological record. This process would have left a large Turkic character on the languages it touches, leading to a disproportional representation of Turkic languages in all

¹⁷⁶ Clauson, *Etymological Dictionary of Pre-Thirteenth Century Turkish*, 84

¹⁷⁷ Anthony, *the Horse, the Wheel, and Language*, 82

¹⁷⁸ Golden, *Cambridge History of Inner Asia*. Cambridge, 284-285

languages of Steppe power. A similar process is seen in the Romanization of Europe and the Sinicization of the Vietnamese kingdoms.¹⁷⁹ This disproportional representation of a Turkic vocabulary is exactly what we find in the most widely spoken (while still only having a scant less than 700 speakers) surviving Yeniseian language; Ket,¹⁸⁰ Furthermore, Edward Vajda, foremost linguist of the Ket language, informs us that linguistic evidence points to the Ket migrating north over time from an ancestral South Siberian homeland, leaving the Ket pushed from their homelands by the cascading waves of migrations pushed by this northern expansion.¹⁸¹ This expansion's timing would have left the Central Asian terminal point of the Xiongnu migration west as a possible cause, as the newly arriving Xiongnu group pushed the ancestral Ket northward.

The modern Ket exist in small hunter-gatherer communities of the lower Yenisei River basin, located in modern day Russia. Their numbers, according to the most modern ethnographic evidence we have, only add up to around 1200 people.¹⁸² Their lifestyle and marriage practices led to the group being nearly completely isolated from neighboring groups for centuries. Vajda informs us that the Ket language and the Yeniseian language family it comes from contain an underlying structure not found among its immediate neighbors. The language also reflects a millennium of interaction with the neighboring Turkic, Samoyedic, Uralic and Altaic languages and “offer unique evidence of a bygone linguistic situation in Central Asia.”¹⁸³ These language groups represent the languages employed by the various groups that made up the Xiongnu confederation. Notably absent, is any interaction between Ket and Mongolian. Given what I have earlier established about the nature of the leadership of Steppe confederacies, the language

¹⁷⁹ Ball, Warwick. *The Eurasian Steppe*. New York: Simon and Schuster. 2021, 63

¹⁸⁰ Vajda, Edward. *Yeniseian People and Languages*. Oxfordshire, United Kingdom: Taylor and Francis. 2002, 18

¹⁸¹ Vajda, *Yeniseian People and Languages*, 16

¹⁸² Vajda, *Yeniseian People and Languages*, 8

¹⁸³ Vajda, *Yeniseian People and Languages*, XV

groups spoken among the elites shift based on usurpations of power. From what little we do know about it, the Xiongnu language is heavily Turkic in character, which seems to indicate that it is a highly Turkicized if not Turkic language.¹⁸⁴ The Mongolic speaking groups were always a small fringe group within these confederacies until the medieval Mongol empire, which left a linguistic footprint throughout the Steppe. Given Vajda's proposed northern expansion of the Yeniseian languages from a south Siberian source bordering on the northern Steppe, and the low amount of Mongolic influence on the Ket language, it can be presumed that the expansion that terminated in the displacement of the Ket happened before the rise of the Mongols. Therefore, the Yeniseian languages, which originate near the homeland of the Xiongnu, interacted heavily with all the groups that had maintained Steppe power up until they left the Steppe. They once reflected a much wider territorial use, but prior to Mongol ascendancy. Shifts in Steppe confederacy rule tend to be defined by epochs in which tribes speaking similar language groups occupy the elite positions in the confederacies. Each collapse and replacement, with the sole exception of the jockeying for position that defined the early Turkic Khanates, represent large scale takeover by cultures speaking unrelated language groups. If the preceding and succeeding aristocratic groups to the Xiongnu were both Turkic speaking, it is likely that the Xiongnu elites spoke an unrelated dialect, or it would not have been viewed as an epochal change in power. Pulleybank states that the name of the parent house of Turko-Mongol Barlas and Borjigin clans (house of Genghis Khan and Timur) was Kiyat, almost identical to the Middle Chinese pronunciation of the name Jie, /*kjät*/. The Jie were a Yeniseian family speaking group that made up part of the Xiongnu confederacy as recorded by Sima Qian.¹⁸⁵ If this is the case, then Steppe control becomes a story in which power was volleyed back and forth between this Yeniseian

