

THE HUNS IN AFRICA: SOME OF THEIR DEEDS AND PARTICULARITIES ACCORDING TO PROCOPIUS

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Abstract. The “History of the Wars”,¹ and specially “The Vandalic War”² written by the Byzantine chronicler and general Procopius of Caesarea (Caesarea Maritima ca. 590 AD- Constantinople ca. 560-65 AD ca.)³ represent an important literary source for the knowledge about the steppe populations living or moving on the western part of the Caspian Sea until the Western Europe, mainly regard those contemporary at the put in writing of the Procopius' works, namely the half of the VI century AD.

This happened because Procopius himself has been personally present or involved in most of the events that he has related. In fact, he was a very high rank character (legal advisor, *adessor*) starting by the first year of the ascend to the throne of Justinian I (527 AD), following the byzantine general Belisarius (ca. 500-565 AD)⁴ in his many military campaigns on various war theatres.

Thus, under the orders of Belisarius he was on the border area with the Persian Empire against the Sasanians in the Iberian War (526-532 AD.), in the North Africa against the Vandals (533-534 AD) and in Italy against the Ostrogoths (535-540 AD). In 551 AD Procopius completed his work regarding these warlike events, the *History of the Wars* in seven books and, after, he wrote another book in 553 AD where he relates about the *Lazic War* (551-553 AD).

The books III and IV of the *History of the Wars* regard the Vandalic War, namely the military expedition organized by Belisarius against the Kingdom of the Vandals and Alans⁵ in North Africa. In this expedition there were a consistent force of Huns at the

¹ Principally, here we follow these editions: Anthony Kaldellis (ed.); Ian Mladjov; H.B Dewing (trans.), *Prokopios, The Wars of Justinian*, Hackett Pub Co Inc, Indianapolis/Cambridge, 2014.

² *Ibidem*, pp. 144-251; Kaldellis, Anthony: *Prokopios' Vandal War: Thematic Trajectories and Hidden Transcripts*, in: S. T. Stevens & J. Conant, eds., *North Africa under Byzantium and Early Islam*, Washington, D.C: Dumbarton Oaks, 2016, 13–21.

³ Naturally, on Procopius and his life and works, there is a huge literature in various languages. Here we recommend only some works where is possible to find more exhaustive bibliographic indications and discussions: Börm, Henning: *Procopius of Caesarea*, in *Encyclopaedia Iranica Online*, New York 2013, <https://iranicaonline.org/articles/procopius> ; Cameron, Averil: *Procopius and the Sixth Century*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985; Meier, Mischa and Federico Montinaro (eds.): *A Companion to Procopius of Caesarea*. Brill, Leiden 2022.

⁴ For a biography of Belisarius, see: Martindale, John R., ed. , *The Prosopography of the Later Roman Empire: Volume III, AD 527–641*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press. 1992 p. 182, and Hughes, Ian, *Belisarius: The Last Roman General*. Yardley, Pennsylvania: Westholme Publishing , 2009.

⁵ A part of Alans, a steppe people of iranic language, united themselves with the Vandals in their

Byzantine service, and precisely in the Procopius writings that we can find the personal events of a lot of them and interesting accounts on some of their customs and traditions. In this article will be underlined and analyzed both these Huns and the events in connection with them during and after this African campaign.

Keywords: *Huns, Africa, Procopius of Caesarea, Attila, Vandals, Alans*

Overview

In June 533 AD, the Byzantine Emperor Justinian started the first of his wars reconquering the Western part of the Roman Empire. This was a campaign in modern-day Morocco, Tunisia, Libya and Algeria, ruled by the Vandals since the first decades of V century. Person in charge of this operation was one of the most competent of his generals, Belisarius.

The Vandal navy was a perpetual danger for the Byzantine navigation and coasts and, more important, the Vandals were followers of the Christian Arian¹ faith since the 4th century, and they actively persecuted Nicene Christians, the faith of the other local inhabitants of North Africa, mainly belonging to the Roman culture.

In 523 AD Hilderic (or Ilderic, or Childeric, r. 523–30 AD), became the king of the Realm of Vandals and Alans. [Procopius (2014): 3.9, 164]. This half-roman and pro-roman pacific king, contrary to the most part of Vandal population, followed the orthodox faith of his mother, the Roman princess Eudoxia² an element that caused the conversion of many Vandals, provoking an enormous disappointment amongst the Vandals' aristocracy and clergy.

After that the Vandals were defeated by the Moors, Gelimer, [Procopius (2014): cit., 3.9.3-3.9.6., 163] a cousin of Hilderic, overruled with the armed alliance of the Moors, the king in 530 AD and taking his place, he re-established the priority of the Christian Arian faith. Hilderic was imprisoned and Justinian I threatened a breaking of the Treaty of Friendship with the Vandals, if the usurper doesn't liberate him. When

conquests, see below. Giuseppe Cossuto, *I popoli delle steppe e l'Impero romano d'Occidente*, Aseq, Roma, 2019 pp. 78, 85.

