Nicola di Cosmo – Michael Maas (eds): Empires and Exchanges in Eurasian Late Antiquity. Rome, China, Iran, and the Steppe, ca. 250–750. Cambridge 2018.
doi: 10.1017/9781316146040 isbn 978-1-107-09434-5 Hardback 496 p.

Although global connectivity, the network of intercontinental, intercultural and interpersonal contacts evokes our modern world, the roots of globalisation hark back to much earlier periods. Following its application to the Age of Exploration[1] and the 13th century,[2] one version of the world-systems theory has now made an inroad into studies on Late Antiquity as well. Enquiries into 4th–7th-century long-distance connectivity were formerly covered within the framework of 'Silk Road studies'. The present volume has strayed far from this path by constructing a new historical era and interpretative framework, Eurasian Late Antiquity, in which the dynamics of local histories are the stones of the broad mosaic that here replace the previous trade-centred narrative of the Silk Road.

Most of the essays collected in this volume were presented at the conference 'Worlds in Motion' hosted by the Institute for Advanced Study at Princeton in 2013. Its two internationally acclaimed editors, Nicola di Cosmo, author of several monographs on interrelations between China and Inner Asia,[3] and Michael Maas, editor of authoritative handbooks on the late antique Mediterranean,[4] both have an enormous breadth of interest, are extraordinarily widely read, and have the rare ability to synthesise large bodies of data; nevertheless, a third editor, an expert on Iran or Central Asia, would have been beneficial. The list of the volume's authors is a roll-call of the best experts on the subjects, who focus on particular themes drawn from their recently published monographs or summarise their main findings, which is the main reason that these books, reflecting the current state of research on 4th–8th-century Eurasian contacts, are listed for each author.

As described in the Introduction (pp. 1–19), the period covered in the volume broadly spans the time between 250 and 750, which essentially corresponds to the centuries between the rise of Sasanian Empire and the formation of the Abbasid Caliphate. The geographical extent of Eurasian Late Antiquity is just as broad as its 500-year-long duration: it incorporates the Mediterranean, Iran, Central Asia, the Eurasian steppe belt and China, but does not cover Africa and India, even though all great empires of the age (the Byzantine and Sasanian Empires as well as Sui-Tang China) maintained close ties with these two areas both commercially and culturally. This shift can be ascribed to the magnetism of Silk Road's concept,[5] which in the wake of the geographically inspired description by Ferdinand von Richthofen (1833–1905) in 1877 first became a paradigm and has by now hardened into a political doctrine. Thus, in terms of its focus and methods, the notion of Eurasian Late Antiquity departed from the Silk Road(s) model, while remaining part of it in terms of its geographic and chronological framework.

As a matter of fact, the use of the term 'late antique' in this vein is not a novelty: Albert von le Coq, leader of the German Turfan expeditions, already employed it in 1922, although in an

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[1] I. WALLERSTEIN: The Modern World-System: Capitalist Agriculture and the Origins of the European World-Economy in the Sixteenth Century. New York – San Francisco – London 1974.
[2] J. ABU-LUGHOD: Before European Hegemony: The World System A.D. 1250–1350. New York – Oxford 1989.
[3] N. DI COSMO: Ancient China and its Enemies: The Rise of Nomadic Power in East Asian History. Cambridge 2002.
[4] M. MAAS (ed.): Cambridge Companion to the Age of Justinian. Cambridge 2005; M. MAAS (ed.): Cambridge Companion to the Age of Attila. Cambridge 2014.
[5] For a discussion of this concept, cf. Kh. REZAKHANI: The Road That Never Was: The Silk Road and Trans-Eurasian Exchange. Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East (2010) 30 (3): 420–433.

entirely different sense.[6] The volume represents a significant geographic expansion of the already broad notion of Late Antiquity as defined by Peter Brown, which incorporated Iran, early Islam and the Barbarians alongside the Mediterranean,[7] coupled with a general shift from the economic (and especially trade) centred perspectives of world-systems and the Silk Road towards the domains of political, social and cultural history.