¹⁸⁴ Golden, *Nomads and Their Neighbors on the Eurasian Steppe*, 82

¹⁸⁵ Pulleybank, *Central Asia and the non-Chinese People of Ancient China*, 112-118

aristocratic tribe and the more numerous Turkic speaking groups. This historical jockeying between two groups is possibly even captured in its mythology in the Secret History of the Mongols, in which the “white bones” engage in a power relationship with the “black bones”.¹⁸⁶

The only small order of business left is proving that some part of the European Hun group spoke a Yeniseian language, which would be impossible with the current body of evidence. The language of the European Huns is far less attested to than that of the Xiongnu. Maenchen-Helfen admits that there was likely a second lingua franca in the Huns empire in addition to Gothic.¹⁸⁷ Most of the lexicon we have today comes from the names of prominent Huns as recorded by the Romans and a small handful of words recorded by Priscus. Pulleybank put forward the hypothesis that an element within the Huns may have spoken a Yeniseian language.¹⁸⁸ It is also likely that the words put forward by the Huns were Gothicized on the presumption that these would make them more coherent to the Romans. If indeed the Hun leadership was derived from the Jie people as members of the Xiongnu confederation, then the classically imagined etymology of Attila’s own name would begin to make more sense. Though purported to be derived from the Gothic “atta” or father by the Grimms, Maenchen-Helfen notes that our received names for the Huns are “not the true names of the Hun princes and lords.”¹⁸⁹ What we have are Hunnic names in Germanic dress, modified to fit the Gothic tongue, or popular Gothic etymologies, or both.¹⁹⁰ However, linguistic reconstruction of the Arin language, a Yeniseian language that was spoken among the Jie, gives us several kinship terms closely related to those used by Attila’s Huns. In fact, in Attila’s own name (or title) the case ending may

¹⁸⁶ Kahn, *Secret History of the Mongols*, 61-71

¹⁸⁷ Maenchen-Helfen, *World of the Huns*, 242

¹⁸⁸ Pulleybank, *Central Asia and the non-Chinese People of Ancient China*, 120-124

¹⁸⁹ Maenchen-Helfen, *World of the Huns*, 148

¹⁹⁰ Maenchen-Helfen, *World of the Huns*, 148

very well come from one of the many Turkic nominalizing suffixes, many of which end in an open vowel sound.¹⁹¹ Similar to Onegesius in Priscus, it could simply be a title misinterpreted, with Attila's given name unknown to history. Given what we know about Steppe marriage practices it is highly likely that Attila's mother was of a different culture than that of Attila's father, Mundzuk, and likely spoke a different language. The Jie were specifically the tribe in the *Shiji* that supply princesses to the Xiongnu elite.¹⁹² It is possible that Attila's mother was a captive princess either given to Mundzuk to settle for peace or taken by Mundzuk through conquest. Thus, Attila's name, or title, may give us a linguistic connection to the Jie people, likely through Attila's mother.

There is still no consensus on the origins of the Hunnish language given the dearth of source words. However, I think we can say it is likely not an isolate. It would be impossible to know the underlying syntax and morphology simply through vocabulary so even if the words themselves are Turkic or Germanic loanwords, the underlying structure is completely unknown. What can be said for certain is that it is not an Indo-European language, based on reports from history. It is also possible that the Huns were a smaller people that had risen to power in a vacuum. The linguistic path traveled that terminated in the Ket's forced migration was likely related to that of the Xiongnu, as the Ket migrations were forced upon them by a rapidly expanding northern Steppe population and the disruptions that caused among Siberian populations. The Xiongnu followed a historically traceable path to the point in Central Asia that these disruptions emanated from. Given similarities in material culture from Xinjiang,¹⁹³ the directionality of the Hun migrations and the tribes they displaced, and the linguistic elements that can be pinned down for certain, only two possibilities remain. Though the language itself is

¹⁹¹ Erdal, *A Grammar of Old Turkic Languages*, 26

¹⁹² Sima Qian, *Records of the Grand Historian*, 41-42

¹⁹³ Johannesson, "Grave Matters: Reconstructing A Xiongnu Identity From Mortuary Stone Monuments, 201-212

likely Turkic-related in character, it appears to have had extensive contact with Yeniseian languages. If further linguistic innovations occur or new texts are discovered in the Hunnish language that imply a relationship with the Yeniseian family, then the connection between the Huns and the Xiongnu is all but proven. If that relationship does exist, it is likely through the aristocracy of the fallen Jie, if not made up entirely of remnants of the Jie.