¹ Amongst various Germanic and “gothic” peoples, the Arian version of the Christianity (a doctrine elaborated by the African theologian Arius (250 or 255-56) was diffused principally by a typical example of pluricultural man of the last centuries of the Roman Empire: the bishop of Roman origin (he was born in a Cappadocian (of Sagolthina, probably modern day Karamollauşağı, Ankara province) family and grown under Visigothic rule on the North of Danube) Ulfilas (311-383). Ulfilas, that spent most part of his life in the territories between Black Sea and Danube, translated the Bible in gothic, elaborating a new alphabet based on Latin, Greek and Runic, too and he was a renowned bishop and missionary. Peter Heather, *The Fall of Roman Empire*, Londra, Macmillan, 2005, p. 76, Falluomini, Carla. *The gothic version of the Gospels and pauline Epistles: cultural background, transmission and character. Arbeiten zur neutestamentlichen Textforschung*. Berlin, De Gruyter, 2015, pp. 18–21.

² Eudoxia (439-471 or 472 AD) was the daughter of the Emperor Valentinian III. At some time following the birth of Hilderic, Eudocia withdrew to Jerusalem due to religious differences with her Arian husband, the Arian king Huneric, a fierce persecutor of the Catholic Christians and of other declination of Christianity. On the persecutions in the Kingdom of Vandals and Alans there is the account of the contemporary African roman catholic bishop Victor Vitensis (ca 330-after 484), *History of the Vandal Persecution*, translated with notes and introduction by John Moorhead, Liverpool, Liverpool University Press, 1992.

Gelimer refused, Justinian I planned an invasion of the Vandals' lands, an action that has been seen by the Byzantine advisors as very dangerous. But, as soon as the Persian War was ended with the signing of the 'Endless Peace' in September 532 AD, the Emperor started to plan this ambitious, new campaign.

Procopius himself gives us a detailed description of the troops engaged in the Belisarius' expedition [Procopius (2014): cit., 3.11.1–21, 169]. In this typical Byzantine army of the middle of VI century, we can find various "Huns", as commanders (see below), as in the troops. [Ibidem]

The Huns in the expedition

It's well known how the different steppe peoples changed the Roman (both Western and Eastern Empires, with their local differences) way of combat and how they became an essential element in the Roman armies and, furthermore, during the Procopius era, the Roman citizens belonging to the hippodrome faction called "the Blue" dressed themselves like the Huns (Massagetai: Kutrigurs, see below) and the notable peoples and the high clergy during the ceremonies dressed the *scaramangium*, [Cossuto, 193-95] a long robe of Hunnic derivation.

Circa a century before this expedition, little later after the Nedao battle, we can find companies of Huns in the service of the Western Romans. In 457 AD Huns were enlisted in the army that Majorian (r. 457-461 AD) had assembled for his projected campaigns in Africa and Gauls as Sidonius Apollinaris (430-486 AD) affirms [Edward A. Thompson (1948): 174]. These Hunnic mercenaries, who had previously lost their best commanders at the Battle of Nedao and had revolted before retreating from Italy, were led by Tuldila (458 CE). Another different and considerable group of Huns were engaged in 461 AD by Marcellinus (d. 468 AD), count of Dalmatia, but these Huns were corrupted by Ricimer (407-472 AD), a very rich and powerful Romanized Goth of Arian faith, and they betray Marcellinus. In this period the Attilan Hun bands, after the Attila death, are still a no-good affair for who intended hire them.

At the time of Belisarius, the situation was very different. We can find also a good number of Huns in the high ranks of the Byzantine army and very loyal to the Empire. Belisarius preferred the use of the cavalry. [Procopius (2014): XIII] By the time that this commander's troops fought in the Vandalic War, the transformation begun with the Emperor Aurelian (214/15-275) of the Roman army into squadrons of heavy cavalry was complete. The most valuable sixth-century Roman soldiers sat astride horses, armed with lances and the compound bow that was the great contribution of the steppe peoples to the art of war. This bow was short enough to be shot on horseback, recurved in a double-S and reinforced with horn and sinew, this tool of battle could send an iron-tipped arrow through chain mail at a distance of several meters. Procopius writes:

But archers of the present go into battle fully armored and fitted out with greaves that extend up to the knee. From the right side hang their arrows, from the other a sword. There are some who have a spear also attached to them and, at the shoulders, a sort of small shield without a grip, so as to cover the face and neck. They are excellent horsemen and are able without difficulty to shoot their bows to either side while riding at full speed, and to shoot an opponent whether in pursuit or in flight. They draw the bowstring along by the forehead all the way to the right ear, thereby charging the arrow with such an

impetus as to kill whoever stands in its way: neither shields nor breastplates can withstand its force. [Ibidem, 1.2.1, 4]

