ETHNICITY IN A KHAGANATE: AVAR IDENTITY BETWEEN 570 AND 630 A.D.

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(they/them)

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To Palestine, my fibre and being

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Summary

Avar history has received little scholarly attention over the past two centuries. When research on the Avars was done, it was treated as a separate topic under Eurasian steppe studies. This thesis utilises a new wave of scholarship that recentres Avar history in its early medieval European and Eurasian steppe contexts and explores identity in the Avar Khaganate. It aims to build upon these studies by investigating what Avar ethnicity looked like during the Early Avar Period (570-630 AD) using written and select archaeological sources. The method used in this study is based on current anthropological understandings of ethnicity, specifically where it is defined as the way members of a group perceive themselves *and* the way outsiders perceive the same group. This research implements such approach by examining indicators of the way Avars perceived themselves and the way outsiders perceived the Avars within the ancient sources. Most of the evidence of Avar history to survive are written texts by Byzantine authors and contemporary archaeological evidence like elite and warrior burials. This study uses these sources to identify and discuss potential ethnic markers of the Avars, including origin, migration, language, appearance, religion, and warfare.

Statement of originality

This work has not previously been submitted for a degree or diploma in any university. To the best of my knowledge and belief, the thesis contains no material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the thesis itself.

(Signed)_____ Date: 25/11/2021

Natalie Abedi

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I am incredibly proud to call this thesis mine. Every word in this investigation of Avar ethnicity is informed by my passion for activism and experience as a Non-binary Palestinian Ukrainian Muslim. I believe every history deserves to be told, especially those of marginalised communities. This is why I created this project – to help shed light on the rich history of a marginalised group.

I want to say a huge thank you to my supervisor Dr Danijel Džino for being an amazingly supportive teacher. From the moment I heard Danijel speak during his first lecture on World Archaeology six years ago, I knew he would be a significant mentor to me. Finally, I owe everything to my mother, Ludmila, and brother, Hamoudi, for their support in life and this journey especially. I love you both very much.

1. Introduction

Denis Sinor summed up Avar research perfectly when he said, "the history of the Avars is not yet written."[1] Avar history has received little scholarly attention over the past two centuries. When research on the Avars was done, it was treated as a separate topic within Eurasian steppe studies. Part of the reason for such scholarly disregard is the perception that the Avars were irrelevant to European history because of their Eurasian steppe origins. Another reason for this neglect is that most early scholarship on the Avars was written in Hungarian, making it difficult to access by non-Hungarian speakers and readers.

This thesis will utilise current scholarship that recentres Avar history within its early medieval European and Eurasian steppe contexts and explores identity in the Avar Khaganate. It aims to build upon these studies by investigating the highly debated question: what did Avar ethnic identity look like during the Early Avar Period (570-630 AD)? Because of the restrictive word limit, this research uses a selection of the most relevant written and archaeological evidence for understanding Avar ethnicity. The method used to analyse Avar ethnic identity is based on recent anthropological understandings of ethnicity.[2] Within this anthropological frame, ethnicity is understood as internal and external definition. In other words, ethnicity involves how members of a group perceive themselves *and* how outsiders perceive the same group. Ethnicity is also understood as a fluid social construct, which is usually perceived as reality by the members of the group.[3] This research engages such approach by examining the

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[1] Sinor 1963: 265.
[2] Barth 1969; Bourdieu 1990.
[3] Barth 1969.

ancient sources for possible indicators of how the Avars perceived themselves and how others perceived the Avars.

Written sources about the Avars have survived in elite Byzantine and Western perspectives only, meaning we do not have access to written evidence from the Avars themselves. Nevertheless, the surviving texts still provide insight into how outsiders viewed the Avars. To examine how the Avars were understood by their neighbours, this thesis will first establish what these written sources say about the Avars. It will then examine what are perceived as Avar ethnic markers and how they came to be recorded. To understand how the Avars defined themselves, this thesis turns to the material record for information. On account of the constraints of this thesis, this thesis cannot cover the wealth of archaeological evidence from the Early Avar period. Instead, it will deal with a small collection of the most significant Early Avar mortuary evidence that might be linked with Avar identity.

This thesis presents the case of Avar ethnicity across five chapters. So far, this introductory chapter has outlined the purpose and aims of this research. It also provides a literature review of the methodological developments in the modern scholarship on Avar ethnicity and a summary of the ancient written sources. Chapters Two to Four are thematical, each pertaining to Avar ethnic markers found in the written and material evidence. The first of these themes is the origin of the Avars and their migration to Europe. This is explored in Chapter Two, where the following question is asked: what happened during the migration of the Avars and did this impact the way they and others defined them(selves)? Chapter Three discusses the language of the Avars and their appearance, namely hairstyle and costume. Again, it demonstrates how these characteristics may have contributed to the Avars' and Byzantines' conceptualisation of Avar ethnicity. Avar religion and warfare are the focus of Chapter Four. It investigates what contemporary literature and archaeology reveal about Avar religion, fighting styles, armour,

and weaponry, and how such elements likely feature differently in the minds of Avars than that of outsiders. The thesis comes to a close in the concluding chapter, where the findings and interpretations of Avar ethnicity are synthesised.

1.1 Ethnicity and archaeology

In the archaeology of ethnicity, it has now been established that artefacts do not reflect ethnicity by themselves.[4] Thus, one cannot automatically assume someone's ethnicity through a specific piece of clothing, a type of pot, or even an assemblage of artefacts. However, in some contexts, particular artefacts or combinations of artefacts can indeed reflect ethnicity and/or advertise membership within a social group. Take, for example, Curta's study of early medieval Slavic identity in *The Making of the Slavs*. For Curta, a common Slavic identity that could be described as ethnicity came about when communication and trade with the Byzantine held Balkans became interrupted, following Emperor Justinian's implementation of his fortification program. The outcome of this program was increased social competition among groups north of the Danube and the emergence of leaders who used warfare as a basis of power. Evidence of these processes exist archaeologically, wherein particular styles of material culture went past the boundaries of local communities, and 'exotic' prestige goods obtained from plunder were buried with the elite. Curta interpreted this change in material culture as possibly being the first sign of 'emblemic style'. The changes in material culture include the introduction of sunken buildings with a heating facility, the generalisation of specific types of pottery decoration, and the intrasite distribution of clay pans. An emblemic style is a material item that carries a specific "message to a defined target population about conscious affiliation or identity."[5] Emblemic style can be used to mark and maintain boundaries, including ethnic ones, and can be detected in the material record by its uniformity within its realm of function. Since ethnicity is also a

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[4] Curta 2014: 2509-2511.
[5] Curta 2001: 33, 228, 341.

function of power relations, an emblemic style that is used as a tool in social strategies has the potential to control the style's meaning and power. Emblemic style becomes particularly evident "in times of socio-political stress and between-group competition and hostility."[6] Curta, therefore, argues that written sources from the sixth century probably chose the label 'Sclavene' to describe this process of political mobilisation that is demonstrated in the archaeological evidence. Essentially, the Slavs became Slavs "in the shadow of Justinian's forts," not in their perceived homeland in the Pripet marshes of Ukraine.[7]

Another scholar that has contributed greatly to discussions of ethnicity in archaeology is Stefan Burmeister. Archaeologists researching migration have often assumed that migratory ethnic groups were responsible for the spatial distribution of cultural traits.[8] Burmeister provides an alternative approach to researching migration that distinguishes transformations fuelled by migration from those produced by other forms of cultural transfer. The key to distinguishing the spread of cultural traits through migration, to Burmeister, is the external and internal cultural domains. For immigrants, the public or external domain is the zone of contact with the new society they moved to. It is where immigrants adapt their material culture, creating a change to the *habitus*. Oppositely, the internal domain is the private sphere where invariability in material culture occurs. Here, "the conditions that determine practices—such as the social system of the family and the household and the organisation of private life—are not directly connected to external conditions, and the *habitus* is very likely to persist." Burmeister maintains it is the material culture within the internal domain that may show archaeological proof of migration. He tested this model on the Anglo-Saxon migration and found that this process was multilayered. In areas where all-encompassing migration did occur, the migration happened over a long period of time and initially included only certain sections

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[6] Wiessner 1983: 257-258; Curta 2001: 33, 197.
[7] Curta 2001: 344; 2019: 48.
[8] Kokowski 1995; Leube 1986.

of society. Finally, it *is* possible to find indicators for immigration. However, whether we can locate the origin of these immigrants requires further investigation in the future.[9] Dialogues on ethnicity in archaeology have also been engaged by other prominent archaeologists such as Ian Hodder, Siân Jones, Sebastian Brather, and Susanne Hakenbeck.[10]

1.2 Modern literature on Avar ethnicity

Discourses surrounding Avar ethnicity began in the mid-eighteenth century when Joseph de Guignes published a four-volume work titled *Huns, Mongols, Turks and other western Tartars*. He used the Chinese, Byzantine, and Latin sources to write about the Avars' history in Central Asia and their migration to Europe. Through his analysis of the Chinese sources, de Guignes was the first to link the Avars' origins to the Juan-Juan on the Chinese frontiers.[11] Even more detailed than de Guignes is Henry Hoyle Howorth's article published in 1889.[12] He provided an in-depth history of the Avar's migration to Europe until their defeat by the Franks by using the most important Byzantine, Latin, and Syrian ancient written sources. Despite the discovery of significant Avar artefacts at the time, Howorth did not include archaeology in his analysis. His work did, however, offer a strong base for future research.

By the 1930s, archaeological research in Hungary flourished with the discovery of excellent quality Avar age artefacts, which ignited scholars' interest in Avar material culture. One of the most substantial approaches to the newly found archaeological finds was András Alföldi's in 'Zur historischen Bestimmung der Awarenfunde.' He attempted to identify possible Byzantine influences, especially Christian symbols, within Avar decorative motifs, jewellery, and buckles.[13] The study of Avars continued into the 1950s by the likes of Gerard Labuda, Franjo

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[9] Burmeister 2000: 540-542, 552-553.
[10] Hodder 1982; Jones 1997; Brather 2004; Hakenbeck 2011.
[11] de Guignes 1756/58: 334-366.
[12] Howorth 1889.
[13] Alföldi 1934.

Barišić, Arnulf Kollautz, and Jovan Kovačević.[14] In 1954, Kollautz provided the first "global, synthetic view of the Avars" through exploring their interactions with the Byzantines and the West, an analysis of their inner organisation, and a survey of the most significant archaeological discoveries. He also published extensively on Avar-Byzantine relations in the 1960s, in addition to a comprehensive bibliography on the Avars.[15] In collaboration with Hisayuki Miyakawa, Kollautz published a monograph on Avar history that synthesised all the progress in earlier research. In their 1970 monograph, Kollautz and Miyakawa analysed the Avars' politics, internal organisation, society, spirituality, material culture, and ethnic composition.[16] A year later, István Bóna released a systematic study of the Avar age archaeological evidence and its results. Bóna also built upon Ilona Kovrig's study of the Alattyán cemetery by distinguishing three periods of the Avar age – Early, Middle, and Late.[17]

The emergence of a new generation of historians and archaeologists and international conferences on the history of Central Europe ensured that Avar studies continued well into the 1980s. A noteworthy name among these scholars is historian Walter Pohl. He entered the field of Avar research with an influential monograph titled *Die Awaren*, published in 1988, as an outcome of his Habilitation.[18] The second edition of this monograph was released in 2002, but it was not until 2018 that Pohl released another edition in English. Pohl's principal aim was to shed light on the Avars after years of exclusion by early medieval scholars. He did this by exploring why so few names associated with the Avars survive in contemporary written sources. These terms include Baian, khagan, and a few other titles. Pohl asked: "does this anonymity reflect a conscious program, or does it express the chroniclers' sense of Avar

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[14] Labuda 1950; Barišić 1954; Kollautz 1954; 1965; 1968; Kovačević 1977.
[15] Kollautz 1954; 1965; 1968.
[16] Kollautz and Miyakawa, 1970.
[17] Bóna 1971.
[18] Pohl 1988a.

foreignness?"[19] From his analysis of the written sources and their methodologies, Pohl concluded that this failure to include more information on the Avars resulted from a well-established ethnocentric world view. This worldview was built on resentment toward the *other*, in this case, barbarians, which helped establish the superiority of Christian Western Europe and repress the barbarians.[20]

Pohl's chapter 'Telling the difference: Signs of ethnic identity' in *Strategies of Distinction* delves deeper into the way outsiders perceived the Avars. It asks: how can peoples be distinguished? Such characteristics include custom, clothing, language, religion, and military organisation. As he points out, these signs of ethnicity need not always coincide with one another. In light of this fact, scholars now see ethnicity as the belief in belonging to a group.[21] Pohl explores how early medieval authors selected these signs of ethnicity to become an essential part of ethnic discourses. He does so by problematising the ethnic markers detailed in the ancient written sources. Regarding Avar ethnicity, the chapter shows how fighting on horseback became an ethnic characteristic to outsiders.[22] Early medieval written sources record the steppe peoples as skilful fighters on horseback. Pohl argues that this fighting type was never wholly adopted by their western and Byzantine neighbours as it was more suited to an open, flat steppe environment. This is why the elite Western and Byzantine authors perceived mounted fighting as an ethnic marker of the steppe peoples. There is not enough evidence to suggest whether types of military tactics or weapons were considered a part of the steppe people's *own* perception of ethnicity.[23]

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[19] Pohl 2018a: 1-2.
[20] Pohl 2018a: 3.
[21] Pohl 1998: 16, 19-20.
[22] Pohl 1998: 28-29.
[23] Pohl 1998: 31, 37-39.