The volume is structured into three parts, the first describing historical thresholds, the second movements, contacts and exchange, while the third focusing on empires, diplomacy and frontiers. Due to the overlaps, some names recur in several studies, one case in point being the Sogdian merchant Nanai-Vandak, a symbol of the Silk Road.

The section entitled 'Historical thresholds' offers an overview of the period's main research questions. Michael Maas describes the 'Byzantinisation' of the steppe, i.e. the formation of the Byzantine geopolitical, diplomatic and cultural image of the nomadic peoples of the steppe (pp. 19–34), as a four-stage process. The initial perceptions gained from the sporadic Roman–steppe contacts were fine-tuned during the Hunnic period in consequence of the new military and diplomatic conditions. Two different text traditions influenced the Byzantine assessment of nomadic peoples: the ethnographic tradition of ancient Greek science and Christian apocalyptic literature. The image mediated by these texts fundamentally determines our views on nomads to this very day.

Sinologist Nicola di Cosmo describes the relations between China and the nomads in the turbulent period between the collapse of the Xiongnu Empire and the formation of the Türk Empire (pp. 35–53).[8] The Han period (206 BC–220 AD) was an age of empires defined by an equilibrium of war and peace between China and the Xiongnu characterised by the policy of harmonious kinship (*heqin*). The disintegration of the Xiongnu Empire led to the emergence of new political formations characterised by new royal titles (e.g. *qaghan*) and the barbarisation of northern China. The new nomadic elite preserved its own identity, promoted a foreign religion (Buddhism) and created a highly hybridised culture. The rise of the Türk Empire (founded in 552) ushered in a new age of empires, bringing an end to the period of fragmentation, and united China under the rule of Sui dynasty (from 589). This dynasty and the subsequent Tang period saw an intensive nomadic policy and the dynamic growth of western trade relations with Central Asia.

Between these two empires (Rome and China), marking the two edges of Eurasia, the geographical centrality of Iran became the mainstay of the Sasanian dynasty's idiom of power, which, as Matthew P. Canepa[9] argues, was essentially a cosmological propaganda spread by visual, ceremonial and spatial means (pp. 54–69). The transcendent power of Persian cosmic kingship grew from the ideological competition with the period's other empires, and it served as a model for several non-Iranian states too.

The research on long-distance trade, the volume's main topic, is presented by Richard Lim with a description of the steppe[10] and maritime roads along with the Silk Road(s), their routes and nodes as well as their principal commodities and the identity of the merchants acting as middlemen

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[6] A. VON LE COQ: Die buddhistische Spätantike in Mittelasien Ergebnisse der Kgl. preussischen Turfan-Expeditionen I. Die Plastik. Berlin 1922.
[7] P. BROWN: The World of Late Antiquity. London 1971.
[8] Three Kingdoms (220–280), Sixteen Kingdoms (304–439) and Northern and Southern Dynasties (420–589)
[9] M. P. CANEPA: The Two Eyes on Earth: Art and Ritual of Kingship between Rome and Sasanian Iran. Berkeley – Los Angeles – London 2009.
[10] D. CHRISTIAN: Silk Roads or Steppe Roads? The Silk Roads in World History. Journal of World History 11/1 (2000) 1–26.

(pp. 70–83). It evokes an image of a global commercial network made up of several interconnected small-worlds. The poignant timeliness of this essay is the author's remark on the potential dangers of global connectivity, exemplified by the Justinianic Plague.

The main agents of the Eurasian continental trade were the Sogdians speaking an Eastern Iranian language, who founded a series of autonomous emporia beyond their settlement territory in the valley of the Zeravshan River in China. Breaking with the general narrative focusing on the commercial aspect[11] of Sogdian history, Rong Xinjiang demonstrates that the Sogdians living in China were not only merchants, but also farmers, soldiers, missionaries, musicians and political leaders (pp. 84–95). The Sogdian elite's lifestyle and activity connected China with the nomadic empires.