Procopius affirms that the soldiers participating to this expedition, when they were not regularly enlisted in the imperial army, are equalised with these last as *foederati* auxiliaries. The most part of these *foederati* were mounted archers (*hippotoxotai*) and a force of infantry composed mainly by, exotics amongst exotics, Herules led by Fara [Ibidem, 3.11] that used a lance or javelin in the strict combat and had their bows strong and weighty; they shoot in every possible direction, advancing, retreating, to the front, to the rear, or to either flank; and as they are taught to draw the bowstring not to the breast, but to the right ear, firm indeed must be the armour that can resist the rapid violence of their shaft.¹ The Herules were, a century before, until the decisive battle of Nedao in 455, a human component of the so-called “Hunnic System”,² a sophisticated super-complex tribal confederation with imperial dimension where the Attila's Huns had the supremacy.³ In fact, we can find the elaborate political system of the ancient Xiung-nu amongst the European Huns in the 4th and 5th centuries, too.

Procopius knew very well the “Huns” of his time, because often he had a strict contact with them during his military career and, from his notices, we can better understand the historical events of these post-Attilan nomadic peoples, their political situation and a lot of different facts in connection with them.

Procopius gives us a precise definition for the “Huns” of his time: they belonging to the Scythians for the lands where they lived in origin, as other peoples, [Procopius (2014): 8.5.6, 470] but they are their own *ethnos*, divided in some political formations.⁴ Procopius underlines the “ancient” name of the various Huns (i.e. Cimmerians, Massagetes, etc..., *see below*) and these parallelism may be are some other indicators for a better definitions of human groups and personalities.

In this sense, a very great importance is represented by the story related by this historian about the passage of the ancient Cimmerians [Giuseppe Cossuto (2012): 16] beyond the Maeotis Lake (Azov Sea), an event that “opened the doors” to the movement of “Scythian” populations outside of Scythia. This record, says Procopius, is preserved by the “Scythes” of his time. Thus, a group of young Cimmerians (this element leads me to think that this is a *mannerbunde* with a class of age in initiation to become adults) saw a doe and decided to follow her. This doe passed the waters and the Youngs failed the hunt, but returned to their own lands saying that it was possible to cross the waters. When the

¹ A lot of Herules belonging to the Arian confession, as Procopius affirms. From the late 4th century the Heruls were one of the peoples belonging to the Hunnic Confederation. By 454 AD, after the death of Attila, they ruled over a mixed population including Suevi, Huns and Alans in a proper territory in Middle Danube. Herules also participated in successive conquests of Italy by Odoacer (433-493). See Cossuto, *I popoli delle steppe...*, *cit.* pp. 82 and ss.. One of the last commanders of the Herules has been the grandson of Attila, Mundus, died in 536 in the service of Byzantines. See Alexander Sarantis, "The Justinianic Herules", in Florin Curta, (ed.), *Neglected Barbarians*, Brabel, Turnhout, 2010, pp. 361-402

² See Roland Steinacher, “The Herules: fragments of a history”, in “*Neglected Barbarians...*, *cit.* p. 360.

³ Kradin, N.N., ‘Stateless Empire: The Structure of the Xiongnu Nomadic Super-Complex Chiefdom’, in (U. Brosseder and B.K. Miller, eds.), *Xiongnu Archaeology: Multidisciplinary Perspectives of the First Steppe Empire in Inner Asia*, Contributions to to Asian Archaeology, Bonn, 2011, vol. 5, pp. 77-96.

⁴ I'll debate this interesting topic in a further article.

different peoples of Scythia had known this news, they moved towards the Roman Lands [Procopius (2014): cit., 8.5.6, 470] and the Cimmerians that finally Procopius reveals to be the Kutrigur Huns, follow them and occupied their ancestral lands. [Ibidem] Clearly, the crux of this story (the young hunters that follow the doe and crossed the sea), was preserved in the story of the passage of the Huns described by Jordanes (half of the VI century) and the episode of Hunor and Magor of the Magyar tradition, reported by Simon de Keza (XIII century).

The most important between the “true Huns” described by Procopius were the Kutrigurs and the Utigurs, two confederations that, before, were only one, probably leaded by Ernak the third and youngest son of Attila. They are first recorded in the 540 AD on both banks of the Don River [Zimonyi (2015): 251]. Procopius relates a foundation legend, not far away from an historical process, about the political ethnogenesis of this two tribal Hun groups, process that includes them in the classic Hun system of the territorial diarchy. According to Procopius, Utigur and Kutrigur were two sons of a single ruler (may be “the hero founder”, too) and the confederations adopted their names [Procopius (2014): 8.5.1–4, 469]. Procopius locates the Utigurs in the Kuban steppe and the Kutrigurs in ‘the greater part of the plains’ west of the Sea of Azov (South of modern Ukraine) [Procopius (2014): 8.5.22–3, 471]. Also for the contemporaries Agathias (536-582) and Menander Protector (Menander the Guardsman, VI century) the Utigurs and Kutrigurs are Huns. The use of the name Hun in a generic sense for northern Pontic nomads only begins later, with Theophylact Simocatta in the seventh century who calls Huns both the Turks and their enemies Avars, two confederations that in the VI century are still defined with their specific political identity.¹