The early 2000s were characterised by extensive archaeological summaries of Avar age finds. Curta provided a short, comprehensive overview of the Early, Middle, and Late archaeology of the Avars in his 2001 book.[24] This summary informed readers about the historical and archaeological interconnectedness of the Avars and Slavs, which held important implications for later Slavic identities. Falko Daim published an even more detailed summary of Avar archaeology in 2003. Daim's chapter summarised the most recent archaeological finds from the Early, Middle, and Late Avar periods in English. This work provided English speakers and readers greater accessibility to Avar archaeological research that had been previously published in other European languages. Daim's research method was to identify how some of the written sources described the Avars and compare them to how the Avars presented themselves through the material evidence. He concludes that the Byzantine authors described the Avars as warriors on horseback, a concept also reflected in elite Avar warrior graves. A mounted warrior type image was frequently portrayed in these graves through horse burials, bridles, saddles, and stirrups.[25]

In 2008, Peter Stadler wrote a chapter titled 'Avar chronology revisited, and the question of ethnicity in the Avar Khaganate.' Stadler's work introduces new seriation methods for dating and studying Avar age archaeological material. For his research, Stadler uses a type of seriation, known as correspondence analysis, on female Avar age burials.[26] The correspondence analysis results showed that during the Early Avar period, 'Byzantine-Avar' and 'Germanic' artefacts were more distinctive. However, by the Middle Avar period, starting at c.630, these distinctions began to disappear, giving way to a more unified material culture.[27] Stadler also uses software known as WinSerion to generate maps of Avar settlements and

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[24] Curta 2001: 204-208.
[25] Daim 2003a: 464-465, 468.
[26] Stadler 2008: 56.
[27] Stadler 2008: 59; Kardaras 2018: 103.

statistically analyse them. He discovered distinctions in archaeological culture that possibly reveal how different groups within the Khaganate used particular artefacts to mark their ethnic boundaries. Stadler interpreted this evidence as presenting the multiplicity of ethnic identities in the early Avar Khaganate.[28] Using this seriation method, Stadler was also able to redefine the ending of the Middle Avar period.[29]

In the same edited collection as Stadler's study is Tivadar Vida's article 'Conflict and Coexistence,' where archaeology is used to explore the cultural and ethnic conditions of the Early Avar Khaganate. Through such, he brings to light a fundamental aspect of Avar identity in the Early Avar Period – elite warrior graves. Vida proposes that political power within the Khaganate was "unambiguously reserved for the Avar elite." He argues such theory by drawing on evidence like the uniform distribution of 'funerary pyre' assemblages of 'Central Asian' type across the Carpathian Basin, central position within cemeteries given to males buried with their horses, composite bows and spearheads. Moreover, Vida states the "burials of high-ranking leaders produced swords with P- and D-shaped suspension mounts of East European type, as well as various symbols of power, such as bird-shaped heads of scepters or staffs, which were carved in either bone or wood and then covered with gold foil. Such symbols of power have good analogies in burial assemblages of the Eurasian steppe lands."[30]

An excellent example of research into the Avar-Byzantine cultural relationship and its impact on Avar ethnicity is Georgios Kardaras' 2018 book. He identifies a lack of systematic study of the Avaro-Byzantine relationship within the scholarship and remedies this by taking a critical approach to the Byzantine image of the Avars in the written sources and archaeology. Through critical analysis, Kardaras argues that the cultural interaction between the two was

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[28] Stadler 2008: 60.
[29] Herold 2011: 134; 2012: 733.
[30] Vida 2008: 15-16.

constant, with goods of Byzantine origin appearing in Avar burials and Byzantine decorative motifs on Avar goods. Such objects likely appeared through trade, presents from the Byzantine emperors to the Avar khagans, or booty from lands the Avars raided. Byzantine imports such as coins, crosses, amphorae, buckles, and earrings have been found in Avar graves. According to Kardaras, Byzantine goods were displayed in the graves of Avar elites to represent their social status.[31]

A year later, in 2019, Martin Hurbanič presented the first interdisciplinary synthesis of the Avar attack on Constantinople in 626 and how it developed into a legend spanning hundreds of years. He specifically introduces a comprehensive perspective of the complex relations between the Avars and other groups of warriors that were involved in the Avar siege. The first half of his book is dedicated to the structure of the Avar army, possible relations between the Avars and Slavs, weaponry and tactics of all the groups within the military, and the defence of Constantinople during the siege. At the centre of Hurbanič's *The Avar Siege of Constantinople* is a detailed reconstruction of the siege, focusing on the facts that have been omitted. In the second half of his book, he looks at the continuous transformation of the attack from a historical event into a legend. This monograph proves very valuable as it offers a detailed commentary on the evidence of the siege and a critical investigation of the conclusions of historiography.[32]

For decades, Eastern Europe as a whole was ignored in debates about the transition from Antiquity to the Middle Ages. In 2021, Curta addressed this gap by applying the conceptual tools used on Western Europe that helped reveal the transformations that occurred during the transition from Late Antiquity to the Middle Ages to the situation in Eastern Europe. He tested a vast area of the European continent between 500 and 680 by using and criticising Chris

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[31] Kardaras 2018: 7, 185, 106.
[32] Hurbanič 2019: 4-5.

Wickham's model of the "transformation of the Roman world."[33] From his investigation, Curta concludes that the sixth century was longer for the eastern part of Europe than others because the "transformations were still happening during the first decades of the seventh century." Specific parts of Eastern Europe experienced the first effects of the turning point after the middle of the seventh century. Thus, by the start of the eighth century, Eastern Europe was socially and economically very different from what it had been in the sixth century. The transformations between 500 and 700 were therefore far greater than those occurring between 300 and 400 and those during 700 and 900.[34]

1.3   Ancient literature on Avar ethnicity

As was addressed earlier, the written sources on Avar ethnicity have limitations; thus, exercising caution is integral. A narrative of Avar history from the Avar perspective has not been preserved. What remains is the elite Eastern and Western written sources, which primarily engage in a longstanding ancient methodological tradition, which saw barbarians as 'ugly,' 'angry,' 'pagan,' 'malicious,' and 'slaughterous.'[35] This image is a negative trope that emerged from ancient ethnography, dating back as far as Herodotus's description of the Scythians in the fifth century BC.[36] Because of such methodological tradition, these texts "can only be understood if we do not see them as evidence for the natural existence of ethnic communities, but as part of strategies to give shape to these communities."[37] Overall, these authors mostly wrote about the military or political spheres of Avar-Byzantine relations, specifically the

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[33] Curta covered Czechia in the west, to the Ural Mountains in the east, Russia beyond the Arctic Circle to the north, and Greece to the south. Curta 2021: 1-3; Wickham 2006.
[34] Curta 2001: 2-3, 311.
[35] Menander frag. 5.1-4, pp. 49-53; Theophylact 1.3.13, p. 24; Theophanes 6076, pp. 375-376; *Strategikon* 11.2, pp. 361-362.
[36] Herodotus 4.1-13, pp. 240-245.
[37] Pohl 1998b: 21.

exchange of embassies, treaties, raids, and conflicts. They were not entirely interested in cultural matters, which makes it difficult to discern the ethnic situation in the Khaganate.

Another problem faced when approaching these sources is the ancient authors' interchangeable use of ethnonyms when referring to Avars in the Carpathian Basin. Ethnonym swapping can make it challenging to linguistically and historically trace an essential part of Avar identity – their origin (see section 2.1). Often, the Avars were also designated as Scythians and Huns. This practice was common in the written texts when referring to all types of steppe groups. In early Byzantine historiography, especially in the work of Herodotus, the name *Skythes* was used to label steppe peoples and the Goths. Scythian was a general ethnonym used for people of the North, essentially northern barbarians, which was in "direct imitation of classical historiographical models embodying the *other* in the ancient Greek world."[38]

Agathias

One of the earliest authors to describe the Avars was Agathias, a Greek poet and historian who continued the work of Procopius and wrote from 552 to 559. Modern scholars have criticised Agathias for lacking the knowledge, sources, and motivation to write political and military history.[39] Like his predecessors, this author uses the same set of negative stereotypes associated with barbarian groups when describing the Avars. The only marker of Avar identity explored by Agathias is the hairstyle of Avars, which he describes as long, unkempt, and worn in a knot.[40]

Menander

Continuing the work of Agathias in the classicising mode was Menander the Guardsman, an early Byzantine historian writing about foreign relations between the Byzantines and the

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[38] Kardaras 2018: 9; Pallas-Brown 2000; Borri 2011; Nechaeva 2012; Chernienko 2005: 175.
[39] Wood 2015: 20; Cameron 1970: 30-37, 75-88; Gador-Whyte 2007.
[40] Agathias 1.2.4, p. 11.

Avars.[41] His *History* only survives in fragments within later Byzantine works. Menander appears to have had quite a high diplomatic post in Constantinople, which explains his focus on Eastern political events. Menander's account used archival information, diplomatic reports, and official correspondence, which could be seen as a reliable source of information.[42] His work is our primary source for the first Avar wars, detailing the treaties, embassies, tribute payments, and the Byzantine-Avar conflict. Again, barbarian stereotypes used to describe the Avars are rife. Despite his excellent source material, Menander's *History*, unfortunately, has little information regarding markers of the Avar ethnicity. The only mention of a potential marker of Avar identity is in fragment 12.3, where Menander recounts the Avar tradition of howling and beating their drums before war to terrify their opponents.[43]

Strategikon

The *Strategikon* is a Byzantine military treatise containing histories of the Byzantine military, Avars, Slavs, and other frontier peoples. Written at the end of the sixth or beginning of the early seventh century, during the reign of Maurice, it is a manual outlining how to best defeat barbarian groups, like the Avars, using specific tactics. The quality of description regarding barbarian settlements and customs suggests the unknown author (sometimes thought to be emperor Maurice) was likely an experienced commander who fought against the people they wrote about. The author probably had firsthand observations and dealings with these people, making it a valuable source for understanding Avar identity. The *Strategikon* records the Avar style of warfare as mounted units, mobilisation, and methods of fighting that were common amongst nomads. The author confirmed the organisation of the Khaganate when he described it as a confederation of many groups.[44] A significant feature of this treatise is where some

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[41] Menander frag. 1, p. 41.
[42] Curta 2019: 7.
[43] Menander frag 12.3, pp. 131-133.
[44] *Strategikon* 11.2, pp. 116-118; Różycki 2017: 109-110, 117-118.

Byzantine military equipment originated – from barbarian peoples. Byzantine horses were said to have worn Avar armour, and the soldiers, Avar neck-guards, to stop chafing.[45]

Theophylact Simocatta

Theophylact Simocatta, a Greek-speaking Egyptian, continues the work of Menander and describes the Byzantine relationship with the Avars and Persians in the late sixth and early seventh century. He was trained in law and served a successful administrative career in Constantinople.[46] Theophylact's position likely gave him access to official imperial archival documents, some of which include the *City Chronicle of Constantinople* and a campaign diary written by a member of Emperor Maurice's entourage. This diary would have been composed during Maurice's campaigns against the Avars and Slavs in the 590s.[47] The similarity of his narrative to the *Strategikon* suggests the use of the same campaign diary. The illegible chronology of Theophylact's account shows that he was unable to synthesise these sources completely. Despite this, the *History* provides a detailed report of Avar history, the Khaganate's battles, and foreign policy. Theophylact also offers some information regarding the origins of the Avars, mainly that they hailed from the Var and Chunni people in Central Asia who escaped their Western Turk overlords. This information is limited in usefulness as it has been interpreted as an adaptation from Menander to solve a chronological error.[48]

George of Pisidia

An eyewitness to the Avar siege of Constantinople, George Pisidia presented his information in the form of poems, namely the seventh century poem titled *Bellum Avaricum*. Like his contemporary Theodore Syncellus, George Pisidia created the notion of a city protected by

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[45] *Strategikon* 1.2, p. 12; Różycki 2017: 123.
[46] Theophylact 8.12.3-7, pp. 228-229.
[47] Curta 2021: 7.
[48] Theophylact Simocatta 7.7.13, pp. 189, n. 39.

God "with its chief patron in the person of the all-holy Mother of God" in his work.[49] Specific details of the Avar siege within the poem have been the subject of much scholarly discussion. One example is the strength of the Avar army, which George of Pisidia numbered eighty thousand soldiers. This number is likely exaggerated, as the standards of the time show that thirty thousand was already quite a large army.[50]

Fredegar

The *Chronicle of Fredegar* is an annalistic work based on sources from earlier Western chronicles. Compiled in the mid to late seventh century, the *Chronicle* was written in Latin by an unknown author or authors and overviews a period from Creation to around 642.[51] Fredegar's *Chronicle* holds patchy but useful information on the events east of the Frankish border.[52] The first three books cover previous chronicles and the fourth book introduces new information and provides insight into the Wends, who were probably an elite Sclavene military or political unit within the Avar Khaganate. Fredegar details that the Wends rebelled against their Avar rulers to create a kingdom under Samo, a Frankish merchant in the 620s.[53]

Theophanes Confessor

The material in Theophylact Simocatta's *History* was the basis for the *Chronographia* composed by Byzantine monk Theophanes Confessor in the early ninth century. Theophanes reiterates a similar description of the Avars' hairstyle that Agathias did in the sixth century. For example, he describes the Avars as wearing very long hair at the back that was tied with ribbons and plaited.[54] Theophanes relied on Theophylact's account to outline the years of the first Avar wars. When writing his account of the seventh century, Theophanes used the same

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[49] Hurbanič 2019: 3.
[50] George of Pisidia, *Bellum Avaricum*.
[51] Wallace-Hadrill 1960: xiv-xxviii; Goffart 1963.
[52] See Collins 1996 and Reimitz 2015: 166-239.
[53] Fredegar 4.48, 4.68, 4.72-77, pp. 39, 56, 60-64; Wood 2015: 26.
[54] Theophanes 6050, pp. 339-340.

set of information Nicephorus used in his *Brevarium*, written in the late eighth century.[55] The *Chronographia* was written a while after the events of the Early Avar period, thus making it less reliable than the more contemporary evidence outlined above.

The Miracles of Saint Demetrius Books I and II

At the turn of the seventh century, Archbishop John of Thessalonica wrote Book I of the *Miracles*, a collection of miracle stories in Greek. In the sermonising tone, it is sensationalistic and demonstrates Saint Demetrius' protection of the city against barbarians. Together, these factors prompt the historian to not take the work at face value.[56] It records two attacks on Thessalonica by 5,000 Sclavenes and then 100,000 Sclavenes and Avars.[57] Considering the purpose of Book I, and that no other source seems to record such attacks properly, the importance and scale of these events were probably exaggerated. Nevertheless, these stories still show the level of threat posed to provincial cities by Avar and Sclavene raiding.[58] John, like Menander, recounts the cacophony that Avars would perform before battle.[59] The second book is of unknown authorship and contains events concerning the later seventh century. It projects the typical Byzantine attitude towards barbarians, describing them as heathens determined to ravage Thessalonica.[60] Unlike Book I, Book II has less of a sermonising and sensationalist tone and relies more on documentary and oral material.[61] Beyond the supernatural content both books still offer detailed accounts by knowledgeable contemporaries, who were most likely eyewitnesses to the events.[62]

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[55] Nicephorus, *Short History*.
[56] Curta 2001: 53.
[57] *Miracles of Saint Demetrius* 1.12, 1.13.
[58] Curta 2001: 54; Wood 2015: 25.
[59] *Miracles of Saint Demetrius* 1.2.112, 1.123.
[60] *Miracles of Saint Demetrius* 2.2.214; 2.4.274.
[61] Curta 2001: 62; Wood 2015: 25.
[62] Pohl 2018a: 127; Panov 2012.

2. Origin and migration

The question of Avar origin and migration has been on the lips of ancient and modern scholars for centuries. This chapter provides a summary of the recent discourse surrounding the topic. Through such, it becomes clear that the ancient written evidence indicates the Avars originated somewhere within Eurasian steppes and migrated to Europe due to their conflict with the Western Turks. In the view of the Byzantines, these two aspects were some of the Avars' most distinctive ethnic markers. Whether these factors were considered markers of ethnicity among the Avars themselves will be explored.

