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Jerzy Gąssowski

## THE DAWN OF MEDIEVAL EUROPEAN CULTURE

The division of history into periods, to which we have become accustomed, has always been an accepted convention, an arbitrary choice of borders and divisions used according to our depth of knowledge, needs and imagination. However, even as time passes our knowledge of history deepens, we are conscious how imperfect and outdated these divisions are: they remain milestones in a time when kilometres are used.

One such accepted division of history is between Antiquity and the Medieval period, set in 476, when the Western Roman Empire officially ceased to exist. I will not discuss here the basis for placing the Medieval period within this framework – a practise which has continued over many centuries. For although the name *medii aevi* was to express a period of transition, symbolising the fall of civilisation between the Classical world and Renaissance, the period saw certain cultural events of significant influence for the future of Europe.

By studying the cultural events of lesser significance, however, such as folk art, pagan rituals etc., the cultural historian and archaeologist may perceive a fuller picture of the epoch than would arise merely by looking at the heights of civilisation.

In the History of Civilisation there are no visible borders between the late Classical period and the beginning of the Medieval. Of far greater importance were the changes which took place over the late Roman period, during the 3rd and 4th century. The enormous crisis, which shook the Empire beginning in the second decade of the 3rd century; the great barbarian invasions – mainly by the Goths, Saxons and Sarmatians – in the middle of that century, the acceptance of Christianity in 313 first as an equal and later as the state religion in 392, the arrival of the Asiatic nomads and their settling in the heart of Europe (after 375), all these important events greatly influenced the cultural picture of the Empire,

especially in the West. The cultural distance between the Golden Age of the Roman Empire in the 1st to early 2nd century A.D. and the Medieval "Dark Ages" is immense. A comparison to the late Roman Empire, however, reveals a greater cultural continuity.

During the 4th century many Germanic tribes in "barbarian" Europe convert to Christianity, and later remain faithful to Arianism for several centuries: mainly the Goths, Vandals and Gepids. At the same time Mitraism gains a wide popularity in many Roman provinces, fiercely competing with Christianity as well as the old official religion. Although Christianity dominates, other faiths and intellectual currents also begin to penetrate from the Near East. These currents reach the furthest corners of the Empire, up to Hadrian's Wall on the borders of Pictish Britain. They also cross the frontiers there to find at least partial acceptance.

This all takes place from the mid 3rd century against a background of ongoing waves of barbarian invasions and the continual – peaceful or military – penetration of Roman lands.

The appearance of the Visigoths as *foederati* within the borders of the Empire in 376 brings this process to a culmination and marks a new chapter in the founding of "barbarian" kingdoms within the old Empire, mainly in the West. However this process did not begin in the third quarter of the 4th century but over a century earlier.

Significant economic changes also occur: restructuralisation of the *latifundia*, development of the colonat economy, the deepening agricultural crisis, especially in the Western Empire, which lead to a gradual depopulation of even the most arable lands (for example, Roman Campania).

Due to the constant invasions from the mid 3rd century, reaching far into the heart of the Roman provinces, the urban picture also undergoes a change, cities build mammoth defence walls, flanked with numerous towers. Towns acquire an appearance which remains unchanged throughout the early Medieval period. Some of the *latifundia* are transformed into castles similar to the medieval ones.

The process of feudalisation develops, gently opposed by the state, as for example in the matter of commendation. *Latifundia* become centres of guild production, providing haven to refugees from towns in the Eastern Empire. Their safety is secured by the magnate's private army, stationed on the lands of the castle – residence.

In many ways the end of the Roman Empire reminds one of the Middle Ages, even of the later Medieval period, however it is not so for many relevant reasons.

However what exactly differentiates the early Medieval period from the late Roman Empire, given that both are effected by the same historical process?

One of the important differences stems from the expanded influence of Roman and Greek-Byzantine civilisation across the huge area of "barbarian" Europe. Although the primary carrier of these currents was Christianity, one can

nevertheless follow this development before the actual dates of conversion, especially in the northern area of Europe. One can say that the conversion to Christianity was preceded and, to a great extent, conditioned by earlier cultural influences from areas of former Roman Provinces.