Evidently about the name of these two post-attilan confederations, we have the suffix *-oğur* that indicate us that they are groups of this type, namely a military-tribal group, confederate for kinship. We had the peoples of a Hun leader, living at same time of Ernak, called Uto, recorded by Jordanes that become sedentary and changed their name in *Sacromontisii* [Cossuto (2019): 78]: “*Uto et Iscalmus, qui ea potiti sunt, multique Hunnorum passim proruentes tunc se in Romaniam dederunt. Et quibus nunc usque Sacromontisii, et Fosatisii dicuntur.*” [Getica, L, 126] Thus, there was an Uto captain well connected with the formation of the post-Attila Huns confederations, but it's uncertain if he was also the founder of the *Ut-oğur*, also because an ancient *oğur* confederation habitually takes the name by a colour or by number of its components as: *Utigur* (*otur oğur = thirty Ogurs); *Saragur* (*şarı oğur = white Oğur); *Onogur* (on oğur = ten Ogurs) and *Kutrigur* (*toqur oğur = nine Ogurs) [Zimonyi (2015): 245] At the same time, we had a consanguineous of Attila, the danubian hun Ultzindur (living around 460), that gives his name to a Hun tribe. In fact, tribal names arose very frequently out the steppe from the names of famous heroes, real or legendary, a process that can be illustrated from the Othman, the Seljuks, the Chatagai and the Nogai, among others

¹ Hiun Jin Kim, *The Huns, Rome and the birth of Europe*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2013, <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511920493>, p. 253, note 24. See, Giuseppe Cossuto, “Un problema di identità politica: le confederazioni nomadiche autoctone dell'attuale Dobrugia durante la grande guerra tra Gökürk e Avari”, in Tasin Gemil, Gabriel Custurea, Delia Roxana Cornea Eds.), *Moştenirea culturală turcă în Dobrogea* (The Turkish Cultural Legacy in Dobroudja), Muzeul de Istorie Nationala si Arheologie, Constanta, 2013, pp. 17-31.

[Thompson (1996): 202; Reynolds L., Lopez R.S. (1946): 44].

The fact is that also the Western Steppe confederations, after a dozen of years, will be involved in the huge relocation of populations provoked principally by the revolt of the Göktürk against the Juan-Juan (Roruan Kaghanate). This movement changed the political aspect of the confederations in Eurasia and brought a large number of nomad tribes living traditionally beyond the eastern banks of the Caspian Sea until Western Europe with the name of a new confederation: the Avars.

This huge movement of population from Inner Asia to Eastern Europe in VI century has as precedent the dislocation and the newest tribal aggregations that brought the Oğur one century before [Golden (1992): 78]. Rightly, Istvan Zimonyi wrote that the migration of about 463 was among the crucial events in the history of Eastern Europe [Zimonyi (2015): 252]. Has been suggested that this nomadic movement began with the Chinese attack in 450-458 against the Rouran Khaganate [Ibidem, 246-247] well known by Priskus [Priskus (2008)], and that interest the destiny of the Huns, as happened to the Akatzirs led by the Attila's son Ellak and other Hun tribes living in the north of Crimea, that were disrupted by the Saragurs around 463 [Golden (1992): 88; Denis Sinor (1946-1947): 5] but probably, at the same time, we can meet an *Oğur* tribe amongst the attilan confederation, the Bittugurs, too.¹ The Saragurs missing in the sources very early, probably absorbed by the Sabirs (*see below*) that arrived in the region by the late 5th-early 6th century. [Golden (1992): 97]

Thus, amongst the true Huns that Procopius knows, there are these Oğur confederations that incorporates some of the most significative post attilan tribes. Other significative groups where the interesting Sabirs (Wanderers, Nomads), that were very skilled in the use of siege machinery and had also a lot of warrior women.² There were located in Northern Caucasus, in Kuban and in Western Shores of the Black Sea and were able to build boats for their raids. They were allied and mercenaries both for the Byzantines and the Sasanians but [Golden (2011): 35] around 515 AD, one of their leaders called Zilbigis, had a terrible force of 20.000 cavalymen, [Ibidem, 87] and five years later, the powerful Sabirian leader Boareks (she ruled over 100.000 peoples, with an huge military force), widow of the chieftain Balaq came closer to Justinian I, and attacked two Hunnic groups led by Astera/Styrax (after executed in Constantinople) and Aglanos/Glones (a Sasanian ally). [Golden (1992): 106] These Northern Caucasian Huns had also a significative infantry, a fact that brings to think that they used their sedentary people, inserted in their Hunnic System, as subordinates. In fact, in 556, a force of two thousand Sabirs were enlisted as heavy infantry mercenaries of the Byzantine

¹ On the arrive of Oğur type tribes in the Ponto-Caspian Steppes in the V century, see Golden, *An introduction...*, cit. pp. 92 and ss.. See also Cossuto, *I signori del Danubio. I nomadi guerrieri e l'Europa alto-medievale*, Chillemi, Roma, 2014, pp. 25 e ss. and Idem, *Tracce "turche" in Europa medioevale. I popoli delle steppe in Europa dalla comparsa degli Unni alla nascita della Turchia*, Aracne, Roma, 2009, pp. 89 and ss..