2.1 Modern discourse

A theory that dominates discussion about Avar origins is that they were descendants of the Rouran, a khaganate in Central Asia established in the fourth century CE. Following their conflict with the Western Turks, the Rouran disbanded into groups, one of which migrated to Europe, becoming what we know as the European Avars. This interpretation is based on the polarising information in Theophylact of Simocatta's *History*, composed more than two generations after the events. He recounts a letter that a Turkic khagan (unnamed in the text) sent to Emperor Maurice detailing his success in a civil war. Theophylact positions this letter in his account of 595, "when summer had arrived in this particular year." The khagan wrote that he conquered the Hephthalites (or Abdeloi) and then the Avars, of which some fled toward Mukri and another to the Tabgast.[63] The Avars that Theophylact mentions here are probably the Rouran, whom the greater part fled eastward to China, North Korea, and northern China.[64] The Oghurs are then listed as settled on the 'black river' Til, some of which were named Var

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[63] Theophylact Simocatta 7.7-10, pp. 188-189.
[64] Haussig 1956: 22; Czeglédy 1983: 38, 105-108.

and Chunni. The last group listed and thus defeated were the Kolch. Theophylact goes on to

say that the ancestors of the European Avars were Oghurs, who were called Var and Chunni.[65]

Therefore, it seems that the European Avars were not related to the Avars from Central Asia

whom the Turkic khagan defeated. In the following passage, Theophylact suggests that the

European Avars were "wrongly designated Avars" or Pseudo-Avars:

> "During the imperial rule of Justinian, a small portion of the original tribe withdrew
> from these Var and Chunni and invaded Europe. These people called themselves
> Avars and designated their leaders with the title khagan. How their name came to
> be changed we shall now tell…
>
> When the Barselt and Onogurs and Sabirs and other Hunnic peoples of the region
> saw that a part of the Var and Chunni had fled into their districts, they became
> greatly afraid, since they assumed that the invaders were Avars. They honoured the
> refugees with fine presents and believed that they would remain unharmed in return.
> When the Var and Chunni saw how successfully their flight had begun they made
> their own the error of those who had been sent to them and called themselves Avars.
> Among the Scythian peoples it is in fact said that the Avars are a people of great
> skill."[66]

As discussed later, Theophylact's declaration that the European Avars were 'false' Avars has

been interpreted widely. The 'real' Avars that Theophylact mentions could be the Rouran.[67]

Before exploring Theophylact's passage, it is essential to outline the origins of the 'Avar'

ethnonym. One of the earliest mentions of the name is in Herodotus 4.36, where a Scythian

Abaris myth is described. Hyperborean Abaris, the hero of the myth, gained mantic power

from Apollo and traversed around the world on an arrow.[68] In Strabo's *Geography*, a Scythian

group in what is now the Russian Republic of Dagestan was named Aparnoi.[69] The name Aba

(A-pa) frequently occurs throughout Chinese sources. On one occasion, the *Sui Shu* records the

group designated as Aba rising against the Turkic khagan Shabolüe in 585.[70] Another group

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[65] Theophylact Simocatta 7.7.13-14, 7.7.8, pp. 189.
[66] Theophylact Simocatta 7.7, 7.8, p. 188.
[67] Pohl 2018a: 40.
[68] Herodotus 4.36, p. 252.
[69] Strabo 11.9.2-3.
[70] *Sui Shu* in Liu Mau-Tsai 1958 1: 51; Liu Mau-Tsai 1958, 1: 108, 1:19, 2: 558, n. 555; Pohl 2018a: 41.

known as the Abar are mentioned in Pseudo-Zachariah Rhetor's list of "Hunnic" peoples in the Caspian-Pontic steppes.[71] Avar in Turkic etymology means "rebellious, disobedient," and modern Caucasian Avars have been documented in the Caucasus prior to the Middle Ages.[72] Uar, the name of one of the Avar tribal ancestors attested to by Theophylact, could be a variant of the name Avar, while Chunni and Ch(i)onites are likely variants of the ethnonym Hun.[73] The wide use of Chunni and Ch(i)onites means that an exact ethnic classification is out of the question.[74] These etymological and onomastic interpretations still do not explain the origins of the name Avar or the origins of the European Avars.

In the eighteenth century, Joseph de Guignes disagreed with Theophylact's statement that the Avars were descended from the Rouran mentioned in the Chinese sources. Despite multiple conjectures with this theory, it became generally accepted among the field since the chronology of events somewhat supported the idea.[75] Theophylact's information on the Pseudo-Avars has commonly been interpreted as a topos.[76] Michael Whitby dismisses Theophylact's account as historically worthless, while Golden argues that the Psuedo-Avars "may be safely removed from historical analysis. What remains are the Rouran (and variants) and the Abar/Avar/Awar. These are clearly one and the same people in Central Eurasia."[77]

There are obvious mistakes in Theophylact's account, but the information is valuable. The main argument is not mere speculation; in fact, the idea that the European Avars were fake was the official diplomatic position of the Turks in their communication with Byzantium. According to Ekaterina Nechaeva, Theophylact's statement reflects "Turkish influence and interest in keeping the Avars as 'Pseudo-Avars' for reasons of diplomatic and political

[71] Pseudo-Zachariah Rhetor, pp. 447-450.
[72] Turkic etymology: Németh 1930: 105. Modern Avars: Pohl 2018a: 40.
[73] Pohl 2018a: 41.
[74] Atwood 2015: 35-63.
[75] de Guignes 1756/58, 1: 352; Kollautz and Miyakawa 1970, 1: 13-15; Czeglédy 1983: 107-110.
[76] Czeglédy 1983: 108-124.
[77] Whitby 1988: 317; Golden 2013: 65.

status."[78] The Turks could have lied to the Byzantines, "although they certainly knew better" according to Pohl.[79] Yu Taishan offers a critique of the Rouran theory by suggesting that it would have been difficult for remnants of the Rouran to escape west as the Turks, and other enemies blocked the way. Instead, Yu Taishan proposes that the Avars should be linked with the Yueban (Yueh-pan), which he believes is another transliteration for Avar or Apar.[80] The Yueban were situated west of the Rouran and were defeated by them around 450. Following their defeat, the Yueban moved west, where Priscus took note of them. However, this idea would not explain the adverse reaction Turkic khagans had to the flight of the Avars.[81]

This same counter-argument applies to Hans Wilhelm Haussig, who suggests that the Avars were part of the Hua mentioned in Chinese sources. In his opinion, the Avars resided near the Caucasus for a century before their contact with the Byzantines.[82] In disagreement, Pohl argues that this theory does not explain why the Turks were furious about the escape of the Avars a hundred years after.[83] Some scholars trace the origins of the Avars to the Oghurs in the Altai region, although Priscus states that the two groups were hostile towards each other.[84] The Hephthalite kingdom situated in Tokharistan (southern Uzbekistan and northern Afghanistan) has also been "considered a point of departure for the Avar migration because of the prevalence of Avar and Var names in the region." [85] However, the Hephthalites' destruction by the Turks could not be the reason for the Avar migration because, at that time, the Avar envoys had already arrived at Constantinople.[86] Haussig asserts that the name Avar had no ethnic specificity because it was a traditional Sogdian term for aliens. This would explain the

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[78] Nechaeva 2011: 179, n. 22; Dobrovits 2003; Pohl 1988a: 31-37.
[79] Pohl 2018a: 41.
[80] Yu Taishan 2014: 320; Parker 1902: 446-60; Pritsak 1983: 364.
[81] Pohl 2018a: 42.
[82] Haussig 1973: 192.
[83] Pohl 2018a: 42.
[84] Priscus frag. 40, p. 344.
[85] Pohl 2018a: 42.
[86] Menander frag. 4.2, pp. 44-46; Haussig 1953; 1956; 1973; 1975.

popularity of the name across Central Asia. However, if the word was Sogdian and had no ethnic specificity, why were the Sogdian envoys of the Turkic khagans proclaiming vehemently that the European Avars were not 'real'? Because by Haussig's definition of the word, there could be no 'real' Avars.[87]

Another hypothesis comes from Károly Czeglédy, who believes that 'Varchonites' was used as a broad term that not only applied to the Hua but the Rouran too. He concludes that the European Avars were descendants of the Rouran, and the distinction between the Rouran and Oghurs, to Czeglédy, is the latter's identification with the Tiele.[88] This theory, however, contradicts Theophylact's statement that the Oghurs were Varchonites. If the Rourans were also Varchonites, why did the Turks maintain that the escapees were Varchonites, not Avars? Thus, neither the Rouran, Tiele, Yueban, Hephthalites or Oghurs can be linked with the Avars encamped near the Caucasus in 558. Pohl maintains: "it is a widespread misunderstanding to attempt an unequivocal identification of the European Avars with a Central Asian people. So far, that has been the goal of most efforts to unravel the inconsistencies in Theophylact's many-layered text."[89]

Pohl's standpoint on the Avar origin and migration is based on the historical accounts written by their contemporaries. According to Menander, the Avars (as they were known in the West) or Varchonites (as the Turks knew them) were a circumscribed group, some of which remained under Turkic rule.[90] In line with the steppe tradition, the Avars' origins were diffuse. A Chinese emperor around 600 described the Turks as consisting of thousands and sometimes tens of thousands of groups.[91] Various groups forming imperial steppe federations were often

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[87] Pohl 2018a: 42.
[88] Czeglédy 1983: 97-100.
[89] Pohl 2018a: 42.
[90] Menander frag. 10.1, p. 111-117.
[91] *Sui Shu* 84, p. 47.

hierarchised, which sometimes brought about conflict and instability in their relationships with one another. Frequently emphasised throughout the Orkhon inscriptions of Turkic Bilge khagan and his successors is the way a ruler would create a powerful confederation from small groups: "having become khagan, I gathered the whole miserable people; I have made the poor people rich, a people few [in number] have I made numerous."[92] As described by the Orkhon inscriptions, this organisation of groups through a mythically authorised constitution was critical to the rise of the second Turkic Khaganate toward the end of the seventh century. "Over such an extent did they [the Turkish khagans] rule that they reordered the 'blue Turks,' who were without rulers and tribal organisation."[93] The reorganisation of groups as a foundation of steppe empires resulted in an everchanging ethnic landscape where one or more groups would use the same ethnonym.[94] Ethnonyms of the steppe strongly illustrate the fluidity of steppe identities. Attila's empire is a prime example of this phenomenon, for instance: among many other things, it is recorded that a grandson of Attila, due to certain conditions, appeared as a Hun or Gepid (Mundo); a Greek merchant emerged as a Hun warrior in the empire; and when the Hunnic empire fell, many polyethnic groups are recorded to have sought refuge in the Roman empire.[95]

A prominent focus on topics like human movement and war made it difficult for ancient ethnographers like Theophylact to study the origins of a group. Origin myths were frequently used when the ancient ethnographer did not have access to material on a subject group's origins. Timpe explains that the conceptual world of Antiquity had "at its disposal above all a model of origin and growth; as a consequence, the topos of *origo* was everywhere addressed."[96]

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[92] Orkhon inscription, pp. 142, 147. The Orkhon inscriptions are eighth century memorial installations written in Old Turkic. The Göktürks erected them in the Orkhon Valley in Mongolia. See Ross and Thomsen 1930 for more information.
[93] Orkhon inscription, p. 145.
[94] Radloff 1884: 230; Pritsak 2007: 66-67.
[95] Pohl 1980: 240-305, 260-262, 292-293.
[96] Timpe 1986: 36-37.

Information that was transmitted with these topoi need not always be learned constructs and often contained contemporary elements. Even so, origin stories "have a truth of their own; they do not reflect empirical data but mythical facts (in the sense of *factum*, 'made')." The myths of the ethnographers and the people they were studying are intertwined. They reveal more about the time they were written than about the history of the subject. This is most certainly true for Theophylact's sometimes confusing account of the Avar migration. Yet his *Histories* still hold great information regarding ethnic processes in the steppes. Current research that addresses Theophylact's passage demonstrates that one name does not always equal a single people.[97]

Pohl's view is that the Rouran/Asian Avars cannot have migrated and settled in Europe in any sufficient strength after the Turks defeated them. All significant members of the ruling dynasty were dead, and their hordes scattered.[98] From the Greek texts, it is plausible that the Turks considered the European Avars, whom they called Varchonites, as their rightful subjects for decades. They also illustrate the reaction of Turkic khagans to the news of the Avar migration to Europe. In the 570s, Turxanthus accused a Roman envoy of signing a pact with his runaway slaves, the Varchonites.[99] According to the Turkic envoy, Sogdian Maniakh, in 568, about twenty thousand Avars had escaped, while some Avars remained behind and served the Western Turk state.[100] Byzantium knew that the Avars were "not quite so unconquered," and this fact was constantly relayed to the Turks.[101] In Theophylact Simocatta, a Byzantine envoy in 584 told the Turkic khagan that the Romans gave refuge to the Avars when they initially "split off and separated from the original eastern tribe." This news was met with so much anger that it nearly had the envoy killed.[102] This is where Theophylact's passage on the

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[97] Pohl 2018a: 43-44.
[98] Pohl 2018a: 36.
[99] Menander frag. 19.1, p. 173.
[100] Menander frag. 10.1, pp. 111-117.
[101] Pohl 2018a: 37.
[102] Theophylact Simocatta 1.5, 1.6.1-3, pp. 26-28.

origin and migration of the Avars fits in, as discussed above. To Evagrius Scholasticus, a Syrian scholar of the sixth century, "the Avars are a Scythian people, one of the wagon-dwellers who range across the planes over there beyond the Caucasus; they had fled en masse from their neighbours, the Turks, after being ill-treated by them, and had come to the Bosporus."[103] With this information, Pohl states that there is no doubt that the 'Avars' encamped in the Caucasus in 558 had escaped the Turks in Central Asia.

Thus, the Avars or Varchonites disbanded – some remained under Turkic rule, and others migrated elsewhere, including Europe and the Caucasus. After 580, there is evidence of more Varchonite tribes leaving Asia and joining the Avar Khaganate in Europe. Like the first Varchonite/Avar migration, the second migration was due to conflict with the Turkic confederation.[104] Menander explains the circumstance of the Avar migration: when "Sizabulus, the leader of the Turks, learned of the flight of the Avars and the damage they had caused to Turkish possessions at their departure, as is naturally the case with barbarians he declared boastfully that… When I have ended the war with the Hephthalites, I shall attack the Avars, and they shall not escape my might."[105] The Varchonite group that would become the European Avars likely used the Turks' war with the Hephthalites to exit Central Asia. From this, Pohl concludes that the Avars had to have been Turkic tributaries before the destruction of the Hephthalite polity. Whether the Avars abandoned the Turkic army or left the hinterland while the Turks were absent cannot be determined.[106]

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[103] Evagrius Scholasticus 5.1, pp. 255.
[104] Theophylact Simocatta 7.8.16, pp. 191.
[105] Menander frag. 4.2, pp. 43-45.
[106] Pohl 2018a: 37-38.

2.2 Origin and migration as ethnic markers

2.2.1 Written evidence

From the information available in the written sources, four points can be gleaned. Overall, it is clear that to outsiders, the European Avars' origin and migration were defining factors of their identity. From the works of Theophylact and Menander, it is clear that the Avars were also called Varchonites. In particular, Theophylact adds that from the seventh century, they "were divided according to genealogies of the rulers, and the one was called Var in time-honoured fashion, and the other Chunni."[107] The name Varchonites does not help us identify the Avars with any group in the Eurasian steppe zone, although it does show that they were a mixed population who used the general name 'Huns.'[108]

Secondly, the Rouran mentioned in Chinese sources were likely called or called themselves Avars. They were not the only group to go by this name. It was steppe tradition to choose the name of a ruler and their confederation from an ancient list of words. This action would "invest them [the chosen names] with religious and magic powers."[109] Theophylact describes this practice as "the choice of a name for a new group in a dialectic of external perceptions and self-designation."[110] Therefore, the Avars appropriated the prestigious origin of the name in an attempt to define themselves. This name choice could be described as a way for Avars to "distinguish themselves and summarise their 'essence' to themselves – as if in a name lay the magic of their existence and guarantee of their survival." The Avars likely chose the name because it had a symbolic myth of descent attached to it. A myth of descent essentially offers an answer to questions of similarity and belonging.[111]

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[107] Theophylact Simocatta 7.8, pp. 189-190; Menander frag. 19.1, p. 174.
[108] Pohl 2018a: 45.
[109] Pritsak 2007: 62.
[110] Pohl 2018a: 45.
[111] Smith 1987: 23-24.