The existence of new "barbarian" kingdoms, predominately Germanic, played an important role in this process, as they were the mediators of cultural assimilation. The majority of them – especially the Gothic states – intentionally aspired to the highest forms of cultural assimilation. Their struggles brought results, despite the constant religious barrier inherent in the heretical Arian faith or outright paganism. Only a few of these tribes, such as, the early Franks, or, for far longer, the Anglo-Saxons, declared their anti-Roman programme.

It is impossible to maintain the earlier thesis that the mass Germanic settlement in the West was the main cause of the decline in the cultural achievements of the Roman Empire. One could even postulate that this was partly responsible for its survival, especially with the Ostrogoths in Italy and in the courts of the Visigoths in south Gaul as well as in Spain.

Archaeological evidence shows that many aspects of the Germanic culture were attractive to the old inhabitants of Gaul, Italy or Spain, despite their differences of law and faith. Once these barriers were removed, as i.e. when the Franks adopted the orthodox version of Christianity or when the Visigoths repudiated the heretical Arianism this mutual assimilation was accelerated. This is highlighted by the rich artefacts showing burial rites, dress, jewellery, armoury etc.

For example in southern France all the known cemeteries from the second half of 5th and the end 7th century A.D. display burial rites and artefacts typical of Germanic "row" cemeteries, despite the fact that Visigoths and later Franks were fewer in number compared to the Gallo-Roman population.

At the same time in the British Isles the local Celtic populace openly rejected any Germanic influence from the Angles or Saxons. Research has shown that the Celtic Welsh melted down beautiful Anglo-Saxon jewellery to make their own, so as not to fall from grace by wearing the work, not only of an outsider but also of an enemy. But this example is exceptional.

An interesting analogy in central Europe and part of eastern Europe can be found among the early Slavs. Despite the widespread fashion of Germanic type jewellery over much of Europe in the 5th to 7th century; the large area between the Elbe and Dniepr valleys yield almost no examples of this type of jewellery. In the area of Slavic settlement, not using or importing these modern items would seem to be "deliberate". At the turn of the century Bernard Salin drew attention to this with study of typology and distribution of this animal style in Europe. Later research supported these observations: everywhere these artefacts appeared, or animal style decoration in areas of early Slav settlements, there was an enclave of Germanic, Balt or nomadic settlement.

The Slav population avoided the use or imitation of Germanic jewellery or decorative style, despite the fact... they had no alternative to offer. The Island Celts resisted Germanic imports or influence, having a rich decorative background of their own whose motifs stretch back far into history. This Celtic resistance is above all a manifestation of their disaffinity for everything Anglo-Saxon and Germanic from the Continent. A different and more complicated picture is the symbiosis occurring in the immense Nordic territories.

At the beginnings of the Medieval period there arose here, in the decorative art an interesting network linking the traditional decorative arts of Ireland, the land of the Picts (today's Scotland), Norway, Sweden and Finland, thus linking Celtic, Germanic and Finnish tribes, moreover this network linked both Christian (in the case of the Celts) and pagan nations. The rich animal style characterised by intricate interwoven ornament, develops everywhere and, as this development continues well into the 11th century, it undergoes similar evolutionary trends, regardless of place. Its rich representation is seen on the pages of illustrated manuscripts from Iro-Scottish monasteries (on the British Isles as well as on the Continent), and in the decorations of the lay pagan Scandinavians. In the latter case this style continues even up to the decorations of the earliest Norwegian wooden churches, not to mention the earlier ornamentation of the Viking boats.

The origin of this network of Hiberno-Nordic style is still unclear, considering its expanse and the presence of multi-ethnic elements, where insular-Celtic as well as Nordic-Germanic elements dominate.

Elements of the style reach the Slavs no earlier than the late 10th century, however its range of influence is limited, appearing in wooden decorations and in architecture in northern Ruś (Nowogród Wielki, Stara Ładoga), as well as in ports of the Coastal (Wolin, Kołobrzeg) and Elbe valley Slavs. There we can suppose the presence of Normans or Varegs as merchants, sailors or retinue.