² Peter B. Golden, *Studies on the Peoples and Cultures of the Eurasian Steppes*. Editura Academiei Române; Editura Istros a Muzeului Brăilei., p. 91. P. Golden, later, gives also other possibly ethimologies: "Some Notes on the Etymology of Sabirs", in Alexander A. Sinitsyn; Maxim M. Kholod (eds.). *Koivov Δωρον - Studies and Essays in Honour of Valery P. Nikonorov on the Occasion of His Sixtieth Birthday presented by His Friends and Colleagues.*, St. Petersburg State University - Faculty of Philology., 2013, pp. 49–55.

Empire against the Sasanians but they were led by three cheftains with a Turkic name: Balmaq (finger), Kutilzis (**qut-il-či*, with *qut* meaning "majesty") and Iliger (*Ilig-ār*, "prince-man").¹ In the same year, relates Agathias (530-between 582-594 AD), circa five thousand Sabirs that were allied with the Sasanians were killed by three thousand Byzantine horsemen. [Agathias (1975): 4.14.1, 115]

The end of their power, according to Theophylact Simocatta and Menander Protector (that placed these events between 558 and 560) happened when them, together with the Onugurs and the Barsils suffered the invasions of other steppe peoples, the Uar and Chunni, two ancient tribes of Ogurs. A small portion of these tribes fled westward and usurped the name Avar (Rouran). [Zimonyi (2015): 250; Cossuto (2009): 119] The last mentions of the Sabirs is dated during the Byzantine conquest of Caucasian Albania during the period of reign of Tiberius II Constantine (578–582), [Cossuto (1992): 106] but surely they were absorbed by other confederations, as the Bulgars and the Khazars, a theory supported also by the Arab traveller and writer al-Mas‘ūdī (896-956) that connected them to the this latter [Ibidem] and they left a certain numbers of toponyms, too.

The Onugur (Ten Oğurs), as the Urog (Ugor) and Saragurs were one of the first Oğur groups that entered the Ponto-Caspian steppes as the result of migrations set off in Central Asia. [Ibidem, 0203] We have their representatives in Constantinople, send by the Attilan ruler Ernak in 463. [Ibidem, 92-93, 103] Without a doubt, this meaning that they were entered in the Hunnic System ruled by Ernak. A century later, when the pseudo-Avars and Gökturks, arrived in Western Eurasia, the name of this confederation appears many times.

Another important confederation present in the Procopius time, is the Bulgar (The Mixed).² [Zimonyi (2015): 245]. They are certainly in connection with the Attila's Huns and tribes of oğur type, and we can find, in the VI century, various groups, mainly in Ponto-Caspian Steppe, [Cossuto (2009): 135-170; Cassuto (2014): 55-88] but also around the Black Sea. [Zimonyi (2015): 250]

For Procopius, a more atypical great group of Huns were the Ephtalites. In fact, there were Huns but their physical appearance were clearly Caucasian, as Procopius underlines. [Prokopios (2014): 1.3.2, 6] According to Procopius the Ephtalites aren't nomads, they are settled on a good territory and had a capital city called Gorgo, situated on the border with the Sasanian Empire. [Prokopios (2014): 1.3.2, 6; 1.4.10, 9] Menander Protector (middle of VI century) confirms these words and relates that the Turk ambassadors said to the Byzantine Emperor Justin II (520-578) that the Ephtalites are “a people of the cities”. [Menander (1985): frag. 10.1, 115] For Procopius they are different stock respect to the Huns that he knows, and they do not mingle with these other Huns.

¹ Peter B. Golden, *Khazar Studies (An Historico-Philological Inquiry into the Origins of the Khazars)*, Akademiai Kiado, Budapest, 1980, p. 258; J. D. Frendo, *Agathias: The Histories*, in *Corpus Fontium Historiae Byzantinae* (English translation with introduction and short notes), vol. 2A, Series Berolinensis, Walter de Gruyter, 1975, 3.3.5, p. 87 and the more recent edition in french of Pierre Maraval, *Agathias, Histoires, Guerres et malheurs du temps sous Justinien*, Paris, Les Belles Lettres, 2007 and Maenchen-Helfen, Otto John, *The World of the Huns: Studies in Their History and Culture*, University of California Press, 1973, pp. 409-414.

² A list of other etymologies is in Zimonyi, “Muslim...”, *cit.*, p. 245.