Peter Brown describes the trade of exotic and luxurious goods as the circulation of charismatic commodities (pp. 96–107). His description abounds in illuminating metaphors ranging from Byzantine giraffes to the Silk Road as the Trans-Siberian Railway of its time. Long-distance trade was not merely a profit-oriented activity, but, from the perspective of archaic globalisation, it also served purposes of power, state formation, prestige and diplomatic needs through the accumulation of exotic goods.

China achieved the synthesis of the Tang dynasty only after a long process of assimilating non-Han elements into its culture. Valerie Hansen[12] characterises the era with the peculiar encounter between a Buddhist missionary, a general of barbarian (Xiongnu) origin, and a Sogdian merchant (pp. 108–122). Northern China was carved up between ruling houses of nomadic origin, which promoted Buddhism and significantly profited from the trade of the Central Asian Sogdians. With the re-unification of China, the Sui and Tang dynasties came into power, both of which were closely connected to the nomadic elite of northern China, and they continued the policy introduced by them, which eventually served as models for other Far Eastern states.

In Late Antiquity, the contacts between empires lying far from each other engendered a geographical thought that differed vastly from our own. Drawing from Hellenistic schemes, the regions beyond the former empire of Alexander the Great were shrouded in vagueness on the Roman mental map (Guisto Traina, pp. 123–132). Nevertheless, the Romans were aware of the existence of China (Seres) and India, even if indirectly.

The volume's next section discusses migrations, contacts and exchange. Population movements and the so-called *Völkerwanderung* are central issues of late antique history, a period also designated as the Age of Migrations unfolding around the time of the fall of the West Roman Empire. However, our knowledge of the finer details of these demographic processes remains limited. The immense advances in modern gene technology and bioinformatics provide a powerful tool for a better understanding of migrations: by studying population genetics, the origin, the size, distance and time-span of a population movement can be estimated. Patrick Geary, known for his work on the Lombard migration using genetic and isotopic methods,[13] who recently won an ERC synergy grant,[14] discusses different types of migrations by citing the findings of population genetics research on mainly modern samples (pp. 135–150), demonstrating its potentials, while at the same time warning against possible pitfalls.

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[11] É. DE LA VAISSIÈRE: Sogdian Traders: A History. Handbook of Oriental Studies 10. Leiden – Boston 2005.
[12] V. HANSEN: Silk Road: A New History. Oxford 2012.
[13] https://www.nature.com/articles/s41467-018-06024-4
[14] HistoGenes: Integrating genetic, archaeological and historical perspectives on Eastern Central Europe, 400–900 AD ERC Synergy Grant won jointly with Walter Pohl and Tivadar Vida.

Michael Kulikowski, the renowned historian of Antiquity, analyses the historiographic concept of *Völkerwanderung* and the topoi of northern migration (pp. 151–165).[15] He defines several fundamental concepts that have become household words in academe, whose original meaning is rarely explored. For example, the terms 'Barbarian' and *Völkerwanderung* illustrate the persistent discursive patterns of a historiography constructed at the time of nation-state building, which continue to influence our historical perspective.

Historiography determines the image of the past not only in Europe, but also in Chinese historical thought, as demonstrated by Luo Xin in the case of the Northern Dynasties (386–589) (pp. 166–175). The traditional Chinese historical approach presumed continuity between the Han and Tang Empires and attempted to diminish the significance of the nomadic conquerors in the north by a Sinocentric world view, according to which Chinese civilisation was essentially maintained and preserved by the Han south. Recent Chinese and international research has challenged this traditional historical view of China.

The assumed identification of the Xiongnu with the Huns and the theory of Hunnic migration connected Eurasia's two endpoints and significantly contributed to the historical and archaeological concept of *Völkerwanderung*. In her survey of previous historical and archaeological migration concepts, Ursula Brosseder (pp. 176–188) draws attention to the potentials of archaeology in identifying migrations, the dangers of migration hypotheses based on the distribution of a single artefact type – in this case, the cauldrons – and the new environmental data relevant to the climate change theory.