Section IV- What's in a Cell? Evidence From Genetics

The connections I have laid out previously, while tentative, do all add up to a theory that has more points that must be addressed to refute it. The fact that there are so many different types of connections between the Xiongnu and European Huns is certainly not a coincidence. We simply must determine if these connections are byproducts of the cultural superstructure underlying Steppe nomadic pastoralism imparted by the Yamnaya expansion, something more significant, or something more idiosyncratic. Given the nature of Steppe nomadic culture, movements of material culture or language may be irrelevant. I don't think such questions are fruitful, but those trying to connect the two cultures, especially in the field of anthropology, seem to require a definitive ethnogenesis. Though the meaning of ethnicity may be too fuzzy a concept to adequately capture Steppe politics and migrations through fictive kinship and voluntary association, the question would be definitively answered if we could use science to establish concrete evidence for the movements of population groups across geography and time.

Genomic sequencing and population genetics have revolutionized our understanding of the past from a migratory perspective. Though 23 and Me is probably just placating nationalist gatekeepers with their "precise" and "scientific" techniques, they are based on actual scientific

practice. The human genome was sequenced in full in the 1990s and continues to be elaborated upon in greater detail as time passes. MtDNA analysis allows us to take genetic information from the past through archaeological remains of ancient humans. Due to a nearly fixed rate of mutation, we can use these sequences to date analysis and the accuracy of those findings has proven to be more accurate than radiocarbon dating.¹⁹⁴ When we take genetic samples from skeletal remains found in graves and compare them with the samples already taken from modern populations, we can begin to construct a map of population movements in the past. The applications in the modern day for determining ancestry may be dubious for the individual, but this method of analysis is uniquely well suited to giving us accurate information about migrations of groups in the ancient past. By tracing mutations along genetic lines, scientists create sequence markers assigned to the mutations and can then give us a reasonably accurate measure of when various groups in the past split from one another or mixed with one another. For instance, the work done by population geneticists has confirmed not only the previously hypothesized Beringian Hypothesis, but it was also able to confirm Vajda's proposal that there was a relationship in deep history between the Ket, natives of Siberia, and groups in the Northwest portion of the North American continent.¹⁹⁵ If anything, the Ket show us that language is a great way to connect people and cultures, but it occasionally produces some strange outliers that confound the practice of using linguistics to track the movements of people. Marija Gimbutas' kurgan hypothesis, the theory that burial practice similarities connect a broad range of Steppe cultures through a shared Yamnaya source, has been confirmed, strengthened, and expanded upon using this new type of evidence.¹⁹⁶ In recent years, as more skeletons from archaeological digs have been sequenced, some facts about migration on the ancient Steppe have

¹⁹⁴ Cavalli-Sforza, *Genes, People, and Languages*, 3

¹⁹⁵ Jeong, Wang et al. "A Dynamic 20000 year history of Eurasia's Eastern Steppe." *Science Direct*. February 2021.

¹⁹⁶ Anthony, *the Horse, the Wheel, and Language*, 32

come into focus. If there really are connections between the various phenomena I have described in this section, they will certainly show up in cell nuclei.