Lastly, the European Avars cannot be identified with any group titled 'Avars' in the East. Theophylact mentions the four names that played a role in their formation: Avars, Var, Chunni, and Oghurs. This list is similar to the enumeration of groups conquered by the Turkic khagan in the letter described by Theophylact. After 552, the Rouran population between the Volga and the Great Wall of China had to choose between staying under Turkic rule or migration. After the Rouran political centre was destroyed between 552 and 555, some of its remnants, which would become the future European Avars, prepared to migrate to Europe when the Hephthalites began their war with the Turks around 560.[112] This newly formed group (containing some of the disbanded Rouran) fled Asia during the Turkic-Hephthalite war. The group was likely made up of subordinate military groups of the Oghur model, which essentially describes the Oghur people who were usually one people among others and did not assume supreme power. Oghurs are attested to in all steppe empires of the early medieval period and represented a loose form of cohesion generally organised in regional polities; accordingly, they could easily integrate into emerging empires. The future European Avars that fled Turkic power further appropriated the prestigious 'Avar' name. "This was first of all their political identity, the name of a polity (rather than the dynasty) they were Avars by decision."[113] During the Hephthalite war, it is possible that groups attacked by the Turks, along with additional West Asian people, joined the movement to Europe.[114] Moreover, the list mentioned at the beginning of this paragraph helps reinforce the political plan of the new Avars in Europe: they chose a name that was prestigious among the steppe peoples, and they were welcoming to ambitious groups that fled the Turks.[115]

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[112] Menander frag. 4.2, pp. 44-46.
[113] Pohl 2018a: 31, 46.
[114] Theophylact Simocatta 7.8, pp. 189-190.
[115] Pohl 2018a: 36-37, 46.

As Pohl contends, it is unlikely that the Rouran core could move to Europe and build a confederation following their brutal defeat by the Turks. Individuals of the ruling group may have survived and helped legitimise the new Avars' appropriation of the title 'khagan.' Through this, they could attract a following of smaller (or other) groups from the former Rouran territory and beyond. "Given the numbers many steppe dynasties acquired in the course of generations, it is not unlikely that the Avar khagan Baian could claim descent from the ruling clan of the Rouran." In fact, the term 'khagan' remained so central to the legitimacy of the Avar Khaganate that the name of only one khagan, 'Baian,' survives in our sources – all others are known only by their title.[116]

The Avar migration from the Eurasian steppe is an extensively discussed topic among the ancient texts, especially those of the Byzantines. The evidence demonstrates that origin and migration were one of the Avars' most significant ethnic markers. It cannot be said with any certainty how the Avars defined their origins according to these written texts, but they may have felt a sense of belonging through a shared migration history.[117]

2.2.2 Archaeology

The archaeology shows no evidence of a unified culture imported into the Carpathian Basin from elsewhere. On that account, it is impossible to pinpoint where the Avars migrated from, ruling out a complete understanding of Avar origins. Despite this, there have been multiple attempts to link early Avar artefact types in the Carpathian Basin to those in Central or West Asia.[118] At this point, only Avar age bone artefacts like needle cases, buckles, awls, or pendants have been associated with Central Asia.[119] Other Avar age artefacts commonly cited as having analogies with Central Asia are swords with P- or 3-shaped sheath attachments. However, these

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[116] Pohl 2018a: 46.
[117] Smith 1987: 25.
[118] Bálint 1989: 149; 1993: 214; Garam 1990: 253; Curta 2001: 205.
[119] Sekeres 1957; Bóna 1980: 52, 54.

objects that are often attributed to Avar warriors predate their cited Eastern European or Central Asian analogies.[120] Bow shaped stirrups and stirrups with elongated attachment loops, which were part of Early Avar assemblages and the earliest European stirrups, have also been discovered in the Kudyrge cemetery in Tuva. Turkic archaeology currently lacks a firmly established chronological system, which makes it difficult to know whether such stirrups were brought by the Avars from Central Asia or invented by them in the Basin.[121] Archaeological material from the Rouran realm is very scant, but they appear more Sinicised in the sixth century in comparison to evidence from the Carpathian Basin.[122] Like the linguistic and historical sources, the archaeology shows that the Avars' origins were diffuse.

A change in archaeology in the land east of the Middle Tisza during the Early Avar period offers more clues as to the contours of the Avar migration. The arrival of the Avars in the Carpathian Basin is demonstrated by the appearance of distinct type weapons, 'nomadic' belt sets, and apple-shaped cast stirrups.[123] Additionally, we have evidence of 'funerary-pyre' assemblages in the Great Hungarian plain and separate elite burial clusters within existing cemeteries dated to the early period.[124] Even more significant is the appearance of tunnel-shaped shafts, which were not in existence in the Carpathian Basin. This evidence could be related to Southern Ukraine, where the Avars were first mentioned in the written texts.[125]

2.2.3 Genetics

Setting out to investigate the origins and composition of the ruling group of the Khaganate, Csáky and collaborators anthropologically and genetically tested twenty-six elite Middle and Late Avar age skeletons. The remains come from the Kunbábony group; Szarvas,

[120] Bálint 1993: 219; Ambroz 1986.
[121] Bálint 1989: 242-243, 249; Bott 1976: 227; Curta 2001: 204-206.
[122] Pohl 2018a: 45-6.
[123] La Salvia 2007: 155-171; Curta 2008: 297-326; Csiky 2015.
[124] Vida 2008: 15-17.
[125] Lőrinczy 1998: 343-472.

Békésszentandrás, and Székkutas, and are dated to seventh and eighth centuries. The research explicitly addresses issues of homogeneity in the Khaganate, identification and nature of the Avar migration(s), the similarity or dissimilarity of maternal and paternal lineages, and the role of biological kinship in the Avar elite stratum.[126]

The analysis showed that the study group's paternal genetic data was homogenous compared to the maternal gene pool, mainly consisting of N-Tat haplotypes. These haplotypes found in Avars may reflect common genetics with ancestors of Mongolians and Uralic populations. The maternal gene pool was found to be more complex, containing Western and Eastern Eurasian elements. Loose connections were discovered between the Avar elite and available mitochondrial DNA data of ancient populations in Eurasia. The results showed high affinities to Central and East Central Asian ancient populations. Regarding the social structure of Avar society, Csáky et al. found new Y chromosomal data that suggests this elite Avar group had strong biological connections, possibly reflecting paternal kinship relations. The researchers thus concluded that the Avar elite likely inherited their power and wealth through the paternal line. Paternal kinship was detected within the communities of the Kunszállás and Kunpeszér sites.[127]

Scholars have somewhat understood Avar society in the framework of nomadic societies. However, the term nomadic is inaccurate, as the Carpathian Basin region, including the Great and Little Hungarian Plains, did not provide the right conditions for nomadism during the early medieval period. Archaeological evidence from the Carpathian Basin suggests the Avars had a mixed economy; therefore, the phrase 'Eurasian steppe societies' would be more appropriate in this case.[128] For people of the Eurasian steppe, biological and/or mythical kinship ties were

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[126] Csáky et al. 2020: 3-4.
[127] Csáky et al. 2020: 8-10.
[128] Fusek 1991: 296; Kenéz and Pető 2015; Curta 2021b: 110-113.

highly important. Kinship is defined as a social segment based on the closeness of individuals in the system of biological relationships, and for nomadic societies of Central Asia, patrilineality has been strictly adhered to, and in some cases, matrilineal lineages were also found. Using the research of Charles Lindholm and Anatoly Khazanov, Csáky et al. note that "kinship is also a way of understanding the world and creating order in it, and also served as a framework within which social order was maintained."[129] Nomadic societies are understood to be segmentary, meaning "the rank and the relationship between individuals and/or groups and their place in society is determined," consequently, a system is created where no one has their exact equal. This system differentiates superior and inferior lineages, where a dominant lineage could emerge. The lavishly furnished graves of the elite Avars studied by Csáky et al. demonstrate the dominance of their lineage in paternal kinship relations.[130]

They conclude that the Asian components of the Avar elite arrived in the Basin with the Avar conquest. According to the genetic evidence, the Avar elite families did not mix with the local sixth century population for around a century and likely remained a closed stratum of the society. The dominance of the Asian mtDNA lineages, particularly in males, shows that intermarriages with local females increased after the arrival period. It also illustrated that the Avar elite, especially those of Eurasian origin, arrived in Europe in family groups and were largely endogamous in the Basin. This genetic study points to a possible East Central Eurasian origin of the Avars and the prevalence of patrilineal kinship in the society. Both aspects illuminate an Avar identity that was bound by biology, politics, elite social status, and ethnicity in the Early Avar period. Their biological origins and patrilineal kinship society could have been used as an ethnic marker to distinguish themselves from other local and non-elite Avar communities.

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[129] Lindholm 1986; Khazanov 2003.
[130] Csáky et al. 2020: 9-10.

2.3 Conclusion

The ancient evidence illustrates that the Avars likely originated somewhere within the Eurasian steppe region. A change in material culture in the Carpathian Basin during the Early Avar period, like the appearance of new funerary rituals, grave goods, and burial structures, confirm the Avar migration. The written texts demonstrate that in the outsider, or Byzantine perspective, an Avar was somebody who originated in the Eurasian steppe and fled the Western Turks by migrating to the Carpathian Basin. On the other hand, archaeological and genetic evidence present ethnicity from the Avar viewpoint as ancestral connections to the steppe, biological or mythical kinship, and/or strong ties to the elite class.

3. Language and appearance

Limited to just a few personal names, titles and short runic inscriptions, studying the language of the Avars is challenging. Even more complex is understanding Avar identity from the sparse remnants of their language. Only general conclusions about the symbolic and ritualistic use of language may be drawn from the linguistic evidence. An aspect of Avar identity that is more documented in archaeology and written sources is Avar appearance, especially hairstyle and costume. Specific mortuary evidence will be studied for personal representations of Avar appearance, and written texts will be used for outsider conceptualisations of this marker.

3.1 Language

Researchers have often turned to linguistics to help illuminate the ethnic situation of past steppe peoples – the study of the Avar Khaganate is no exception. Yet, discussing the language of the Avars is highly problematic since there are no texts in the Avar language, and the small number of transmitted names and titles cannot offer a precise linguistic categorisation. It is important to caveat that any interpretation of ethnic identity that is based on very little linguistic evidence is severely limited and speculatory at best.

Many scholars have tried to argue that the Avars spoke Mongolic, which is a theory primarily tied to the identification of the Rouran with the European Avars.[131] However, the first considerable evidence for the Mongolian language only dates back to the fourteenth century. Other researchers have assumed that the Avars spoke the Turkic language.[132] In present times, multilingualism or language replacement among the Avars has been suggested

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[131] In favour of Mongolic interpretations is Menges 1951; Grousset 1970: 193; Samolin 1957/58: 63. Sceptics of this theory are Togan 1939: 193; Barthold 1945: 19-20.
[132] Moravcsik 1958, 2: 59-61; Macartney 1944: 273.

(see 3.1.1 for more). Modern scholars have argued that language does not always correlate with an individual's identity, especially ethnicity.[133] In many cases, though, language can be an essential part of someone's identity; whether language is considered an ethnic marker depends mostly on context. There are many instances in the early medieval period where a change of native language did not mean a change of identity, such as the Franks and Lombards who started using the Romance language of their subjects.[134] For the most part, linguistic theory cannot illuminate everything about who the Avars were, especially how they identified themselves. Nonetheless, they can still provide some information about the possible relationship between the Avar language and identity in the eyes of outsiders.

The only remnants of the Avar language that survive are hybrids, crossing multiple linguistic boundaries. As was pointed out in Chapter Two, the very names and ethnonyms 'Avar' and 'Varchonite' (Var and Chunni) exist in many different languages. The evidence of Avar language takes form in preserved personal names from the early period, late Avar titles, and short runic inscriptions. Eleven Avar names from the Early Avar period survive in the Greek sources of Menander and Theophylact. The first name is that of the Avar khagan *Baian*, which has often been associated with the Mongolic or Chuwash-Turkic languages. In the seventh century we see the same name being used among the Bulgars, especially the Bulgar khan Kuvrat who had a son named *Baian*.[135] The Avar name *Targitius* features among the Scythians and bears resemblance to *Targüt*, a common name in modern Central Asia.[136] An Avar envoy sent to help the negotiations of settlement in Europe was named *Kunimon*, a Germanic Gepidic name, which the contemporary Gepid king *Cunimund* also bore.[137] *Candac*, an Alanic name,

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[133] Pohl 2018a: 270-271.
[134] Pohl and Zeller 2012.
[135] *Baian*, the Avar ruler, occurs in Menander frag. 11, 12.1, 12.4, 12.5-6, pp. 127, 129, 133-139. Kuvrat's son *Baian* is mentioned in Theophanes 6171, p. 498.
[136] *Targites* or *Tergazis* is preserved in Menander frag. 12.6, 25.1, pp. 139-143, 217; *Tergazis* also features in Corippus 3.258, p. 68; See Stache 1976: 442-443 for the word form; *Targitius* is mentioned in Theophylact Simocatta 1.6.5, 1.8.7, 6.11.6, pp. 28, 30, 176; Yu Taishan 2014: 300.
[137] Menander frag. 5.4, p. 53.

has been linked with the personal Avar name *Kandikh*, and around 580, the Avar name *Apsikh* was also used by a Hun in the Byzantine army.[138] Additional Avar names to survive are *Kokh*, which is best described as the Turkic word for blue, and *Alciocus*, meaning the Turkic *alti-oq*, 'six arrows.'[139] The name and/or title of the Avar high priest fugitive *Bookolabras* likely denotes a Turkic title used by the Bulgars probably related to the Turkic term for high priest, *böqü-qolavuz*.[140] *Hermitzis* was the name of an Avar 'exarch' that execrated defenders during the Avar siege of 626 and is possibly related to the ethnonym *(K)ermichiones* and the later Bulgarian clan name *Ermi/Ermares*.[141] The final two names that have been preserved are *Solakhos,* who delivered Baian's declaration of war in 580, and *Samur*, who was in charge of an advance party of eight thousand soldiers in 592.[142] Both *Solakhos* and *Samur* have various origins and can be interpreted in multiple ways. The diverse nature of this evidence does not allow a distinct linguistic categorisation. Despite a lack of linguistic clarity, the Avar language seems to originate from Central or Inner Asia.