Their “way of life” is very similar to the Romans and Persians and not to “savages” Huns. Thus, why they are considered Huns by Procopius? It is possible that their *élite* continued the nomadic life, controlling an urbanised territory with aristocratic and military garrisons inside the cities, a process that involved other nomadic groups, too.

During Justinian time, the politic of the Roman Empire towards the Huns was also based on the use of the religion to establish more links between the Huns and Constantinople. A typical and unsuccessful of this politic was the episode of Grod (Gordas, d. 528 AD), a king of the Crimean Huns (politically Sabir, may be), that came in Constantinople in 527-528 AD to be converted but, when he returned in his lands, with a neophyte zeal, he destroyed the pagan idols venerated by his peoples causing a revolt and his death. Justinian sends a fleet and a Gothic army in Crimea and occupy the region in 530. [Elizabeth Jeffreys et al. (1986): 18.14, 250-251; Cossuto (2014): 111-112].

Another fundamental aspect regarding the human movement of the steppe people groups in this period are certainly the little glaciation effects and the terrible plague in the Sasanian and Byzantine Empires and the contiguous territories. This plague, originated by the *Yersinia pestis*, is the same bacterium responsible for the Black Death (1346–1353).¹ Older and actual *Yersinia pestis* strains are closely related to the ancestor of the Justinian plague strain that has been found in the Tian Shan, a system of mountain ranges on the borders of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and China, and this suggests that the plague of the Justinian period originated around this area and diffused by the human movement in the Eurasian steppes towards the west, but there are some other opinions, too.² According to Procopius, the plague started in Egypt, at Pelusion, in 540, [Prokopios (2014): 2.22.6,120] did not afflict the tribal populations³ and it was diffused widespread by the ships of the Alexandria harbour, and this is in strict connection with the period of the Vandalic Wars, also because the plague affected the Persian Lands and the southern shores of the Western Caspian Sea in 546 AD after the Mediterranean Sea and Constantinople.

The Huns in Africa

The authority of Belisarius on the Huns of the expedition was almost absolute in his presence. This fact is demonstrated by Procopius that relates that, during the navigation, in Abydos (Egypt) Belisarius punished with the capital death of the pale two Huns that had killed another hun that, drunk, ridiculed them during a collective binge.

¹ See the detailed article of Uli Schamiloğlu, U., “The Plague in the Time of Justinian and Central Eurasian History: An Agenda for Research” in O. Karatay, & I. Zimonyi (Eds.), *Central Eurasia in the Middle Ages: Studies in Honour of Peter B. Golden*, (Turcologica ; Vol. 104). Harrassowitz Verlag, 2016, pp. 293-311.

² There are a lot of studies on this argument. See Peter Sarris, "Bubonic Plague in Byzantium: The Evidence of Non-Literary Sources", in Lester K. Little (ed.), *Plague and the End of Antiquity: The Pandemic of 541–750*, Cambridge University Press, 2007, pp. 119–132, and 121–123; Amongst the others, see the discussion on the original place where the virus had origin in Justinian times in William Rosen, *Justinian's Flea: Plague, Empire and the Birth of Europe*, Penguin Group, New York, 2007, pp.194-197.

³ As affirms the contemporary African Roman writer Flavius Cresconius Corippus, see George W. Shea, *The Iohannis or de Bellis Libycis of Flavius Cresconius Corippus* (Studies in Classics 7), Lewiston/NY 1998, 3.343-390.

According to Procopius, the Huns were heavy drinkers of alcohol. The relatives and friends of the two Huns impaled were very angry, because the laws of the Huns don't adopted this punishment for this kind of actions, and they declared that they will not adopt the laws of the Romans. With a long and determined discourse, Belisarius calmed and scared his men. [Prokopios (2014): 3.12.7, 171]

The main enemies of the Byzantines in Africa were the Vandals (a Germanic people that, during the decades had augmented his number joining other peoples as the Suebi and the Alans, a steppe people of iranic language. We can find the Alans in the same period also in the Caucasus and Eastern Europe. In fact, after the death of their ruler Attaco (d. 418 AD) in Spain against the Visigoths, the Alans arrived in Western Europe decided to unify their people with the Vandals and, in 530 AD the Vandal souverain, Gelimer still used the title "King of the Vandals and Alans". It seems probable that the Vandal armies, included the Alans, consisted entirely of cavalry, useful against the Moors, but very scarce in comparison with the Byzantine army. [Ibidem, 3.8.27, 163]