Decoration of this type occurs also on Slavic armoury from the 10th century, especially swords and spears, however one cannot state to what extent they reflect new fashion and to what extent imports from Scandinavia.

But these discussions have distracted us from our main train of deliberation, on the cultural influence of Germanic groups on the treasures of contemporary European civilisation.

What values were promoted by the Germanic influences at the turn of the Middle Ages in areas of former Roman territories? Mainly by the so called eastern Germans, Visigoths, Ostrogoths and Vandals. Before the Migration period all these groups settled in the Ukraine, Crimea and Danube delta along the Black Sea; They had all accepted Christianity in the 4th century and had been under the late Hellenistic influence of the Black Sea centres of Antiquity. For several centuries one of the main elements, although not the only one, was the rich ethnic Czerniachow culture, where iron production, enamelling and

ornaments in various precious metals reached a high level. The technology of pottery production for everyday use also achieved near perfection. Socio-politically the kingdom was at a stage of transformation from a late tribal community to a state. Nomads, mainly Sarmatians and also Persian Sasanides, played an important role in the shaping of culture of these groups.

All these cultural achievements migrated to western Europe – to Gaul, Spain and Italy and – somewhat later – together with the Vandals to North Africa.

An interesting moment occurred once the hostility of the natives towards the invaders had subsided, when the "barbarians" threw down their swords and took hold of the plough. Then the local population discovered – according to contemporary writers – that the "barbarian" invaders were closer to them than the Romans, whose inhuman economic oppression should rather classify them as the barbarians. Moreover it seemed also that the invaders represented a lifestyle containing many forgotten virtues, which had once been attributed to the Romans: marriage, filial respect, heroism. Archaeological evidence shows that many customs brought from the Black Sea steppes received an enthusiastic acceptance amongst the native population – some of these aspects have been mentioned above. If not for the obstacle of faith (Arianism) and the ban on mixed marriages the process of assimilation would have been quicker.

The western Germanic contribution (Franks, Alemanni, Burgundians) was somewhat different. The Franks, the most powerful of this group, had for a long time settled the border areas of the Rhinelands, several of these groups served as *foederati* for Rome defending the *limes*, often against their own groups. At the same time one of the oldest tribal codes "Lex Salica", declared in its preamble that Rome was an enemy. Long after the defeat of northern Gaul there were still pagan Franks. Here too we see the decline of the late tribal system. This process was accelerated in new territories where new trans-tribal kingdoms were quickly created.

The introduction of Roman Christianity was an important step for the invaders. A fundamental barrier was overcome, separating them from the native population. Despite the fact that the Romanization of the Franks was far behind the significantly more organised of the Visigoths, in a general way – almost from one day to the next – the Franks became more Gallo-Roman. A minor matter was that the court of the Toulouse Visigoths imitated the ceremonies of Byzantium whereas the official language was Latin. When it came to a confrontation between the Franks and Visigoths, Gallo-Roman populace and aristocracy sympathised with the Franks, for whom the town gates were opened, The occupation of territory south of the Loire resulted in a decreased proportions of Franks to the native population and in easier assimilation. Furthermore Christianity quickened their Romanization.

The situation of the Ostrogoths in Italy provides an even clearer example than the Visigoths. Their cultural politics clearly aimed at maintaining and cultivating Roman civilisation, evidence of this is seen in the work of Theodoric the Great. Ethnic and religious differences, which alienated the Ostrogoths from

the local populace became obvious in the face of Byzantine reconquest. This became one of the main causes of the downfall of the Ostrogoth kingdom in Italy.

Similar causes brought about the downfall of the Vandals in their African kingdoms. Their religious intolerance towards the old and well-served Catholic Church of North Africa, as well as bad memories of their brutal invasion of Rome, forever disparaging their name.

Another important reason to maintain the differences between invaders and invaded apart from religious conflict (if it existed) was the serious dissimilitude in the systems of law. These laws were not only different in code but in spirit as well. One of the most fundamental points concerned punishment, which in many Germanic laws, depended upon the class of the victim, and payment, used as compensation for even the most serious crimes, to be paid by the criminal and his closest family and due to the victim or his inheritors.