The concept of ethnicity is of central significance in the period's history and migrations: the period after the collapse of the Roman Empire is an ethnic history of Barbarian kingdoms. The definition, contemporaneous meaning and applicability of ethnicity is an open question: Walter Pohl attempts an interpretation of the plethora of ethnonyms preserved in historical accounts (pp. 189–205) by distinguishing umbrella terms, ethnic and political identities, as well as self-designations and outside identifications.

Late Antiquity witnessed the spread of religions and extensive missionary activity. Most peoples converted to Christianity and Buddhism, but Zoroastrianism and Manicheism also made inroads, and Islam, too, was born in the same period. This spiritual diversity finds ample reflection in the volume.

Christianity penetrated as far as China during the 7th century in the form of the Church of the East, as recorded in countless manuscripts written in various languages and scripts; sociolinguistics have played an immense role in analysing these translations. The prestige and function of languages differed greatly: Scott Fitzgerald Johnson (pp. 206–219) identifies Syriac as the primary language of Christianity, as a *lingua franca* as far as Turfan in eastern Turkestan, that was eventually succeeded by Middle Persian, Sogdian, Uighur and Chinese translations.

Buddhism of Indian origin was the main missionary religion in China, promoted by the northern nomadic dynasties during the centuries of fragmentation after the fall of the Han Empire. According to Max Deeg (pp. 220–234), the spirit of Buddhism remained alien to Chinese traditions. It spread from the oasis cities of the Takla Makan desert, transmitted by a Central Asian diaspora, and transformed China's cultural image by the Tang period, while Buddhism itself was adapted to local conditions.

[15] M. KULIKOWSKI: Rome's Gothic Wars. Cambridge 2006; M. KULIKOWSKI: Imperial Triumph: The Roman World from Hadrian to Constantine. London 2016.

As an esoteric lore, astrology was not closely connected to either religion; instead, it spread widely in Eurasia, conforming to the needs of the political elite. The Sasanian astrological tradition had a prominent status, as attested in the manuscripts studied by Frantz Grenet,[16] and even reached the Uighur elite in Turfan (pp. 235–252). An astrological interpretation is proposed for several iconographic themes. A reading of the Sogdian murals in Afrasiab in this vein is particularly engaging by suggesting a new dating of this impressive artwork.

The trade and gift exchange of luxury items as well as their circulation is of outstanding significance in the study of late antique connectivity. In his study on the Sasanian pearl trade and its ideological use, Joel Walker[17] addresses some of the questions raised by Peter Brown (pp. 253–267). Based on written, artefactual and visual sources, he identifies gift exchanges as well as certain symbols of power and royal favour such as pearl earrings and the pearl roundels appearing on precious textiles.

The volume's third section covers questions of power and diplomacy with an emphasis on ideology, elite representation and frontiers. The depth and intensity of the Byzantine Empire's diplomatic contacts with Eurasia have been a matter of controversy in historic studies. Mark Whittow,[18] who has tragically left us, makes a convincing case for the existence of a Byzantine Eurasia policy (pp. 271–286), illustrated by the diplomatic missions to the Türk Qaghanate. In his view, although the absence of detailed reports suggests sporadic or incidental embassies, the available sources indicate intensive contacts despite the vast distance.

While history books mainly focus on the Late Roman and Byzantine wars of the Sasanian Empire, its northeastern frontier on the steppe was equally important as it exposed the empire to the attacks of nomads. The Gorgan Wall and the incessant wars with the Kidarites, Hephthalites and Türks, fought with changing fortune, reflect the turbulent history of this boundary (Daniel T. Potts, pp. 287–301).