The remnants of the Avar language are so diffuse because these names and titles were likely taken from foreign languages for their symbolic meaning. Pohl notes that a difference should be made between "symbolic language used for names, titles, or perhaps cultic purposes… and the language(s) of communication."[143] An example of the use of symbolic language is "Genghis Khan who was called *Temujin* after a Tatar prince whom his father had conquered at the time of his birth."[144] Steppe titles were especially revered for their foreignness. For

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[138] *Kandikh* was the name of an Avar envoy. See Menander frag. 5.1, pp. 48-49; Moravcsik 1958, 2: 135. *Candac* was the name of a fifth century Alan king. See Jordanes 265-266, pp. 126-127. *Apsikh* was the name of an Avar deputy field commander. See Theophylact Simocatta 8.5, pp. 216-217. The Hun named *Apsikh* occurs in Theophylact Simocatta 1.14.5, 2.3.1, pp. 40, 46. The name is discussed by Moravcsik 1958, 2: 83.
[139] *Kök*: Theophylact Simocatta 6.6.6, p. 167; Menges 1968: 22. *Alti-oq*: Pohl 2018a: 271, 321.
[140] Theophylact Simocatta 1.8.3, p. 30; Yu Taishan 2014: 301.
[141] *Chronicon Paschale*, p. 178; Moravcsik 1958, 2: 117; Altheim 1959/62, 1: 26-27.
[142] *Solakhos*: Menander frag. 25.2, p. 224; Moravcsik 1958, 2: 240. *Samur*: Theophylact Simocatta 6.4.11, p. 164; Moravcsik 1958, 2: 227.
[143] Pohl 2018a 271.
[144] Quote from Pohl 2018a: 276. Pohl references *Geheime Geschichte der Mongolen*, pp. 2, 19; Franke 1968: 84.

example, *khagan* is primarily interpreted as Mongolic and sometimes also Persian in origin.[145] Late Avar titles, including *tudun*, *kapkhan*, and *iugurrus* were mostly used amongst Bulgars and Khazars. The term *zoapan* from the Nagyszentmiklós inscription mentioned below was used by Croats and Bulgars as *župan* (local lord or court official).[146]

Short runic inscriptions are the final piece of evidence for the Avar language. These inscriptions are not Germanic; instead, they are a different runiform script known as Eurasian runes. The most significant inscriptions are fourteen short texts that feature on a gold vessel from Nagyszentmiklós.[147] Runic characters are also found on about a dozen bone objects from Avar graves.[148] All attempts to decipher these runes are hypothetical, as scholars are yet to know which language they were written. Turkic has been proposed as the language of the Avar runic inscriptions, while others have proposed a Mongolic reading. Other Eastern European runic inscriptions do not provide more helpful clues to this problem either.[149] Interestingly, the Nagyszentmiklós vessel inscription also contains Greek characters. These characters, among others, are now thought to be Turkic, which brings scholars to believe that someone at the Avar courts of aristocracy knew Turkic and could read the Greek alphabet.[150] Thus, it looks as though Avar runic literacy was a marginal occurrence, limited to ritual and representation. The inscription does not allow interpretations of everyday language use in the Khaganate, as it likely indicates old linguistic conditions. From the symbolic meaning and ritualistic use of these words, it can be postulated that they – both the words and their corresponding languages – meant something to the Avars. It is plausible that the Avars' language, and their use of

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[145] Menges 1968: 20.
[146] Smiljanić 1990; Alimov 2013; Zhekov 2003; Pohl 2018a: 234, 272.
[147] Bálint 2002; 2010; Daim, et. al 2015. See the following for readings of the inscriptions: Németh 1971; Vékony 1973; Vásáry 1972: 335-47; Göbl and Róna-Tas 1995; Róna-Tas 2002.
[148] Juhász 2004: 91-93.
[149] An overview of the Turkic and Mongolic interpretations is in Róna-Tas 1988. The inscriptions on Avar bones were published in Vásáry, 1972. The Turkic interpretation is held by Harmatta 1996/97. Röhrborn and Veenker 1985 discuss eastern European runic inscriptions; Vásáry 1999.
[150] Róna-Tas 1988: 129; Albrecht 2015: 142-43.

language in general, played a role in how they understood themselves. Language could have been an indicator of Avar identity to outsiders, but there is not enough information in the written sources to confirm this.[151]

3.1.1 The Avars and Common Slavic

Other than the sparse evidence mentioned above, there is nothing that attests to the Avar language. However, it has been recently proposed that the Avars used Common Slavic as a *lingua franca* throughout the Khaganate.[152] Scholars believe Common Slavic was used in the Avar Khaganate because the Avars and Slavs had an interconnected socio-political relationship that necessitated communication. The historical context surrounding the use of Common Slavic in the Khaganate is explored in the following section (see 3.1.2). Common (or proto-) Slavic is a linguistic reconstruction based on present-day Slavic languages. Paul Barford maintains that the *lingua franca* hypothesis explains the spread of Slavic, but it does not show how it appeared.[153] The most dominant opinion among researchers is that the Slavic language spread through migration. However, some scholars express the opinion that Common Slavic could not have been brought about by migration, as migration would have resulted in language differentiation.[154]

It was also argued that Common Slavic developed in a region bordered by Iranian, Baltic, Dacian, and Germanic languages and was a convergence of Balto-Slavic, Iranian, and Thracian dialects.[155] In line with this idea, Common Slavic has been considered a *koine* instead of a

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[151] The only source to mention the languages understood in the Avar Khaganate is in the *Miracles of Saint Demetrius*, pp. 223, 229, when Kuver/Mavros said, "our language, as well as those of the Romans, the Slavs, and the Bulgars." However, it is unclear what 'our language' means. Mavros lived in the Khaganate as a member of the elite and likely described its multilingualism in this passage. Grigoriou-Ionnidou 1987: 3-15; Pohl 2018a: 272.
[152] Pritsak 1983; Curta 2004: 135.
[153] Barford 2008: 22.
[154] Lunt 1984/85: 421; Popowska-Taborska 1997: 92.
[155] Holzer 2014: 1118.

lingua franca.[156] The latter is a "vehicular language used for interlingual comprehension between groups that do not speak each other's languages, as well as between native speakers of the *lingua franca* and other groups."[157] On the other hand, Koineisation involves "structural convergence between closely related linguistic systems (languages, dialects) leading to the stabilisation of some compromise variety."[158] A *koine* is essentially dialect mixing and results from a type of language contact, where speakers continue to use their own linguistic varieties while communicating with speakers of similar varieties. Hence, there is no need for either group to learn another language with this process.[159] Koineisation occurs in new social networks, especially those created by younger generations after traditional networks have been destroyed. Speakers must be in constant intimate social interaction for the process to begin.[160]

Common Slavic is a language that seems to fit the criteria of a *koine*, as it is easy to learn because of its simplified structure.[161] Despite not knowing where the *koine* was precisely formed, Balto-Slavic, Iranian, and Thracian languages must have had frequent contact for Slavic to develop. These linguistic, social, and psychological interactions of the sixth century were likely favourable enough for linguistic convergence and the Slavic *koine* to be created.[162] If Slavic was indeed a *koine*, then a different explanation is needed for its spread throughout the Carpathian Basin and beyond.[163] The Avar migration has been used as an explanation for Common Slavic's spread to Eastern Europe.[164] Other groups from Eastern Europe, namely the area to the left of the Dnieper in Ukraine possibly joined the Avar migration from the north of the Black Sea into the Middle Danube area and could have brought the Slavic *koine* with them.

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[156] Paliga 2012.
[157] Curta 2021: 170. Cf. Thomason 2001: 158; Brosch 2015: 74.
[158] Curta 2021: 170. Cf. Hinskens 2001: 200.
[159] Andersen 2003a: 6-7; Andersen 2003b: 47.
[160] Tuten 2001: 330 and 333.
[161] Holzer 2008: 210.
[162] Boček 2014: 294.
[163] Curta 2021: 173.
[164] Richards 2003: 5.

Curta maintains that whether these migrants spoke Slavic or not, the local population in Central Eastern Europe may have shifted to that *koine*. The Slavic *koine* then would have become a *lingua franca* inside the Khaganate because the Avar elites likely used Slavic to communicate with their subjects.[165] Unfortunately, this language replacement theory does not offer much information regarding the identity of the Avars. All that can be presumed is that the Avar identity continued to exist well into the eighth period, despite this supposed language shift.

3.1.2 Historical context of Common Slavic in the Khaganate

After settling in the Carpathian Basin, the Avars subsumed other frontier groups like the Slavs and remaining Romans, Gepids, and other Germanic groups in their Khaganate. The Slavs were made up of decentralised groups and had varying relationships with the Avar Khaganate. Most notable was the case of the Wends, who were a group made up of Slavic tribes that acted as a special military in the Avar army. Written in the seventh century, the *Chronicle of Fredegar* described how the Wends emerged out of unions between Avar warriors and Slavic women: "every year the Huns (i.e., Avars) wintered with the Slavs, sleeping with their wives and daughters, and in addition, the Slavs paid tribute and endured many other burdens."[166] In addition to serving in the Avar army, the Slavs were made to produce livestock, food supplies, and everyday artisanal products for the Avar warrior elite. This type of tribute payment mainly concerned agrarian groups that settled in the Khaganate and the Slavs with whom the Avars were billeted. Another type of tribute expected of the Slavs was symbolic contributions, where the khagan would be recognised as supreme ruler.[167]

Fredegar states that the Wends were long

"subjected to the Huns, who used them as *befulci*. Whenever the Huns took the field against another people, they stayed encamped in battle array while the Wends did

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[165] Curta 2021: 173.
[166] Fredegar 4.48, pp. 39-40; Curta 1997: 148-149.
[167] Fredegar 4.48, pp. 39-40; Pohl 2018a: 142-143.

the fighting. If the Wends won, the Huns advanced to pillage, but if they lost the Huns backed them up and they resumed the fight. The Wends were called *befulci* by the Huns because at the beginning of a battle they formed a second battle-line and advanced into battle before the Huns."[168]

The term *befulci* has been interpreted widely. It could mean 'buffalo-driver' in Slavic, an Umbrian pronunciation of 'herdsman,' 'ancillary people' *(by-folk)* in Frankish, or the root of the modern Hungarian *mufurc*, meaning 'recruit, greenhorn.'[169] Curta proposes that the term *befulci* and its use suggest that Fredegar aimed at (re)interpreting what could have been a 'native,' presumably Wendish account.[170]

3.2 Appearance

3.2.1 Hairstyle

When it comes to the appearance of Avars, hairstyle is a hot topic among the ancient written evidence. The texts' fixation on Avar hair indicates that it was perhaps an ethnic marker in the eyes of outsiders. Writing only a few years after the Avars appeared in Europe, Agathias is one of the first to mention the Avar hairstyle. In fact, hairstyle is the only thing he says about the Avars. While describing the hairstyle of Frankish kings, Agathias contrasts it to the hair of Avars and Turks, for example: "It is not, however, like that of the Turks and Avars, unkempt, dry and dirty and tied up in an unsightly knot."[171] Despite the negative tropes, Agathias'

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[168] Fredegar 4.48, pp. 39-40.
Fredegar's passage has a strong resemblance to the story of the Dulebians in the twelfth century *Russian Primary Chronicle: Laurentian Text* 12, p. 55: "They (Avars) made war upon the Slavs, and harassed the Dulebians, who were themselves Slavs. They even did violence to the Dulebian women. When an Avar made a journey, he did not cause either a horse or a steer to be harnessed, but gave command instead that three or four or five women should be yoked to his cart and be made to draw him."
     The similarity between these accounts has been explained by a general model and/or literary borrowings. See Chaloupecký 1950: 227; Kollautz and Miyakawa 1970, 1: 236. Avar violence against Slavic women was a common theme throughout the written texts and possibly reflects a stylised experience with steppe people in general. See Pohl 2018a: 139.
[169] Mayer 1929: 114-120; Kollautz and Miyakawa 1970, 1: 229; Chaloupecký 1950: 227; Preidel 1957: 86.
[170] Curta 1997: 150.
[171] Agathias 1.2.4, p. 11.

account offers information regarding the knot hairstyle worn by Avars. If the Avars wore their hair in a knot, then their hair would have to have been long enough to do so.

Other texts also reflect the notion that the Avars wore their hair long. Braids and plaits seem to be the hairstyle that garners the most attention among ancient authors. In the *In laudem Iustini minoris*, on the accession of Justin II, by sixth century Latin poet Corippus, an Avar is described as having plaited hair during their turn to Christ.[172] He also states: "That famed people, the Avars, dreadful with their snaky hair, horrible to look upon and fierce in bloody warfare, begs for peace in the middle of your palace."[173] Writing in the ninth century, Theophanes reports on the appearance of the first Avar delegation to Constantinople. Around January 558, "the whole city ran up to see them, since they had never seen such a people before. For they wore their hair very long in the back, tied with ribbons and braided."[174] From this piece of evidence, the Avars' long braided hair likely made a significant impression on the people of Constantinople. In Byzantine sources, long hair was typically associated with those living outside the Roman world, and braids were primarily attributed to steppe peoples.[175]

In Curta's discussion on ethnicity in medieval archaeology, he argues that ethnic displays, much like the Avars' braids, were carefully staged acknowledgements of "pre-existing cultural practices, a (re-)invention of norms." Long braids likely began as a marker of multiple forms of social identity, but, over time, it became an Avar ethnic stereotype among outsiders.[176] In the late sixth and early seventh century, outsiders began to generalise the Avars as "the filthy

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[172] Theodulf of Orléans, *Carmen* 25, p. 484, ll. 39–40; Pohl 2018a: 376.
[173] Corippus, *Praefatio* 5, p. 33; Stache, 1976: 431; Stein 1919: 4-5; Jones 1964, 1: 306; Cameron 1976: 51-67; Haldon 1990: 32; Pohl 2013: 67-86; 2018a: 58.
[174] Theophanes 6050, pp. 339-340; John Malalas, p. 489. The arrival of the Avar envoys is dated to the end of 557 or the beginning of 558 by Szádeczky-Kardoss 1972: 62. Stein 1949, 2: 542 dates the envoy's arrival to January 558.
[175] Kardaras 2018: 10.
[176] Curta 2007a: 181-182. Current scholarship, particularly Haaland's interview in Jakoubek and Budilová 2019: 188, on stereotyping, suggests that "the first features people see in their encounter with others are physical, like gender, skin colour, and hair type etc." These characteristics are then taken as criteria for stereotyping, such as making generalised assumptions about what kind of person an individual sharing such trait is.

race of long-haired barbarians."[177] The archaeology, however, does not contain any evidence that would suggest long braided hair was a valued ethnic marker among the Avars. This changed in the Middle Avar period when long braids became somewhat of a symbol of Avar identity. Middle Avar graves of warriors were frequently buried with pairs of richly adorned hair clips, which were positioned in a way that suggests they were used for the ornamentation of long braids.[178] The instability of the mid-sixth century most likely played a part in long braided hair becoming a badge of Avar identity. Those who were buried with these hairclips were elite men, who were typically buried close to one another within the same cemetery. Not much can be said about whether this hairstyle was valued as an ethnic marker within the early elite Avar stratum, for hair clips seem to be an invention of second and third generation Avars.[179] Similar hairstyles were also worn by Rouran and the Oguz and later among the Mongols and Seljuks.[180]

3.2.2 Costume

Avar Elite

"Their clothing was similar to that of the other Huns," says Theophanes about the Avar costume. While this is valuable information, it does not provide details about what it means to dress like a Hun. This statement likely emerged out of the centuries old stereotype that saw all barbarians, especially Eurasian steppe people, as 'evil,' 'slaughterous,' and 'ugly.' It is integral that the mortuary evidence is considered when trying to find more accurate information on Avar self-identification through dress.