So, what exactly do the genetic studies on the Huns and Xiongnu tell us about them? The largely uncontested view of the peopling of the Steppe from the Yamnya expansion is confirmed.¹⁹⁷ Further details emerge such as the emergence of three separate large-scale expansions of population from the Dnieper homeland. Two of these waves of migration picked up nomadic and settled people from the Iranian highlands, who represent their own distinct genetic contribution to the overall expansion.¹⁹⁸ The first two occurred at roughly 4200 BCE and 3500 BCE respectively and correspond with the emergence of the wheeled wagon among Steppe populations found in the archaeological record. The third, at around 2000 BCE took a less direct path and perhaps corresponds to the development of horseback riding rather than the use of the Horse simply to pull vehicles.¹⁹⁹ The genetic analysis shows that as the original expansions of an Indo-European speaking people spread, they mixed in roughly consistent proportions with the aboriginal pastoral nomads already established in each new region. The spread reached beyond the Steppe including contributions to the genes of Siberian, Chinese, and Near Eastern populations.²⁰⁰ After this base population admixture was established, though the overall Steppe base remained, local groups still showed a tendency to mix at a rate much higher than anything found in the sedentary world.²⁰¹²⁰² This genetic heterogamy apes the cultural-linguistic evidence we find in the historical, linguistic, and archaeological record.

¹⁹⁷ Anthony, *the Horse, the Wheel, and Language*, 21

¹⁹⁸ Cavalli-Sforza, *Genes, People, and Languages*, 88

¹⁹⁹ Martinez-Cruz et al. "In the heartland of Eurasia: the multilocus genetic landscape of Central Asian populations" *European Journal of Human Genetics*, vol.19. 2011.

²⁰⁰ Kradin, Nikolay. *Nomads of Inner Asia in Transition*. Moscow: Moscow University. 2007, 20

²⁰¹ Jeong, Wang et al., "A Dynamic 20000 year history of Eurasia's Eastern Steppe."

²⁰² Maroti, Zoltan et al. "Genetic origins of the Huns, Avar, and conquering Hungarians." *Current Biology* 32, July 11, 2022, 2858–2870

The Xiongnu were the first Steppe confederacy in recorded history, but that is far from indicating them as the first confederacy in prehistoric or protohistoric times. The population base was made up of people who corresponded to samples found in (Outer) Mongolia who had mixed with previously established Siberian groups with low but notable contribution from settled Han farmer groups. Lee and Zhang state; “The Xiongnu are not closely related to the populations from the Central Plains, Inner Mongolia, or Manchuria, therefore their ancestors probably do not originate from these regions. The Xiongnu are probably a local development from within Mongolia dating back at least to the Bronze Age,”.²⁰³ Though a high degree of population mixing occurred and there is evidence for a degree of exceptionality among the speakers of Turkic languages; “We found two presumable cases of linguistic replacements in Central Asia. The Turkic-speaking populations, TUR (Turkmen) and UZA (Uzbek) were found to cluster together with Indo-Iranian-speaking populations.”²⁰⁴ This would imply due to the Turkic khanates being of mixed ethnicity, that the Xiongnu aristocracy did not speak a Turkic language. Given the derivative genetics of the samples corresponding to the groups from Siberia, and a Steppe group outside of Mongolia, this supports strong ties linguistically and genetically between the Xiongnu and Jie. The relationship between the Xiongnu and Yeniseian language speaking Jie is further underscored by Lee and Zhang’s conclusions; “The Xiongnu are not closely related to the Xianbei, Upper Xiajiadian, and Ordos samples. This implies that the barrier to intermarriage with the populations represented by the eastern samples was much stronger than to non-Asians, Qiang (proto-Tibetan), and Chinese. This may be evidence of a political barrier since they had similar

²⁰³ Lu D, Lou H, Yuan K, Wang X, Wang Y, Zhang C, Lu Y, Yang X, Deng L, Zhou Y, Feng Q, Hu Y, Ding Q, Yang Y, Li S, Jin L, Guan Y, Su B, Kang L, Xu S. Ancestral Origins and Genetic History of Tibetan Highlanders. *American Journal of Human Genetics*. 2016 Sep 1;99(3):580-594.

²⁰⁴ Gnecci-Rusconi et al. “Ancient genomic time transect from the Central Asian Steppe unravels the history of the Scythians” *American Association for the Advancement of Science*. March, 2021.

subsistence strategies and material culture, and language.”²⁰⁵ This would heavily imply both a separate Xiongnu ruling elite that did not find itself in power of the new Xianbei that came to replace them. The Xianbei themselves spoke either a Turkic or Mongolic language, and further supports my earlier speculation of a non-Turkic speaking Xiongnu elite.