Against the Vandals, in charge of the regular byzantine cavalry was an eminent Hun, called Aygan (probably late of the 5th century-between 534-548 AD). This general was a renowned soldier during the Iberian War against the Sasanians and, during the battle of Dara in Mesopotamia (AD 530, Dara is located in the present day in Mardin Province, in Turkey), Aygan, under a temperature of ca. 45°, together with another baptized Nicean hun, Sunicas¹ led a troop of 300 Hun cavalry that hold the left flank, meanwhile many more Huns (ca. AD 600) where on the right side under the order of other two generals of Hunnic origin, the *dux* Simmas (late 5th century- after AD 531) [Elizabeth Jeffreys et al. (1986): 18.462, 270-271] and the brave Askan (d. 19 April AD 531). His actions were fundamental in the Roman victory. [Kim, Hyun Jin (2015); Whately, Conor (2021): 56]. After, Aygan participated in the expedition against the Vandalic Kingdom in AD 533, being one of the four cavalry commanders of Belisarius. [Martindale (1992): 1098]

After the end of the war, when his commander Belisarius come back to Constantinople in summer of AD 534² Aygan remained in Africa to give his services to the byzantine *magister militum* and Pretorian prefect, the eunuch Solomon (Last twenty years of V century- AD 544).

Immediately, during the same year, Aygan was involved in the repression of a Moors uprising against the Byzantines, and he combats against the tribal forces in Byzacena (modern day Tunisia). Aygan and his companion ambushed and killed an entire Moorish raiders group, liberating their prisoners. After they fought bravely and lost against an enormous Moorish army led by Medisinissas, composed of circa 50.000 warriors, while the Romans were only 500 men [Martindale (1992): 1098]:

"The Romans, being few and shut off in a narrow place in the midst of many thousands, were not able to fight off their assailants. For wherever they might turn, they were always being shot at from behind. [8] Then Rouphinos and Aïgan with some few men ran to the top of a rock that was nearby and from there defended themselves against

¹ Sunicas, during the battle of Dora, killed the Persian Commander, giving a decisive resolution to the battle.

² For the events happened in Africa after the departure of Belisarius see *Corippus, cit.*

the barbarians. [9] As long as they were using their bows, the enemy did not dare to come directly to a hand-to-hand struggle with them, but kept hurling javelins at them. But when all the arrows of the Romans were exhausted, the Moors closed with them and so they defended themselves with swords as well as the circumstances permitted. [10] But they were overpowered by the multitude of the barbarians: Aigan fell there with his whole body hacked to pieces, and Rousphinos was seized by the enemy and led away.” [Procopius (2014): 4.10.10, 210-210]

Procopius wrote that Aygan, and a lot of the Huns in the expedition or that fought in Italy or previously in the wars against the Persians (as Simmas, Askan, etc.), belonged at the Huns that in the past were called Massagetai [Ibidem, 1.13.21, 32 and 3.11.9, 169] and this, may be, indicate sthe geographic origin of these Huns, the Eastern shores of the Caspian Sea, the ancient Massagetai lands.

We can find an Aygan (Moon Khan) also in the legend of origin of the Oğuz, as one of the Oguz Khagan' son. Many time, the legends of origin of the Steppe Peoples, may be containing historical fact or real personages. In this case, it can be a simple homonymy, because also the other sons of Oğuz Khan are all elements of the Sky or of the Earth.

Another important Hun in the expedition was Sinnion, that Procopius describes as a man of “endowed with bravery and endurance to the highest degree” [Ibidem, 3.11.12, 169]. He and another “massagetae” (Kutrugur) with an iranic name, Balas, [Maenchen-Helfen (1973): 390] leded 600 mounted archers. Procopius cited a lot of “Massagetes” (Kutrugurs) with an iranic, or other linguistic, names. Later, Procopius, more clearly, affirms that the “massagete” [Ibidem, 3.11.12, 169] Sinnion belonging to the Kutrigur confederation and he was involved in the wars against the Utigurs. After the defeat against the Utigurs, Sinnion, as well-known follower of Belisarius and fighter in Africa for the Byzantines, became suppliant to Justinian and ask him to be settled with his peoples in the Byzantine territory. The Emperor received him and established this Huns in Thracia [Ibidem, 8.19.7, 504]. This episode is very important because, according to Procopius: “He (Sandil, the ruler of Utigurs) accordingly sent envoys to the Emperor to protest at what had been done, not putting any letter into their hands—for the Huns are absolutely unacquainted with writing and unskilled in it up to now; neither do they have any teacher of grammar nor do their children toil over their letters at all as they grow up— but instructing them rather to deliver by word of mouth in the barbarian fashion everything that he told them.” [Ibidem] The oral letter of Sandil to Justinian is a perfect example of a Hunnic self-awareness.

After Dara, Simmas and Sunicas led the Hun cavalry at the Battle of Callinicum.(19 April 531, modern day Raqqa, in Syria). During the latter part of this battle, he and Sunicas dismounted and fought alongside the infantry, and Simmas and Askan prevented the complete rout of the Romans [Cameron (1985): 158]. During this battle, the Hun leader Askan and all his Huns has been killed and defeated by the Sasanians. [Hughes (2009): 71]

Another important and celebrated Hun in the African expedition was Althias (around 530, having a Turkic name). [Prokopios (2014): 3.1.1.7, 169] During the battle against the Vandals at Trimacaram, not far away from Carthage, Althias was one of the Roman leaders of the left wing as Aygan of the right wing [Ibidem, 4.3.4, 197.5]. In this

battle the mercenary Huns (ca. 500, arrived with Belisarius) follow their use of to not mingle with the other parts of Roman army.