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[177] Curta 2007a: 181-182.
[178] Andrási 1996/97: 85-123; Breuer 2005: 58.
[179] Curta 2007a: 181-182.
[180] Moreover, Turks, Bulgars, and Khazars are recorded as wearing their hair long and loose. See Togan 1939: 231; Kollautz and Miyakawa 1970, 1: 58; Szentpéteri 1985: 147-149. For instance, Movses Daskhurantsi, in the *History of Caucasian Albania*, reports that the Turks were "savage, gold-loving people of long hair." See Movses Daskhurantsi 2.12 (trans.) Dowsett 1961: 86; Gandila 2018: 212; Aleksidze 2018.

Unlike other early medieval groups, the Avars were rarely attested to outside the Khaganate. What does exist within the Avar sphere of influence is a material culture that strongly suggests the Avars were a political *ethnos*.[181] This notion is reinforced by the uniform distribution of 'funerary pyre' assemblages throughout the Carpathian Basin and central position within cemeteries given to males mainly buried with their horses, composite bows, and spearheads. Other objects that have been found in the graves of high-ranking Avar leaders include Eastern European type swords with P- and D-shaped suspension mounts, as well as symbols of power like bird-shaped heads of sceptres or staffs, carved in bone or wood and covered with gold foil. These symbols of power also occur in burial assemblages of the Eurasian steppe.[182] The evidence of 'princely' burials show that power within the Khaganate was reserved for the Avar elite, and this power was strongly represented through the display of Byzantine luxury goods.

After the arrival of the Avars, the material record suggests substantial ties between groups in Western Europe and the Carpathian Basin. The start of the Avar age is characterised by a mixture of steppe, Merovingian, and Mediterranean-Byzantine traditions. Avar females, in particular, were buried in costume that was heavily influenced by late antique fashions. Grave 107 of cemetery A in Kölked-Feketekapu holds an Avar male, who is believed to be a warrior because of the presence of a sword. Buried next to this individual, in Grave 108, is what seems to be their female spouse, who is found adorned with an abundance of expensive and richly decorated dress accessories. The female skeleton was buried with a cap or headdress secured with two large, spatulate-headed silver stylus pins, positioned on either side of the head, directly beside the cheekbones.[183] Securing a veil, headdress, or hair with pins was a custom attested to in the early Avar period and is known previously from late antique contexts. Small pins have also been found beside the temples of females buried in the cemetery at Keszthely-

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[181] Pohl 2018a: 269.
[182] Vida 2008: 15-17.
[183] Vida 2018: 420-424.

Fenékpuszta.[184] The custom of securing a veil with two pins throughout the cemeteries of local Romanised commoners like the one just mentioned, indicates that this tradition continued into the Avar age.[185]

Byzantine origin gold crescent earrings decorated with peacocks and granulation were also discovered with the female buried in Grave 108. The common occurrence of Byzantine origin jewellery in the assemblages of high-ranking persons suggests that these individuals were likely active in long distance exchange networks where they could acquire such luxury goods. The Avar period elite would attain these rich items through personal contacts, like trade or gifts, or as part of military expedition booty.[186] Grave 108 further includes two bronze buckles on the middle part of the left leg and small strap-ends by the right leg, replicating a Merovingian type leg binding.[187] Small buckles and strap-ends for the leather or textile straps of leg binding are common among those buried in the Early Avar period. This tradition was probably adopted in the Carpathian Basin in the sixth and seventh centuries from the western Frankish lands.[188]

The disc brooch from Grave 108 of the Kölked A cemetery is covered in a geometric design that imitates gem-encrusted pieces and contains a quatrefoil rosette motif at its centre.[189] It differs in style from the popular box brooches of the period because its pressed silver plate was secured to a bronze plate. The disc brooch's ornamentation replicates the Merovingian and late antique rectangular or lozenge-shaped brooches adorned with garnet-set cells. Pressed plate brooches rapidly spread throughout Pannonia and the Merovingian world in the seventh century, typically as copies of brooches worn by the elite.[190] Disc brooches dating from the mid-seventh to late-eighth century have been found in multiple cemeteries of eastern

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[184] Schulze-Dörrlamm 1990: 132, 135; Martin 1995: 52; Stutzinger 1995: 136-208.
[185] Vida 2018: 424.
[186] Heinrich-Tamáska 2016: 281-285.
[187] Vida 1995: 219-291.
[188] Clauss 1976/77: 59 fig. 1
[189] Garam 1993: fig. 9, 12.
[190] Klein-Pfeuffer 1993.

Transdanubia such as Balatonfűzfő, Pécs, and Szekszárd.[191] With all this information, the female of Grave 108 may be interpreted as a member of one of the local communities with links to Byzantium, Frankish Gaul, or the Avar Khaganate. If indeed this individual was linked to the Khaganate, their burial could suggest that Avar females almost immediately adopted the local fashions after the Avar migrations. More generally, the burial in Grave 108 might show how the Avar elite redefined its identity in the new social, political, and economic milieu.[192]

An intriguing yet rare aspect of elite and civilian Avar male identities is the occurrence of earrings in graves across the Avar Khaganate, especially those in the middle of the Transylvanian Plateau dated between 650/70 and 720.[193] Grave 1 in Gâmbaș/Ogoarele de jos contains the skeleton of an adult male aged between thirty and forty years. Beside the right ear of the skeleton lay a silver lunula-shaped earring and a bronze earring with a globular pendant. An earring made of a thin silver bar was also positioned on the right side of the skull.[194] In the Gepid-Avar cemetery in Șpălnaca/Șugud, an Avar warrior grave contained a skeleton, positioned on his abdomen, and three bronze earrings with open ends.[195] Another warrior was buried with a gold earring with pearled pendant consisting of four small spheres in Unirea 2/Veresmort.[196]

In his analysis of the material just mentioned, Cosma recognised two social categories of men in Avar society. The first were warriors buried with a single earring, dress accessories, and horse tack elements, like grave number 38 in Șpălnaca. The second social category involves men who were part of the civilian society of Avar communities in Transylvania. Their graves did not contain any weapons or elements of horse tack. In the graves of such men,

[191] Garam 1993: fig. 8, 3; Perémi 2014: 229 fig. 5, 5. 7-8.
[192] Vida 2016: 258; Vida 2018: 420, 424-426.
[193] Cosma 2015: 261-262; 2017: 24-28; Tănase 2021: 258.
[194] Cosma 2020: 47.
[195] Botezatu and Blăjan 1989: 351; Grosu et al. 1995: 276, note 6; Protase et al. 2000: 104, nr. 143.
[196] Szilárd 2015: 116-117.

archaeologists regularly encountered earrings associated with beads, belt buckles made of iron or bronze, and knives. In the cases of Grave 1 from Gâmbaș and 1 and 2 from Sâncrai, four and two earrings of the same type were found on the left and right sides of the skulls. This pattern could indicate that the deceased wore these earrings daily.[197] The tradition of men wearing earrings was spread throughout the Eurasian steppes and Central Asia during the Turkic period.[198] Bóna argues that the deposition of a single gold earring during burial was a funerary practice of Sassanid origin that the Avars brought from Asia and represented an individual's status as an important soldier in the Avar army.[199] The earrings the men wore, or those deposited during burial, likely reflected the social status of the living and dead, and the frequently changing fashion in the Avar Khaganate during the seventh and eighth centuries.[200]

Unfortunately, it cannot be said what the Avar costume was prior to their settlement in Europe, as there are hardly any assemblage analogies with any other groups, especially those in Inner Asia and Eurasia. As argued, the archaeological material tells us that there was a redefinition of elite Avar identity after their arrival, one which blended many popular European costume traditions.

Germanic groups

A new awareness of the role of artefacts in costume has contributed to the identification of dress with culture and ethnicity. This knowledge has further enabled the location of populations and the mapping of costume provinces in the Khaganate. Through such method, Germanic male and female costumes worn in the Avar period have been identified. The Germanic male costume was typically characterised by three- and four-piece belts and Weihmörting- and Civezzano-type weapon belts. Female costumes were identified by shoe mounts and amulet

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[197] Cosma 2020: 47-54
[198] Balogh 2016: 150.
[199] Bóna 1979: 5, 27.
[200] Cosma 2020: 57.

capsules, amulet pendants, ornamental pendants, disc brooches, and hair pins. These costumes helped locate the areas in eastern Transdanubia and Transylvania that Germanic groups lived during the Avar period.[201]

Romanised population

The archaeology of the Romanised population of the Avar period covers late antique centres like Keszthely, Tác, and Pécs and surrounds.[202] As of yet, there is no reliable method created that can help identify this population in the cemeteries of Transdanubia. Prominent finds in these communities involve western Mediterranean articles, like disc brooches, bird brooches, basket earrings, and eastern Mediterranean types, such as bird headed pins, buckles, brooches with a returned foot. Cultural impacts from the western Mediterranean show the survival of the local late antique population, which preserved its contacts with the Christian population of the south-eastern Alpine region, northern Italy, and Dalmatia in the sixth and seventh centuries. The Romanised community mediated western material culture, craft technologies, and cultural values to the barbarian groups in the Carpathian. Jewellery and other categories of artefacts were the types of material culture that this group continued to create. Late antique traditions and Christianity were some of the cultural values they also carried into the Avar period. After they were resettled from the Byzantine provinces in the Balkans, new Romanised populations introduced eastern Mediterranean costume traditions to the Khaganate.[203]

3.3 Conclusion

The very limited remnants of the Avar language show a potential connection with Turkic and Mongolic languages. This linguistic evidence possibly corroborates the notion that the Avars may have originated somewhere in the Eurasian steppe region. Runic inscriptions on bone

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[201] Vida 2008: 18-31.
[202] Garam 2001: 178-191.
[203] Vida 2009: 233: 260; Müller 2010: 157-166; Müller 2014: 157-166.

objects and a vessel from Nagyszentmiklós suggest that the Avar language had important symbolic and ritualistic functions limited to the Avar aristocracy at court. This idea is further reinforced by the diffuse origins of Avar names and titles in the Greek written texts, which demonstrate the tradition of taking words from other languages for ritualistic and cultic purposes. Unlike the Avar language, the evidence for the Avar appearance is more abundant, especially for hairstyle and costume. From an analysis of the written and archaeological sources, it can be argued that the Avars probably wore their hair long, whether that be in a knot, plaits, braids, and/or free. In terms of costume, it is possible that the Avars, especially women, redefined themselves upon arriving in Europe by wearing or being buried with a blend of steppe, Merovingian, and Mediterranean-Byzantine clothing and accessories. This evidence, along with 'funerary pyre' assemblages and the central position of male graves containing horses and weapons within cemeteries, demonstrates that the Avars were likely a political *ethnos*.

4. Religion and warfare

The final two Avar ethnic markers that will be explored in this thesis are Avar religion and warfare. Avar religion is largely unknown to us, so understanding this part of Avar identity requires analysing ritual and belief among similar steppe groups, like the Turks. Avar warfare, on the other hand, is discussed in much detail by Byzantine sources, especially the *Strategikon*. As is the theme throughout this thesis, warfare as an ethnic marker reveals more about the conceptualisation of the Avars among the Byzantines rather than the Avars' identification with specific weapons and fighting styles.

4.1 Religion and ritual

The steppe peoples' beliefs, myths, and rites, especially their gods, cosmology, and Shamanistic traditions, have been debated since the mid-twentieth century. Informed by the rationalist climate at this time, scholars handled this topic creatively through intercultural comparison. They used modern ethnographic material from other periods to fill the gaps in knowledge on early medieval steppe beliefs. Herodotus' writings on Scythian ritual practices are an example of what researchers at this time used to base their interpretations. Early research in this field conflated information by presenting steppe cultures as static across time and space. However, this paradigm has now been largely abandoned. Sources from other periods like Herodotus, Ahmad Ibn Fadlan, or the *Secret History of the Mongols* do not hold accurate information about Avar religion and ritual. To gain a more precise understanding of the Avar religion, historians could study a similar contemporary group like the Turks, especially if both have similar archaeological and written evidence.[204] Because of the complexities associated with the study

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[204] Pohl 2018a: 254.

of medieval steppe religion, researchers have tended to focus on steppe peoples' conversion to religions like Islam, Christianity, Judaism, Buddhism or Manichaeism.[205] The purpose of this section is to present comparative material that shows the religious options the Avars had in the Early Avar Period. Here, religion is defined as a system of beliefs that is not necessarily organised.

Early medieval Turkic religion often involved elements of Shamanism like possession, purification, incantation formulas, exorcism, liminal rituals, and fire rites.[206] Menander records an experience Zemarchus had with the religion in the Turkic Khaganate:

> "Certain others of their own tribe appeared, who, they said, were exorcisers of ill-omened things, and they came up to Zemarchus and his companions. They took all the baggage that they were carrying and placed it on the ground. Then they set fire to branches of the frankincense tree, chanted some barbarous words in their Scythian tongue, making noise with bells and drums, waved about the baggage the frankincense boughs as they were crackling with the flames, and, falling into a frenzy and acting like madmen, supposed that they were driving away evil spirits. For in this way some men were thought to be averters of and guardians against evil. When they had chased away the evil beings, as they supposed, and had led Zemarchus himself through the fire, they thought that by this means they had purified themselves also."[207]

This passage indicates that the Turks possibly practised some form of Shamanism, although it does not make clear the particular role of shamans in the Turkic Khaganate.[208] In Theophylact's description of Avar origins is the idea that the Turks honoured fire "to quite an extraordinary degree."[209] Magic also formed an important part of the image of steppe peoples, including the Avars, whose victory over the Franks in 566 was attributed to their adeptness in the magical arts which they expressed through various illusions.[210] The *Sudaie Lexicon* mentions the time

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[205] Take Golden 1983 and 2007, for example.
[206] Ripinsky-Naxon 1993.
[207] Menander frag. 10.3, p. 118.
[208] Roux 1988 states that Shamanism as a religious practice should not be confused with the whole religion, which encompasses a belief in divine beings, etc.
[209] Theohylact Simocatta 7.8.14, p. 191; Scharlipp 1992.
[210] Gregory of Tours 4.29, p. 161.