When the Xiongnu were forced to flee west following the collapse of the confederacy, they first found themselves in Central Asia in the area roughly corresponding to modern day Xinjiang. This area’s modern population is much more homogenous as well as having its origins in a migration from the medieval period,²⁰⁶ implying that there was an additional migration out of this region predating the medieval period. This migration led to the establishment of two separate but concurrent populations; the Huns and the Avars. Though the historical record records the Avars suffering displacement at the hands of the Huns, the two groups originated from the same migration out of Central Asia.²⁰⁷ This would imply that the two groups likely spoke different languages. We know that the Avars spoke a Caucasian language, which means the Huns likely did not, further supporting that the Hunnic languages were Yeniseian or Turkic in origin. In addition, among Avar groups, researchers found genes “which seem typical in European Huns, and were mostly accompanied by Asian maternal lineages. These Avar period people could have represented Hun remnants that joined the Avars but isolated in separate communities.”²⁰⁸ This fact, fitting in with marital practices within Steppe confederacies, implies the mobility of female brides within a lifetime and would further strengthen the argument about Attila’s Jie maternal ancestry. Finally, the Huns likely spread from Central Asia was

²⁰⁵ Lee C, Linhu Zh. “Xiongnu population history in relation to China, Manchuria, and the Western regions”: *Xiongnu Archaeology. Multidisciplinary Perspectives of the First Steppe Empire in Inner Asia*. Brosseder U, Miller BK, editors. Bonn: Rheinische-Friedrich Wilhelms-Universitat Bonn; 2011; pp. 193–200

²⁰⁶ Gnecci-Rusconi et al., “Ancient genomic time transect from the Central Asian Steppe unravels the history of the Scythians”, 7

²⁰⁷ Maroti et al., “Genetic origins of the Huns, Avar, and conquering Hungarians.”, 2858–2870

²⁰⁸ Maroti, et al., “Genetic origins of the Huns, Avar, and conquering Hungarians.”

accompanied by those who would become Avars as well as Sarmatians; “The large number of genetic outliers with Hun_Asia_Core ancestry in both Avars and [Sarmatian-Hungarian] Conquerors testify that these successive nomadic groups were indeed assembled from overlapping populations.”²⁰⁹

Taken together, this would seem to indicate that upon the breakup of the Xiongnu confederation, whose elites may have spoken a Yeniseian language accompanied by a commoner class speaking a Turkic language, migrated towards the arid flatlands of Central Asia. After a period of mixing with local populations, they departed further west. During this westward migration they split into two groups, the Avars and Huns, one of whom spoke a Caucasian language, and the other a different non-Caucasian language. This predated the rise in power of Mongolic speaking people and likely disqualifies them as well. This leaves a Yeniseian or Turkic-related language speaking elite to displace the Avars and then the Goths as they moved into the Pannonian Basin. These people formed the elite, if not most of the ethnic body of the confederacy that would eventually be led by Attila in their conquest of Rome until upon the death of Attila they split into multiple fragmentary groups. Of these groups, both intermixed with local sedentary people or migrated back into Steppe lands. The genomic history of the Huns by Maroti et al state the connection between the Xiongnu and the Huns in their conclusions,²¹⁰ I have merely elaborated upon it here by connecting it with linguistics and the historical record;

“The genomic history of Huns Avars and Conquerors revealed in this study reconciles with historical, archaeological and linguistic sources. Our data shows that the leadership strata of both European Huns and Avars originated from the area of the former Xiongnu Empire, from present day Mongolia, and both groups can

²⁰⁹ Maroti et al. “Genetic origins of the Huns, Avar, and conquering Hungarians.”, 2869

²¹⁰ Maroti et al., “Genetic origins of the Huns, Avar, and conquering Hungarians.”, 2870

be traced back to early Xiongnu ancestors. Northern Xiongnu were expelled from Mongolia in the second century CE, and during their westward migration Sarmatians were one of the largest groups they confronted. Sergey Botalov presumed the formation of a Hun-Sarmatian mixed culture in the Ural region before the appearance of Huns in Europe, which fits the significant Sarmatian ancestry detected in our Hun samples, though this ancestry had been present in late Xiongnu as well. Thus, our data are in accordance with the Xiongnu ancestry of European Huns, claimed by several historians. We also detected Goth- or other German-type genomes among our Hun period samples, again consistent with historical sources.”²¹¹

Conclusions – What Does This All Tell Us?