The main episode of his life happened when a very powerful Moorish leader Iaudas with Donatist sympathy, with thirty thousand warriors, was plundering the land and enslaving many peoples. During this period Althias was keeping guard over some forts in Centuria (Ain El Adjar, in modern day Algeria) in the lands ravaged by Iaudas and wanting liberate the captives, exits with his 70 Huns from the fort:

“Reasoning that he was not able to fight against such a great multitude of Moors with only seventy, men, he wished to occupy some narrow pass so that, while the enemy were marching through it, he might be able to snatch up some of the captives. [4] As there are no such roads there, because flat plains extend in every direction, he devised the following. [5] There is a city nearby named Tigisis, then an unwalled place but having a large spring in a very narrow place. [6] Althias therefore decided to take possession of this spring, reasoning that the enemy, compelled by thirst, would surely come there, for there is no other water at all close by. [7] Now it seemed to all who considered the disparity of the armies that his plan was insane. [8] But the Moors came up feeling exhausted, greatly oppressed by the heat of the summer, and naturally almost overcome by an intense thirst, and they made for the spring with a great rush, not thinking that they would meet any obstacle. [9] But when they found the water held by the enemy, they all halted, at a loss what to do, for they had already spent the greatest part of their strength in their desire for water. [10] Iaudas therefore had a parley with Althias and agreed to give him a third of the booty if the Moors could all drink. [11] Althias was not willing to accept the proposal, demanding that he fight with him in single combat for the booty. [12] This challenge was accepted by Iaudas, and it was agreed that if it so fell out that Althias was overcome, the Moors would drink. [13] The whole Moorish army rejoiced, being in good hope, as Althias was lean and not tall of body, whereas Iaudas was the finest and most warlike of all the Moors. [14] Both of them were, as it happened, mounted. Iaudas hurled his spear first, but as it was coming toward him Althias unexpectedly managed to catch it with his right hand, stunning Iaudas and the enemy. [15] With his left hand he drew his bow instantly, for he was ambidextrous, and hit and killed the horse of Iaudas. [16] After he fell, the Moors brought another horse for their leader, upon which Iaudas leaped and immediately fled, and the Moorish army followed him in complete disorder. [17] And Althias, by thus taking from them the captives and the whole of the booty, won a great name for this deed throughout all Libya” [Procopius (2014): 4.13.2,218]

Other Huns accomplished act of valour in Africa but, unfortunately, Procopius does not report their name. For example, a Hun chieftain that following the rules of his people (the man with more illustrious forefathers can be the first in battle), confronted alone with the Vandal army of Gibamund composed by two thousand men, provoking them, at the Fields of Salt, near Decimum [Ibidem, 3.19.12. 182].

Procopius relates another interesting episode about the nature of the relationship between the Roman army in Africa and their Hunnish mercenaries. The king of the Vandals Gelimer put on siege Carthage and tried to attract to himself the Roman soldiers and inhabitants professing the Arian faith. At same time he sent messengers to the Hun leaders, promising them a lot of goods if them betrayed the Romans joining his side. The

Huns, that had received a false oath by the byzantine general Petros, were not in good confidence with the Romans were receptive to the Vandals' words. But Belisarius, suspecting the betrayal, with shrewdness and diplomacy, started to court everyday the Huns with a lot of gifts, banquets and everything they asked. After, Belisarius promised them that when the Vandals will be defeated, the Roman navy will transport the Huns and their booty to their homeland without any delay. When the battle started, after a council, the Huns decided to not engage immediately the fight, but to maintain good relationship both Romans and Vandals, attacking the part that clearly is losing. Naturally Aygan, Althias and the other Roman-Huns were in the battle with their regular soldiers. The mercenary Huns were positioned in a separate part, and they do not mingle with the Roman army until this defeated the Vandals [Ibidem, 4.1.1, 193-198].

CONCLUSIONS

In Procopius *Vandalic Wars* we can find first hand reports about the Huns, especially about VI century Huns. These Huns are a constant presence in many parts of the Roman Empire and other lands. A lot of them are well integrated in the Roman Empire System, meanwhile other lived mainly in the Hunnic System. All these Hunnic populations are well determined in the period between the death of Attila (*grosso modo* coincident with the arrival of the *Oğur* groups in the western steppes and Eastern Europe) and the arrival (after a couple of decades) of other tribes determined by the war of the Göktürk and their nomadic enemies. Some of these Huns (called by Procopius "Massagetai") have mainly a Turkic name, other an Iranic one. The great plague of the Justinian's era affected these and other populations after the departure of Belisarius from Africa, in 540 AD, but many Huns remained in the territories of North Africa and, amongst them, there were important figures of the Roman Empire.

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