

***Empires and Exchanges
in Eurasian Late Antiquity
Rome China Iran and the Steppe
ca. 250-750***

Nicola Di Cosmo Michael Maas eds
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This is an excellent and innovative volume, one which is likely to open up a brand-new field of research – or, at least, a useful and intense debate – as it introduces the scholarly world to the concept of ‘Eurasian Late Antiquity.’ In 1971 Peter Brown’s *The World of Late Antiquity* had already expanded the geographical limits of this crucial period well beyond the frontiers of the Roman empire;¹ however, as noted by the editors in their articulate *Introduction*, «Late Antiquity, as a historical concept, remains rooted in the Mediterranean» (7). This volume however adopts a very different perspective by considering the Mediterranean as just one part of a much broader picture which extends to the Eurasian continent as a whole: it argues that in the five centuries from roughly 250 to 750 CE the main cultural and political blocks of the Eurasian continental space (namely Rome/Byzantium, the Sasanian empire, China, and the nomadic communities of the Inner Asian steppes) «were subject to forces that brought them closer together» (1), and that the ‘granularity’ of the period demands an approach which connects local events to large-scale dynamics, in order to understand the momentous transformations which occurred in the half-millennium under scrutiny.

The volume includes twenty-six contributions of very high quality – most of them originally written for the conference “Worlds in Motion: Rome, China and the Eurasian Steppe in Late Antiquity”, held in 2013 – divided into three sections and followed by an epilogue by Averil Cameron.

The first section (‘Historical Thresholds’) includes eight chapters that describe the historical context in which the interchanges among Eurasian communities, between the third and the eighth centuries CE, became stronger than ever before. In their essays, Michael Maas and Nicola Di Cosmo take into consideration the unprecedented pressure from nomadic warriors felt by Byzantium and China

¹ PETER BROWN, *The World of Late Antiquity: from Marcus Aurelius to Muhammad, AD 150-750* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1971).

respectively, while Matthew Canepa focuses on Sasanian Iran and on the enormous influence that the representation of a divinely inspired kingship exercised on both the Mediterranean basin and Central Asia. Trade and contacts along the ‘Silk Road(s)’ are the subject of the following three contributions. Richard Lim stresses that, although exchanges in premodern Eurasia were mostly local, long-distance trade existed even before the foundation of the cosmopolitan empires of the Tang and Abbasid dynasties, and was primarily meant to satisfy the elite demand for luxury goods; in this trade, as Rong Xinjiang reminds us, Sogdian merchants played an absolutely preminent role. But luxury goods were at the same time ‘charismatic’ goods: as Peter Brown emphasizes, extremely expensive and rare commodities such as silk carried a symbolic charge which made them tokens of power, comparable, in a sense, to modern «enriched uranium» (100). In her contribution on Sui and Tang China, Valerie Hansen uses the concept of ‘Eurasian synthesis’ to describe the new style of governance that combined Chinese traditions with Central Asian elements introduced in the fourth century by the Northern Wei. Finally, Giusto Traina argues that even if Romans started to collect more precise information on Central Asia at least from the second century CE, their knowledge of the eastern world remained superficial and continued to be heavily influenced by the traditional view elaborated at the time of Alexander the Great’s expedition.

The second section (‘Movements, Contacts, and Exchanges’) includes nine chapters which concentrate on mobility and interconnections, in their various forms. In his innovative contribution, Patrick Geary shows the possibilities which ancient DNA can offer in the study of barbarian migrations in the West, although genetic approaches provide no definitive solution and cannot be separated from a careful reconstruction of the historical context. Barbarian migrations as a historiographical *leitmotiv* are the subject of Michael Kulikowski’s essay. He warns western historians who move to Eurasian history against the risk of applying familiar patterns of historical epistemology to unfamiliar evidence; on the other side of the continent, Luo Xin draws attention to the historiographical dilemma concerning the Northern Dynasties from Inner Asia: while the Chinese perspective, in fact, emphasizes the continuity between the Han and Tang dynasties, the Asian perspective recognizes the ruptures between these two periods. The question whether a relationship existed between the European Huns and the Xiongnu of Chinese sources, is addressed once more by Ursula Brosseder, who denounces the use of archaeological data to ‘map’ migrations or identify specific ethnic groups as methodologically weak. In this regard, Walter Pohl emphasizes that ethnic identity in the steppe was flexible, being «the result of a series of acts of identification and distinction» (192) rather than of common origin, and besides self-definition it provided external observers with a «cognitive tool» (203) to distinguish and bring some order to the multifarious nomadic world. The main subject of the following three chapters is the transmission of religious and cultural elements: in his contribution, Scott Johnson draws attention to Syriac as a *lingua franca* in the

spread of Christianity from the Middle East to China: the ‘Nestorian Monument,’ a carved stele with inscriptions in Chinese and Syriac set up in the Tang capital of Xi’an in 781 CE, bears valuable witness to that. But in those centuries Buddhism too arrived in China: Max Deeg argues that Buddhism exerted its strongest influence in the period between the fall of the later Han dynasty and the rise of the Tang, thanks to the translation of both texts and ideas by monastics from India and Central Asia. Another element which crossed political boundaries, as Frantz Grenet aptly points out, was astrology: in Sasanian Iran and in Central Asian countries under its influence, astrological lore had an important role, even though astrologers did not influence political or military decisions. Iran and neighboring regions are also the subject of Joel Walker’s essay, which describes how pearls – “charismatic” goods par excellence – became insignia of royal authority.