On the question of the relationship between the ancient Xiongnu and the European Huns, the historical record appears easily reconciled with genetic, archaeological, and linguistic data. The reading I’ve given to Priscus also seems consistent with it. Priscus' deliberate use of the separate terms “Hun” and “Scythian”, with the former referring to the group that occupied the leadership of the confederacy of European Huns and the latter referring to Steppe nomads in general. Historical sources appear to recognize the relationship between ethnicity and statehood, they were simply lacking the terminology to fully convey it.

To summarize; I believe the most likely interpretation of this evidence when taken together is that the Xiongnu confederation was ruled by an aristocratic elite derived from a mix of a people from the Northern borders of Han China who intermixed with the Jie people from whom they had taken most of their maternal lines. The common classes of this confederation would have been made up by people of various ethnicities and language groups but with Turkic speaking groups making up the majority. It is still unknown what language would have been spoken by the

²¹¹ Maroti, “Genetic origins of the Huns, Avar, and conquering Hungarians.”, 2869

Xiongnu elite, but it was influenced by long term interactions with Turkic and Yeniseian languages. Upon the defeat and breakup of the Xiongnu, elements of this elite were forced to migrate West where within a generation or two they arrived in modern day Xinjiang. The archeological data seems to indicate this as the terminal point of the Xiongnu migration as well as the place of origin of the Huns.

The term Hun, which refers to the same groups of Steppe nomads by cultures from most settled regions along all borders of the Steppe and was likely used by the people themselves as a claim to political legitimacy, as per de la Vaissiere. These Huns, of which some confederation was born during their stay in Xinjiang and along their subsequent migration to the Pannonian basin, eventually came under the leadership of Attila. When encountered by Priscus, the envoy used the more ancient Herodotean generic term of “Scythian” to refer to the wider confederacy in his writing, while using the self-appellate “Hun” to refer to the specific group of which Attila was a part. This was likely due to the European Huns and Xiongnu claiming legitimacy of rule appealing to a shared tradition, a tradition that maintained continuity through the nobility of both groups and their descendants. I believe further that the genetic ties established between the two groups can be ascribed using historical and linguistic evidence as connected to the tradition of selecting aristocratic elite women from among the Jie people in both confederations. The existence of a widespread dynastic ruling class of horseback Habsburgs means that some element of the aristocracy of the European Huns can be said to be the direct descendants of the Xiongnu aristocracy that fled after the collapse of the Xiongnu confederation first encountered by Sima Qian.

I believe this proposal of the Xiongnu elite class being made up of the Yeniseian-speaking Jie people or a mixed group that included them as the best interpretation of

the data we have. Though linguistic and historical information on the Huns is less detailed and reliable, the archaeological and genetic evidence suggests a very likely connection between the Hun and Xiongnu elite and support the conclusions of a relationship between the two cultures that goes beyond just a shared name. The disagreements over this relationship in the historiography then stem from an incomplete set of sources used by various disciplines, with a lack of syncretism between the disciplines leading to each missing key supporting evidence from the other. When taken together they present a compelling argument for a direct relationship between the two groups. Though still contested and open to new evidence, my broader argument about the historical misinterpretations of Steppe societies by sedentary researchers is illustrated by these interdisciplinary blind spots. Though it now appears that there is a demonstrable direct connection between the Xiongnu and the Huns, the unique practice of fictive kinship and voluntary association practiced by Steppe nomads means that connection was always there, even in the absence of direct evidence. The horrifying “Curtain of Fire” seen by scouts on the Northern fringes of the ancient Han and the “Scourge of God” that struck terror into the hearts of ancient Rome both wielded the same sword.

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