Similarly to the empires in the Mediterranean and Iran, the Inner Asian nomadic empires also played an active role in moulding the period's power relations. Michael R. Drompp[19] highlights the differences between the organisation and power legitimacy of sedentary and nomadic empires (pp. 302–316). He accentuates the corporate rule of the Türk Ashina dynasty, in which the ruling lineage is more important than the ruler as an individual: every male family member is eligible for becoming qaghan.

Not all nomadic communities reached the level of empire formation; many of them did not even succeed in founding a state. Using the tools of political anthropology, Peter B. Golden discusses the lack of central power among the stateless nomads (pp. 317–332), which was the norm in some regions and periods. Without an external threat, nomadic populations lived in a state of political fragmentation and smaller units. Supercomplex chieftaincies, i.e. nomadic empires as defined by Drompp, appeared under special circumstances only, usually when under pressure from a neighbouring state.

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[16] M. Boyce – F. Grenet: A History of Zoroastrianism. Leiden – Boston I–III. 1991–1996.

[17] J. Walker: The Legend of Mar Qardagh: Narrative and Christian Heroism in Late Antique Iraq. Berkeley – Los Angeles – London 2006.

[18] M. Whittow: The Making of Orthodox Byzantium, 600–1025. London 1996.

[19] M. R. Drompp: Tang China and the Collapse of the Uighur Empire: A Documentary History. Brill's Inner Asia Library 13. Leiden 2005.

The external contacts of the nomadic elite played a significant role in their display of power. Using the case of the First Türk Qaghanate, Sören Stark[20] reviews the external and local elements of Türk elite representation, including inscriptions in various languages and scripts, foreign religions and exotic goods (pp. 333–356). The Türk elite creatively blended Chinese, Iranian and Byzantine elements in its culture when creating its power symbols and expressing its legitimacy.

The communication between states and empires was conducted through diplomatic channels with an established protocol that was adopted by the nomads. The period's diplomatic language was honed in the dialogue between the Roman and Sasanian Empires and became more or less standard (Ekaterina Nechaeva,[21] pp. 357–368), and from the 5th century onward, the newly arrived nomads learned this language and strove to achieve a better position in negotiations. This process led to the emergence of mixed protocols, in the course of which the nomads played by the Roman diplomatic rules, while the Roman envoys likewise needed to flexibly adapt to the requirements of their negotiating partners.

Some empires were located on the fringes of the steppe and sown characterised by a small nomadic elite ruling over a much larger sedentary population. The best example of these hybrid empires is the Northern Wei, whose ruling house and elite was made up of the Tuoba (Tabgach) lineage of the Xianbei (Särbi) confederacy. Andrew Eisenberg outlines a court-centred dynasty using the model of the patrimonial empire by Max Weber (pp. 369–385), where the rivalry of imperial court factions determined politics.[22] By the exclusion of collateral Tuoba from succession, the power of the ethnic elite was drastically reduced, leading to internecine struggles and the fall of the dynasty.

The model of simultaneous kingship during the Sui and Tang era, as a continuation of the hybrid culture described in the former case, represents an ideological interweaving between the Türk and Chinese states. Jonathan Karam Skaff[23] describes it as an ideological competition (pp. 386–399) using identical or similar imperial titles (e.g. Heavenly Qaghan) and deriving legitimacy from Heaven to gain the support and loyalty of the ethnically and culturally mixed population in the borderland.

Instead of a highlight on the ruling elite's agency, Naomi Standen[24] presents the competition for power from a different perspective, from below (pp. 400–418). In her view, the voluntary support of the vassals is crucial in the struggle for clients because the local and regional leaders, who opted for a subordinate position, remained free to choose from among the imperial candidates. The rulers' power rested on the formal subordination of their followers rather than on coercion. In other words, the formation of hierarchies is a two-way process.