Avars tricked Byzantine scouts with the creation of fake rain, fog, and darkness so that "the scouts were not able to distinguish the enemy coming to assault."[211] Bookolabras is the title of an Avar high priest that had an affair with one of the khagan's wives and is translated as 'magician, priest' by Theophylact. A similar title, (*boila*) *kolobros*, also exists in Bulgar inscriptions.[212] Both of these examples also relate to *qolobur*, *qolaguz*, or *qulavuz* ('guide, leader') from Old Turkic, while *böqü-qulavuz* could be translated as 'high priest.'[213] Turkic priests are described as expounders of "the prophecy for the future" by Theophylact.[214]

From Menander's account of khagan Baian building a bridge to prepare for the Sirmium siege, we know that Avar religion was also entwined in politics. To trick the Byzantines into a false sense of security, in front of the people of Singidunum, Baian

> "immediately drew his sword and swore the oaths of the Avars, invoking against himself and the whole Avar nation the sanction that, if he planned to build the bridges over the Save out of any design against the Romans, he and the whole Avar tribe should be destroyed by the sword, heaven above and God in his heavens should send fire against them. Thus were the barbarian oaths sworn by the Khagan. 'Now,' he said, 'I wish to swear the Roman oaths.'"[215]

A common custom among barbarians was damning oneself while oath taking, as was the idea that one must be bound by such an oath when dealing with one's enemies.[216] Making an oath on a sword was a tradition also practised among the Bulgars, although they did not brandish it, rather they put it in the middle and swore on it.[217] Ancient authors describe the Bulgars as practising the traditions of both parties when taking oaths during peace negotiations. This idea is best illustrated in 815-816 when the emperor Leo V poured water onto the earth, reversed

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[211] *Suidae Lexicon*, p. 112, *s.v. diopteres.*
[212] Theophylact Simocatta mentions the title in 1.8.3, p. 30. An example of the Bulgar title is found on a ninth century funerary inscription of a man titled *bogotor boila kolober*. Refer to Petkov 2008: 10 for more information. Beševliev 1981: 350-351 discusses the possible function of a *kolobros*.
[213] Moravcsik 1958, 2: 162; Yu Taishan 2014: 301.
[214] Theohylact Simocatta 7.8.15, p. 191.
[215] Menander frag. 25.1, p. 220.
[216] Beševliev 1981: 377 discusses customary Bulgarian oaths which bare similarity to Avar oaths.
[217] See Nicholas I, *Epistola* 99, *Responsa*, c. 67, p. 591.

horses' saddles, and slaughtered dogs.[218] Cutting a dog in two during oath-taking was a rite attested amongst Cumans, Mongols, and Hungarians and implicitly meant "wishing the dog's fate on the one who violated the oath."[219] Following the use of self-damning in oath taking according to 'pagan' rites, a state crisis occurred in Byzantium.[220] A similar situation presented itself in 900 when the Salzburg archbishop Theotmar defended himself in a letter to the pope addressing the accusations that he made a treaty with the Hungarians through oaths on "the dog, the wolf, and other extremely sacrilegious and heathen things (*ethnicas res*)."[221]

Noteworthy is the information that the khagan swore by God in heaven. The highest being documented among most steppe groups was the sky god Tängri.[222] According to Theophylact, the Turks only worshipped and called god "him who made the heaven and earth. To him, they sacrifice horses, cattle, and sheep."[223] The Orkhon inscriptions state that Tängri invested or sent the khagan to fulfil Tängri's will, and he could maintain his position as khagan so long as the cosmic order was preserved.[224] This divine command from God to the khagan was conceptualised in multiple ways. Khagan Bilge's rise to the throne is inscribed as "I, Tängri-like and Tängri born as Turkic Kagan, mounted the throne."[225] An inscription of Kültegin, Bilge's younger brother and advisor, describes the same process of Bilge's accession but framed it differently: "Then Turkish Tängri (heaven) above, Turkish Yer (earth) and Sub (water) spoke as follows: 'In order that the Turkish people (*bodun*) would, not be ruined and in order that it should be a people again, they raised my father Ilteriş Kagan and my mother

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[218] *Theophanes Continuatus, Ioannes Cameniata, Symeon Magister, Georgius Monachus*, p. 31; Beševliev 1981: 377-378; Ziemann 2007: 299-300.

[219] Sinor 1992: 301-307; Berend 2005: 45; Miller 1971: 56-76.

[220] *Theophanes Continuatus, Ioannes Cameniata, Symeon Magister, Georgius Monachus*, p. 31; Beševliev 1981: 377-378; Ziemann 2007: 299-300.

[221] *Epistula Theotmari*, p. 148.

[222] Roux 1956: 49-82; Grousset 1970: 179; de Ferdinandy 1956: 183-184; Heissig 1985: 37.

[223] Theophylact Simocatta 7.8.14-15, p. 191.

[224] Roux 1959: 235-38.

[225] Bilge Khagan inscription, front side, 1, https://bitig.kz/?lang=e&mod=1&tid=1&oid=16&m=1; Thomsen 1924/25: 142, 168-170; Scharlipp 1992: 59-60.

Ilbilga Katun up and sat them upon the throne.'" In this inscription, reference is made to all three Turkic elemental gods – heaven, earth, and water. Even Theophylact records the Turks as revering "air and water, and they praise earth."[226] Lists like these two examples frequently occur all over the steppes. In the ninth century source *Vita* of Pancratius of Taormina, the Avars are mentioned as venerating swords, animal images, water, and fire. In actual fact, this piece of information is likely a topos or a reference to the Slavs in Greece, at Athens and Dyrrhachium.[227]

Archaeology provides significant insight into the burial customs of the Avars. As Daim has proposed, burial finds do not assist in establishing "personal representations of religious belief, but rather the unifying traditions and customs of the community, with their local variations and spheres of influence. Within this frame, competition for status and right behaviour could be channelled." In most cases, only the 'underground' element of burial customs is within our grasp. Customs outside the 'underground' realm, like when the Byzantine envoy Valentinus had to lacerate his cheeks with a dagger along with a Turkic congregation in mourning, cannot be detected through the material evidence alone.[228] Nevertheless, multiple written sources from Central Asia do attest to the custom of lacerating one's cheeks during mourning.[229]

Inhumation was a tradition commonly practised among the Avars.[230] Slavs in the Khaganate typically cremated their dead, and Central Asian steppe people seem to have done so as well. Chinese sources recorded Turks in the sixth century cremating their dead; however, this is not completely reflected in material evidence.[231] Avar grave orientation varies within and between

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[226] Kültegin inscription, 1st side, 10–11, https://bitig.kz/?lang=e&mod=1&tid=1&oid=15&m=1.
[227] Kollautz and Miyakawa 1970, 1: 282; Kádár 1983, 2: 1373-1387.
[228] This quote is taken from Pohl 2018a: 258, which reiterates the ideas of Daim 2003b: 41-57. See also Ecsedy 1984: 266-267; Barthold and Rogen 1970: 195-227.
[229] *Sui Shu* and *Zhou Shu*, p. 42; Stark 2008: 109-110.
[230] Pohl 2018a: 100-109, 335-352.
[231] *Sui shu*, p. 42; Bálint 1989: 235-271.

periods.[232] The Avars would bury their deceased in coffins made of planks or hollowed out tree trunks. Some burial examples give the impression "of a lovingly laid-out living space as the final resting place."[233] Placing meat within the grave was a custom frequently practised across the Khaganate and the quality and preservation of meat cuts vary from one cemetery to the next.[234] Some conclusions can be made about Avar burial customs indirectly, especially the idea that Avar graves likely held signs and symbols, which are not always visible due to grave robberies.[235]

4.2 Warfare

"They are not engaged in most human endeavours, nor have they trained themselves for anything else except to conduct themselves bravely against their enemies."[236] This quote from the *Strategikon* expresses the shared Byzantine sentiment that the Avars had a warlike disposition. Byzantium used the significant impact of the Avar attacks to justify the notion that Avars were obsessed with war. Using these ancient sources, modern scholars have often taken the Avar military to be superior to other contemporary armies. István Bóna states that "in open or moderately hilly terrain, no single opponent in contemporary Europe—the Byzantine army not excepted—was capable of successfully resisting the armoured Avar horsemen."[237] New research, however, has focused less on the superiority of nomadic military technology and organisation, which should not be treated as intrinsic to steppe empires.[238]

Contemporary observers were well aware of the Avars' advantages in military technology. Relying on centuries of military experience and intelligence reports, Maurice's *Strategikon*

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[232] Kovrig 1963: 89-92; Daim 1988: 170; Tomka 2008.
[233] Bóna 1980: 92; Daim and Lippert 1984: 127; Daim 1988: 171.
[234] Kovrig 1963: 73-75.
[235] Kovrig 1963: 63; cf. section 6.4.
[236] *Strategikon* 11.2, p. 361.
[237] Bóna 1976: 106.
[238] di Cosmo 2002.

describes the Avar art of war as a combination of several features of nomad warcraft, for example: "they are armed with mail, swords, bows, and lances. In combat, most of them attack doubly armed; lances slung over their shoulders and holding bows in their hands, they make use of both as need requires. Not only do they wear armour themselves, but in addition, the horses of their illustrious men are covered in front with iron or felt. They give special attention to training in archery on horseback."[239] Turkic warriors have also been depicted in such way by the Chinese *Zhou Shu*: "by way of weapons they possessed bows, arrows, shrieking arrowheads, coats of mail, long cavalry lances, and swords; decorating their belts they also carry daggers."[240] Stallions and mares are recorded as having followed the Avar soldiers, and they were used as food (meat, blood, and milk) as well as reserves for speed and increased mobility.[241] Early Avar horse burials considerably support the information regarding Avar mounted warriors in written sources like the *Strategikon*. Horse skeletons buried separately or together with males (likely their owners) were typically sacrificed at an adult age, which suggests that they were used in combat for a while.[242] These horse burials produced lances, stirrups, bone reinforcement plates for composite bows, three-sided arrowheads, battle axes, and occasionally swords. Such weapons were typically connected with a group of "professional" warriors, accompanied in death by the horse they used in war.[243] Warrior burials containing horse skeletons and weapons produced a mounted warrior image that strongly represented the Avar political *ethnos*. [244]

"Doubly armed" soldiers typically used two types of traditional cavalry: the first being *cataphractarius*, otherwise known as a heavily armoured lance bearing soldier. This soldier

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[239] *Strategikon* 11.2, p. 363; Pohl 1998: 28.
[240] *Zhou Shu*, p. 9.
[241] *Strategikon* 11.2, p. 363.
[242] Takács, Somhegyi and Bartosiewicz 1995: 173-181.
[243] Csiky 2011: 9-34; Curta 2015: 74.
[244] Pohl 2018a: 269.

was depicted in a stylised ancient fashion, without a saddle, stirrups, and bow, on a gold vessel from the treasure of Nagyszentmiklós.[245] The second type was a more mobile mounted archer who mainly relied on their bow.[246] Reflex bows reinforced with bones were not specific to the steppe peoples; instead, they were a Xiongnu innovation that spread west to the Sarmatians and elsewhere through emulation, not export.[247] The Avars also used this type of rigid reflex composite bow, which was made up of multiple layers of wood, sinew, and horn and was reinforced by bone, significantly increasing its penetrating power. A well conserved eighth century bow found in Žargalant Chajrchan Mountains in western Mongolia consists of heavy arrows with three-edged heads that had a range up to hundreds of yards.[248] This bow is shorter than most simple bows, which allowed it to be handled from the saddle, a skill in which the Avars and Huns were exceptionally proficient. As Pohl puts it, "at full gallop, they could shoot up to twenty arrows a minute, facing forward or turned backward."[249] Despite Huns, Avars, and Magyars using reflex bows, their Western neighbours never adopted the bow in great numbers.[250]

A significant cavalry technique that improves the stability of mounted archers, known as the iron stirrup, was brought to Europe by the Avars. Iron stirrups initially appeared in China and Northern Korea in the fourth century.[251] In the Central Asian steppes, they expanded around the same time as the stirrups in the Carpathian Basin and then rapidly spread throughout the Turkic Khaganate and elsewhere.[252] The *Strategikon* never mentions the stirrup in its description of Avar mounted warriors. Rather, it notes that Byzantium had already introduced

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[245] László and Rácz 1977; Kovács 2002: 17; Bálint 2010.
[246] Meyer 1982: 451-453; Lebedinsky 2001: 35-56.
[247] Brosseder 2015: 226-29.
[248] Riesch, Rutschke and Stehli 2012: 181-198.
[249] Pohl 2018a: 210; Curta 2007b.
[250] Pohl 1998: 31.
[251] Lewis 2009: 60.
[252] Stark 2008: 147-149.

the stirrup into the standard equipment of mounted soldiers by 600.[253] The Byzantine army also prepared their horses with the same cavalry tactics that the Avars used. The first chapter of the *Strategikon* states that Byzantine soldiers were trained to use a bow and lance while on horseback. Despite not being proficient at shooting the bow, the Byzantine soldiers were still made to use it. Byzantine equipment included full armour from the hands to the head, a quiver holding thirty to forty arrows, and a bow, sword, and 'Avar type' cavalry lances.[254] Cavalry usage in the Byzantine army "was a sixth century innovation, which somewhat replaced the traditional Byzantine battle tactics based on formidable infantry lines."[255]

Along with the reflex bow and stirrup, the Byzantine cavalry also adopted other types of Avar equipment: a cavalry lance with a thong in the middle; a felt and wool fringed neck guard or gorget; iron or felt horse breastplate; and a long tunic with mail on quilting that was "worked in the fashion of the Avars," which hung below the knee of the warrior when they were mounted.[256] Byzantine soldiers had copied the round, "sumptuous and practical" Avar tents for their cavalry as well. Military technicians from Byzantium even learned a thing or two from the Avars' construction of boat bridges, which were made "in the Scythian manner."[257] In the perspective of Byzantium, a trademark of the steppe peoples, including the Avars, was their 'wolfish howling,' or war cries, before battle.[258] This type of psychological warfare was recorded in the tenth century by Liudprand of Cremona, who observed the 'devilish hui hui' of the Hungarians.[259]

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[253] *Strategikon* 1.2, p. 80.
[254] *Strategikon* 1.1.13-18, 1.2.10-25, pp. 76, 79.
[255] Pohl 2018a: 211.
[256] *Suidae Lexicon*, p. 483.
[257] *Strategikon* 11.4, p. 377.
[258] Menander frag. 12.3, pp. 130-32; *Miracles of Saint Demetrius* 1.2.112, 123. Theodore Syncellus 15, p. 30; *Suidae Lexicon*, p. 294; Steindorff 1985: 40-49.
[259] Liudprand of Cremona, *Antapodosis* 2.30, p. 89.

Polearms, another type of close combat weapon used by the Avars, were influenced by traditions from the steppe, Byzantium, and the Merovingian West. They can be classified into four groups – reed shaped, conical, leaf shaped, and triangular – and further subdivided into multiple blade types. Spear or '*süngü*' in Old Turkic commonly features in Turkic runic inscriptions on Inner Asian monuments, suggesting the significant role polearms had in the armament of the steppes.[260] Spears were also favoured by the Avars, as shown by 656 Early Avar spearhead discoveries made recently. This number of spears exceeds the amount of Central Asian Turkic and ancient Hungarian (tenth to eleventh centuries) polearms.[261] According to Gergely Csiky's study, of the 656 spearheads, only 532 could be classified as they were in a good state of preservation. 48.2% of these classified spearheads were of the reed shaped group, which was the most popular shape during the Avar age.[262] Comprising 35% of all the spearheads was the lenticular shape, while conical spearheads made up 9.59%. Triangular spearheads only contributed 5.45% overall to the 532 spearheads. The Early Avar period was dominated by the reed shaped and lenticular spearheads, and the Middle period experienced a decline in spearheads overall. Reed shaped spearheads have been found in the Inner Asian and Eastern European steppes and are also known from Byzantine contexts in the Northern Balkans and regions under Byzantine influence like Lombard Italy and southern Germany.[263] Spearheads of lenticular shape are typical among the Merovingian material culture, and they have also been discovered amongst material related to Byzantine forts in the Northern Balkans.[264] Lenticular spearheads with a central blade frequently occur across

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[260] Csiky 2015: 68.
[261] Khudiakov 1986: 156-157 discusses eight spearheads from Inner Asia dated between the sixth- and tenth-centuries. See also Kubarev 2005: 98 for four more Inner Asian examples.
[262] Csiky 2015: 149.
[263] For Inner Asian examples, see Gavrilova 1965: 55 and Khudiakhov 1986: 106-107, 156-157. Reed shaped spearheads from Eastern European steppes are discussed by Bálint 1989, Abb. 14/12-13 (Dyrso, Caucasus) and Kazakiavichius 1988: 41-42 (Balticum). Uenze 1992: I. 445. II. Taf. 42/1–4 looks at reed spearheads from Sadovec in the Northern Balkans.
[264] Merovingian lenticular spearheads are explored by Hübener 1977: 510-527 and Koch 2001: 61-63. Uenze 1992, I. 445. II. Taf. 42/5–7 investigates lenticular spearhead examples at Sadovec, while Kondić and Popović 1977, Tabl. XVII/96 and Bavant et al. 1990, 230, fig. 165, Pl. XL/246 look at those found in Caričin Grad.