Section three (‘Empires, Diplomacy, and Frontiers’) includes the last nine contributions of the volume, which focus essentially on the diplomatic strategies of the great Eurasian empires. While Mark Whittow takes into consideration the development of a Byzantine ‘Eurasian policy’ in the age of the rise and expansion of the Türk empire, Daniel Potts analyzes the relationship of Sasanian Iran with its northeastern neighbors, in particular the Kidarites and the Hephthalites. Michael Drompp for his part emphasizes that even if Inner Asian empires – such as the early Türk empires – did not produce physical and literary remains comparable to the sedentary empires, this does not mean they were insubstantial: the ‘infrastructures of legitimacy’ (as stated in the title of the essay) on which they founded their ideology and organization were in fact perfectly suited to their steppe-based way of life. However, given the absence of compelling economic reasons for centralized leadership in the steppes, Peter Golden shows that statehood always remained embryonic among the nomads. In any case, nomadic elites were eager to represent themselves as legitimate rulers: the sixth- and seventh century Türks, according to Sören Stark, achieved this by adopting and combining a great variety of features drawn from Chinese, Iranian and even Byzantine models. From a different perspective, Ekaterina Nechaeva points out that as nomadic power grew stronger the Byzantines adjusted their modes of international communication, adding practices which were once reserved only for Roman-Persian relations to low-level protocols – thus creating a more flexible and effective diplomatic strategy. If Valerie Hansen refers to the Tang governance style in terms of ‘Eurasian synthesis,’ Andrew Eisenberg, on the other hand, speaks of a ‘Eurasian hybrid’ with reference to the Northern Wei, once they conquered northern China and converted their nomadic confederacy into a relatively stable empire. This combination of Chinese and Inner Asian elements is apparent also in the imperial title of ‘Heavenly Qaghan’ adopted by the Tang emperor Taizong in the seventh century, which mixed Confucian and Turkic traditions: however, as Jonathan Skaff notes, this is just one example of the ideological competition and the close cultural entanglements which existed between China and Inner Asia. In the last essay, Naomi Standen

challenges the traditional image of nomadic empires as systems of power based only on coercion and violence and emphasizes the importance of patron-client relations (that is, of voluntary subordination) in the formation of political entities in Northeastern Eurasia.

This volume is in many ways valuable, first and foremost because it compels scholars of Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages to move beyond the familiar Eurocentric vision and recognize the many threads which, since the third century CE, linked different parts of the Eurasian continent – including the Mediterranean basin. There are, however, a few points which I would like to discuss. While the editors convincingly justify the chronological limits of the volume – the third century CE saw in fact the rise of the Sasanian dynasty in Iran and the collapse of the Han dynasty in China, whereas the year 750, «with the rise of the Abbasids, roughly coinciding with the fall of the Türk empire, [...] the defeat of Tang armies by the Abbasids on the river Talas and the beginning of the devastating An Lushan rebellion in China, appears as a suitable stopping point» (6) – the choice not to include the Indian subcontinent raises some perplexities. At the beginning of the fourth century CE most of northern India was united by the Gupta dynasty, which established an empire that annexed the southern part of the Kushan empire and reached its apogee during the reign of Chandragupta II (ca. 375-415). The Gupta empire eventually fell, towards the middle of the sixth century, under the pressure of Central Asiatic invaders (such as the Hephthalites), and northern India was again split into different regional kingdoms, until the foundation of a new empire by Harsha of Kannauj in the seventh century (606-647). In the same period, the ancient Tibetan people, the Bod, created a strong unified monarchy which contended with the Tang and the Arabs for supremacy in Central Asia. It would have been very useful to include these events, even if only marginally, in the chapters of the volume.

As regards the long-standing debate about Hun-Xiongnu identity, a higher degree of consistency would have been welcome, even in a collection of essays. After reading Ursula Brosseder's contribution, which firmly rejects the attempt to find a connection between these groups, statements like «Among the Huns [...] there may have been few who were actually descended from the core group of the Xiongnu» (Pohl, 199), or «The Huns [...] almost certainly descendants of the Xiongnu» (Whittow, 276), can create confusion; a footnote or a few words in the *Introduction* should have drawn attention to this much debated topic.

Lastly, one might wonder whether the concept of 'Eurasian Late Antiquity' really fits the intentions of the volume. In fact, even though the editors clearly stress that «the central significance of this approach is not the extension of an established historiographical concept (Late Antiquity) to the rest of Asia» (8), this is however the impression that one gets after reading the book. As Averil Cameron puts it in her concluding remarks, «[f]or all its breadth, the study of Late Antiquity as it has

developed from the 1970s onwards has been framed basically as a Mediterranean project» (424), and the very concept of ‘Late Antiquity’ cannot but irresistibly recall the final stage of Greco-Roman civilization before the beginning of the Middle Ages – a ‘Eurocentric’, Mediterranean-based perspective that the addition of the adjective ‘Eurasian’ is not able to conceal. Twenty years ago, Andrea Giardina referred to the chronological elephantiasis of Late Antiquity in recent historiography in terms of ‘explosion’:² again, with the geographical dilatation put forward by this volume «the familiar concept of Late Antiquity literally explodes. [...] Is this a new Eurasian Late Antiquity, as editors hope, or is the conception of Late Antiquity that has served us so well for more than forty years in fact dissolving into a broader kind of global or transnational history?» (Cameron, 424). This, in my opinion, is the fundamental question raised by this volume, whose pioneering and valuable contribution will be surely at the center of scholarly debate over the next few years.

² ANDREA GIARDINA, “Esplosione di Tardoantico,” *Studi Storici* 40 (1999): 157–80.