The epilogue by Averil Cameron, a distinguished scholar of Late Antiquity, closes the book as a well-written review (pp. 419–430). The authors' list of this volume reads like a roll-call of the period's most prominent researchers; the only less known contributors to the volume are the Chinese experts of certain special fields. A glossary of Chinese terms using the original characters, a joint bibliography and an index aids the practical use of this volume. At the same time, in contrast

[20] S. STARK: Die Alttürkenzeit in Mittel- und Zentralasien: archäologische und historische Studien. Wiesbaden 2008.
[21] E. NECHAEVA: Embassies – Negotiations – Gifts: Systems of East Roman Diplomacy in Late Antiquity. Geographica Historica 30. Stuttgart 2014.
[22] A. EISENBERG: Kingship in Early Medieval China. Sinic Leidensia 83. Leiden 2008.
[23] J. K. SKAFF: Sui-Tang China and its Turko-Mongol Neighbors: Culture, Power, and Connections, 580–800. Oxford 2012.
[24] N. STANDEN: Unbounded Loyalty: Frontier Crossings in Liao China. Honolulu 2006.

to the uniformly transcribed Greek and Chinese names and words, the transcription of Middle Persian, Sogdian, Arabic and Turkic terms differs from one author to the next, which can lead to confusion.[25] This minor deficiency does not overshadow the book's remarkably broad perspective, its novel ideas, insightful thoughts and the creation and introduction of a new era.

Finally, some remarks on the relevance of this historical and archaeological synthesis on Eurasian connectivity for East-Central European and particularly Hungarian archaeological scholarship: besides providing a global context, it also offers direct pointers for interpreting our observations.

The volume fits well into the study of elite culture in the early medieval Carpathian Basin. The ideological competition between the Byzantine and Sasanian Empires are reflected in the royal insignia of the client states in their borderland: the king of Lazika adopted mixed Roman- and Persian-style symbols of power at the time of Justin II (565–574).[26] The symbolic worlds created by exotic charismatic goods as a collage[27] explains the universal character of the social display of early medieval elites (of the Huns and the Avars in the case of the Carpathian Basin) blending diverse elements as presented by the elite culture of the early Türks.[28] The Sasanian elite's obsession with pearls, the men's wearing of earrings and their bejewelled attire as a sign of royal favour[29] provides useful analogies for the popularity of earrings with ball and bead pendants of the Early Avar male costume, but also explains the custom of wearing mount-ornamented belts and weapons embellished with gold and silver fittings. Pearl roundels symbolising royal glory appear not only on silks:[30] a similar design can be noted on 6th–7th-century belt mounts and strap-ends, as well as on the pottery and precious metal vessels in the Carpathian Basin.

The volume contains a spate of invaluable methodological approaches to the study of migrations as well as the origins and identities of various populations that can be usefully applied. While palaeogenetic research can certainly shed light on the biological background of individuals, any reconstruction of more extensive population movements can only be hoped for from a meaningful dialogue between experts of various disciplines and a well-planned and quantified sampling strategy.[31] The study of ancient peoples' identities certainly merits our attention: distinguishing umbrella terms, ethnic and political names is essential to creating a realistic historical model.[32] Hopefully, the recently launched ERC project led by the two formerly cited authors and Tivadar Vida will lead to innovative results in this field. Genetic investigations can only illuminate the biological aspect of population movements; reliable historical models of migration should rest on an unbiased, fresh look at historiographical clichés such as *Völkerwanderung*[33] and the analysis of historical records describing its various types (domino effect, long-term migration and assimilation model).[34] At the same time, archaeology, with an appropriate source criticism,[35] can bridge the gap between the factual results of biology and the general images of history.

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[25] For example, the name of the Sasanian ruler Husraw appear in four different forms (Husraw, Khusro, Khusrow and Khosrow) in the book.
[26] CANEPA, p. 64. and WALKER, p. 262.
[27] BROWN, p. 102.
[28] STARK, p. 356.
[29] WALKER, p. 260.
[30] WALKER, p. 265.
[31] GEARY, pp. 149–150.
[32] POHL, pp. 204–205.
[33] KULIKOWSKI, pp. 151–160.
[34] MAAS, pp.29–30.
[35] BROSSEDER, pp. 176–188.