Western and Central Europe from Italy to the Rhine.[265] By the Middle and Late Avar periods, the use of spears decreased.[266]

Much like other aspects of Avar identity this thesis has discussed, ancient authors used certain arms and ways of fighting to distinguish barbarians like the Avars. Ancient writers continuously made a fundamental distinction between western people who fought on foot and Scythians, and later Goths, Huns, and Avars, who fought on horseback. This stereotype likely contained some truth as steppe riders had for a long time been skilled mounted warriors.[267] In reality, though, most armies required various types of troops. In most cases, soldiers could not afford the full armour and equipment, an issue constantly addressed by Lombard laws and Carolingian capitularies.[268] Naturally, some groups could use arms and fighting styles more successfully than others, but this did not mean they were the only ones to use them. The Roman and later the Byzantine army case proves this, as they always attempted to copy their enemies' arms and fighting strategies. The idea that armour was not accessible to all, paired with the Byzantium's affinity for copying their enemies in war, often obscured ethnic distinctions.

Steppe people were successful at mounted warfare because of the number of horses at their disposal and their quick fighting style suited to large open spaces. As Pohl proposes, their ability to maintain specific types of warfare over a long time was not an ethnic characteristic but a result of their environment. Ancient authors likely took these distinctions as evidence that steppe peoples were all Scythians, but the label itself is very vague. Such examples demonstrate insufficient evidence to prove that steppe peoples and/or barbarians considered weapons and fighting styles signs of their ethnic identity. Instead, the material shows that specific types of

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[265] Hübener 1972: 196, Abb. 2.
[266] Csiky 2015: 150-151.
[267] Pohl 1998: 29.
[268] Last 1976: 469.

arms and fighting habits "shaped the outside perceptions of *gentes*."[269] Images that were sent home to Rome possibly influenced the creation of barbarian stereotypes. For instance, paintings of defeated barbarians were exposed to the public in Rome while triumphal arches and columns, like those of Marcus Aurelius, depicted barbarians in stereotyped costume and arms, although such distinctions remained vague.[270] Specific markers of the barbarian in triumphal iconography involved particular weapons, the Phrygian cap, the Suevian knot, or Germanic trousers. More significant was how barbarian units within the Roman army were specially built up to develop the barbarians' fighting styles. In Justinian's armies, ethnic units were recruited based on their specific skills, like the Antes, who were experienced in combat on rough terrain, and the Slavs, who were talented at ambushes.[271]

Late antique authors probably regarded weaponry and fighting styles as ethnic markers of barbarians because the Romans and later Byzantines had a history of incorporating barbarian soldiers, weapons, and tactics into their armies. The Roman army often preserved the names of barbarian groups and their context, as shown in the *Notitia dignitatum*, which lists and discusses the ethnography of barbarian units within the Roman military. These units include the Galatae, Tuetonici, Arverni, Sequani, Chamavi, Alamans, Franks, Salians, and Goths. "When such ethnic groups became the basis of political power from the fourth century onwards, the ethnic language that had been current within the Roman army became an instrument to grasp the new realities of barbarian groups within the Empire."[272]

4.3 Conclusion

As stated by the Greek and Latin texts, Avar religion likely involved some form of oath taking and magic. The comparative material on Turkic religion illustrates that the Avars could have

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[269] Pohl 1998: 31, 37.
[270] Herodian 7, p. 28; Historia *Augusta, Maxim*. 12, p. 10; Pohl 1998: 37.
[271] Procopius, *Bella* 6 and 7, pp. 269-283.
[272] Pohl 1998: 38-39.

engaged in a type of Shamanism, believed in the god Tängri and his divine command, and revered heaven, air, water, fire and earth. Religion was likely an important identifier of the Avars to outsiders, although whether it was a part of how they defined themselves is still unknown. In comparison to religion, weaponry and fighting techniques were more obvious markers of the Avar identity, according to the Byzantines. The Avars' defining attributes were primarily influenced by barbarian stereotypes that emerged from the circulation of negative barbarian images around Rome. These characteristics mainly include fighting on horseback, doubly armed with lances and bows, a quick fighting style, and howling before battle. In the view of the Avars, it is unlikely that such weapons and fighting styles actually represented their identity. The closest we get to the expression of Avar identity through warfare is the mounted warrior image produced in horse burials which were closely tied to the Avar political *ethnos*.

5. Conclusion

Current scholarship on Avar identity has attempted to recentre Avar history after years of neglect. This thesis has built upon such works by investigating the highly debated topic of Avar ethnic identity during the Early Avar Period using the most relevant written and archaeological sources. The method of analysis was based on the latest anthropological understanding of ethnicity, which defines ethnicity as the way members of a group perceive themselves *and* how outsiders perceive the same group. This thesis employed such approach by identifying and discussing markers in the ancient evidence that show how the Avars perceived themselves and how others perceived the Avars. These markers included origin, migration, language, appearance, religion and warfare.

Chapter Two delved into the highly complex topic of Avar origin and migration. Ancient authors seem to place Avar origins somewhere within the Eurasian steppe region. At this stage, no unified material culture survives to help illuminate this question, and only a few artefacts made of bone have analogies with archaeology in Central Asia.[273] Genetic testing of the Avars' ancient DNA revealed Eurasian steppe heritage and practices of patrilineal kinship.[274] For Eurasian steppe peoples, biological and/or mythical kinship was an important part of their identity. This was likely the case for the Avars since the practice was of enough value to bring with them to Europe. In saying this, kinship could have played a role in the reproduction of Avar ethnicity and the wealth and power that came with it, from generation to generation.[275]

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[273] Sekeres 1957; Bóna 1980: 52, 54.
[274] Csáky et al. 2020: 8-10.
[275] Lindholm 1986; Khazanov 2003; Csáky et al. 2020: 9-10.

Based on the evidence in Theophylact and other Greek, Latin, and Chinese texts, scholars agree that the Avars migrated to Europe because of their conflict with the Western Turks.[276] It has been postulated that the European Avars were likely descendants of the Rouran/Asian Avars. The sources tell us that after the Western Turks defeated them, the Rouran disbanded, with some migrating to Europe and adopting the prestigious name 'Avars' as per steppe tradition. Through this, the group became what we know to be the European Avars. The name Avar likely had a myth of descent attached that allowed the group to claim elite Rouran descent and help portray themselves as powerful elites. Because they took on this name, as well as the title khagan, they gained many followers during and after their migration to Europe.[277] The Avar migration to Europe is confirmed by a change in material culture in the Carpathian Basin, although it does not indicate where they migrated from.[278] It could be that the Avars migrated from Southern Ukraine, the location where they were first mentioned in the written sources.[279] Overall, the ancient authors' constant focus on the origin and migration of the Avars illustrates that they were significant indicators of their ethnicity in the view of outsiders, especially the Byzantines. Whether these elements resonated with the Avars and how they identified is yet to be determined. The Avar migration from the Eurasian steppe could have been a case of shared historical experience and belonging through migration.[280] The internal (or Avar) definition of Avar ethnicity, on the other hand, likely involves ancestral connections to the steppe, biological or mythical kinship, and/or strong ties to the elite class.

The language of the Avars and how it related to their ethnic identity was explored in Chapter Three. Fragments of the Avar language survive through personal names from the early period, late Avar titles, and short runic inscriptions. These sources demonstrate the various linguistic

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[276] Theophylact Simocatta 7.7, 7.8, p. 188; Pohl 2018a: 37-38.
[277] Pohl 2018a: 31, 45-46; Smith 1987: 23-24.
[278] La Salvia 2007: 155-171; Curta 2008: 297-326; Csiky 2015.
[279] Lörinczy 1998: 343-472.
[280] Smith 1987: 25.

origins of the Avar language, most of which point to Turkic or Mongolic languages. The reason the Avar language had numerous origins is that such names and titles were likely taken from foreign languages for their symbolic meaning. There is a difference, though, between symbolic language and language used for communication, as Pohl argues.[281] Eurasian runes that feature on a vessel from Nagyszentmiklós hold both Turkic and Greek characters, suggesting that an individual at the Avar courts of aristocracy knew Turkic and could read the Greek alphabet.[282] Thus, Avar runic literacy seems to have been a marginal occurrence, limited to ritual and representation and does not allow interpretations of daily language use. The symbolic meaning and ritualistic use of these words could have been significant to the Avars and how they identified, especially ethnically. Language may have been an indication of Avar identity to outsiders, although there is not nearly enough evidence in the written texts to establish this.[283]

Another potential marker of Avar ethnic identity analysed in Chapter Three was appearance, particularly hairstyle and costume. Avar hairstyle is described frequently throughout the written texts as long and worn in braids, plaits or a knot. The archaeology, however, does not suggest that long braided hair was valued as an ethnic marker among the Avars during the early period. This changed in the Middle Avar period when long braids became a symbol of Avar identity, as shown by hairclips in elite warrior graves. Curta proposes that perhaps long braids began as a marker for various forms of social identity, and over time it may have become an ethnic stereotype created by outsiders.[284]

With regard to Avar costume, material culture illustrates a redefinition of identity upon their arrival in Europe. Avar women, in particular, wore and/or were buried in costume that was strongly influenced by late antique fashions. Examples include caps or headdresses secured by

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[281] Pohl 2018a: 270-273.
[282] Róna-Tas 1988: 129; Albrecht 2015: 142-43.
[283] Grigoriou-Ionnidou 1987: 3-15; Pohl 2018a: 272.
[284] Curta 2007a: 181-182; Andrási 1996/97: 85-123; Breuer 2005: 58.

pins, jewellery like Byzantine type earrings, late antique type disc brooches and buckles and strap-ends for Merovingian type leg binding.[285] Such luxury items were acquired through personal contacts, like trade or gifts, or as part of war booty.[286] Warrior and elite graves typically show a mixture of steppe, Merovingian, and Mediterranean-Byzantine traditions, demonstrating substantial ties between Western Europe and the Carpathian Basin.[287] This mortuary evidence of the Early Avar age suggests that the Avars were a political *ethnos*.[288]

Since there is very little evidence of Avar religion, an analysis of comparative material from a similar culture, in this case, the Turks, was conducted in Chapter Four. The Greek texts mention oath-taking and magic as part of Avar religion.[289] Other beliefs, myths, and rites the Avars had at their disposal were possibly related to Shamanism. Sources on Turkic religion point to practices like possession, purification, incantation formulas, exorcism, liminal rituals, and fire rites.[290] The Orkhon inscriptions also illustrate the Turks' reverence for heaven, air, fire, earth, and water as well as a belief in the god Tängri and his divine command.[291] Avar religion is likely to have been a significant marker of their identity in the view of others, although whether it played a role in their own conceptualisations of identity is not yet known.

A substantial identifier of the Avars in the written sources, especially the *Strategikon*, is specific weaponry and fighting styles. Such characteristics assigned to the Avars stem from negative images of barbarians circulated around Rome, which ultimately influenced the creation of barbarian stereotypes and their perpetuation by Roman and later Byzantine societies.[292] These stereotypes comprised fighting on horseback, doubly armed with lances and

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[285] Vida 2018: 420-426, 428-429.
[286] Heinrich-Tamáska 2016: 281-285.
[287] Vida 2018: 420-424.
[288] Pohl 2018a: 269.
[289] Menander frag. 25.1, p. 220; *Suidae Lexicon*, p. 112, *s.v. diopteres.*
[290] Menander frag. 10.3, p. 118; Ripinsky-Naxon 1993.
[291] Bilge Khagan inscription, front side, 1, https://bitig.kz/?lang=e&mod=1&tid=1&oid=16&m=1; Kültegin inscription, 1st side, 10–11, https://bitig.kz/?lang=e&mod=1&tid=1&oid=15&m=1; Thomsen 1924/25: 142, 168-170; Scharlipp 1992: 59-60; Roux 1959: 235-38.
[292] Pohl 1998: 31, 37; Herodian 7, p. 28; Historia *Augusta, Maxim.* 12, p. 10.

bows, a quick fighting style, and howling before battle. Another reason late antique authors associated types of warfare with barbarian identities was that Romans and later Byzantines had a history of incorporating barbarian soldiers, weapons, and tactics into their armies.[293] To the Avars, their weapons and fighting habits were likely not considered part of their identity, as types of warfare were more about practicality, not active expressions of ethnic identity. The Avars' ability to continue fighting on horseback for generations was a result of their environment, not their ethnic identity.[294] The only marker that relates to warfare among the Avars is the mounted warrior image produced in horse burials, which strongly represented their political *ethnos*.[295]

In summary, this study has illustrated that Avar ethnic identity during the Early Avar period comprised both internal and external definition. Archaeology and genetic evidence from this period show that the Avar ethnic identity, to the Avars, was likely a political and elite identity involving Eurasian steppe ancestry and/or familial ties to the ruling clan through kinship. The adoption of the Avar name demonstrates the value the Avars placed on appearing prestigious. Such prestige was expressed through the image of mounted warriors, rich grave goods, costume, and accessories in graves. In the perspective of the Byzantines, an Avar was someone who had origins in Central Asia, migrated to Europe because of the Western Turks, wore their hair in long plaits or braids, practised Shamanistic like rituals, fought on horseback, and used specific weapons and tactics in battle. As shown, Byzantium's opinion of the Avars was shaped by centuries of barbarian stereotypes that began with Herodotus' description of the Scythians in the fifth century and Rome's negative portrayal of barbarians in imagery. Whether these internal and external elements shaped the Avar identity is an interesting question that could be explored in the future. So far, only one case illustrates the impact of external perspectives on

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[293] Pohl 1998: 38-39.
[294] Pohl 1998: 31, 37.
[295] Pohl 2018a: 269.

the Avar identity: the barbarian stereotype of long braided hair created by Byzantium and the West was adopted by the Avars over time, as demonstrated by richly adorned hair clips in Middle Avar male graves.

These conclusions about Avar ethnic identity beg a broader question: who is/was an Avar? From the findings in select written and archaeological evidence explored above, an Avar was perhaps a person belonging to the elite of the Avar Khaganate. How one defines who belonged to the Avar elite could depend on whether an individual was buried in a rich grave containing mounted warrior imagery, a horse skeleton, and/or luxury grave goods. The limit of such definition, however, is that we cannot be sure that individuals buried in these high-status graves were Avar. Who, then, was not an Avar? In line with the definition of an Avar, a non-Avar could be someone who was not part of the elite class. A major problem with defining both Avars and non-Avars as a researcher is that elite people are often overrepresented in archaeology and the written record. The disproportionate representation of high-status individuals in archaeology and written sources does not mean they were the only group to identify as Avars. At this point in time, the evidence cannot provide more definitive conclusions about Avar identity.

This thesis offers a unique thematic approach to Avar ethnic identity based on the information in select written and archaeological sources that has not yet been done. It has laid the foundations for future research into questions of identity like the one posed throughout, which would allow deeper understandings of marginalised communities in ancient times.

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