This resulted in the term "per head" also called Wehrgeld in German, depending on the social class or administrative hierarchy.

Originating from a completely different basis, Roman law shaped the concept of guilt, as well as punishment, depending on the crime committed and independent of the social position of the victim. Whereas in Germanic law bodily damage of an important person would bring a far larger fine than the murder of a person from the lower strata of society – Roman law acknowledged the degree of guilt as the only base to measure punishment.

Fewer complications came from differences in the system of civil law. Without going into the details due to the complicated situation, when each party is subject to a different system of law, and without discussing whether, in the current situation, Germanic law privileged its own kind, one should stress that the principle of dual citizenships with two systems of law caused a serious, objective obstacle to assimilation.

However at the same time the fact that the majority of the German population maintained two existing laws with Roman law for the native populace, showed some good will towards the defeated society.

There is no evidence of such a system in Anglo-Saxon Britain, in accordance with the general policies of these people, which denied any association with former Roman traditions.

Returning to the system of double law, it shows that the majority of the Germanic groups in Western Europe desired to maintain the fiction of belonging to the Roman Empire (in this case the Eastern Empire), a fiction also beneficial for Byzantium. The Germanic rulers adopted court and army titles from the Byzantine court, creating a legal government with the blessing of the Empire. At the same time they were also rulers of their own kingdoms, which they governed independently and Byzantium had no possibility of dethroning them or replacing them with another body.

The Germanic kings – with the exception of the Angles, Saxons and

Langobards – avoided striking their own gold coins, which would have meant undermining the prestige of the empire.

For all those Romanised Germanic groups the myth of the Roman Empire offered strength and a timeless promise, which lasted not only throughout the Medieval period but cast a shadow through history up to the present. The epitome of this was the coronation of Charlemagne as Emperor in 800, even if with an iron crown of the Langobards. In this spirit the Holy Roman empire of the German Nations was created. All these ambitions were a constant attempt to renew the Western Empire. Something similar happened in the east, where after the fall of Byzantium, a partly legitimate continuation of the Eastern Empire occurred in Rus. Thus one might say that the October Revolution which overthrew the Tsar, removed the last remnants of Byzantine heritage hiding under the two-headed Roman eagle.

The German Kaisers used this same eagle as a seal up until the end of the First World War, conscious of their guardianship of the heritage of the Western Empire, usurped for centuries. A similar case was proclaimed in the House of the Hapsburgs, and the Spanish and English ruling dynasties tried to stretch this idea worldwide.

Even Mussolini tried – with tragicomic results – to build his fascist power based on the symbol of the former empire.

For the people of the early Medieval period the Roman Empire did not cease to exist. Physically it existed in the area of Byzantium, where byzantines did not stop calling themselves Romans. In the West, on the other hand, people never ceased to attempt or dream of its restitution.

Emperor Justinian's reconquest in Italy, North Africa and the southern part of Spain showed the native population that Byzantium was no longer a Roman but a Greek empire. There was a terrible return of large levies and the administration was in a foreign language. This was not freedom but a new occupation. In North Africa the city gates were voluntarily opened to Arabs, in the belief that things could not be worse – and this was probably correct – than under the rule of Byzantium.

The church and its universalism played an important role in maintaining the idea or dream of Empire. It was the Bishop of Rome and not the patriarch of Byzantium who was to become the head of the Church. The empire, so difficult to rekindle in a physical sense, continued to exist in the spiritual sense, claiming bloodless victories everywhere even where Roman legions never marched, even in their greatest imperial glory.

Following the advancement of Christianity, Latin culture expanded its influence in the West and the North, and Greek culture in the East. These influences consisted mainly the use of Latin (and to a lesser extent Greek in the east), monumental stone architecture, sculpture and painting, music and mathematics, liturgical ceremony based on the court and new customs, inspired by the hellenistic mediterranean world.



This ultimately results in the confrontation of the spiritual strength of the Pope and the earthly power of the emperor. At the gates of Canossa the latter experiences a bitter defeat; Henceforward the authority of the Pope becomes an irrefutable fact, even if at times evidently lessened.

The imperial myth helped the Church in its victories across barbarian Europe, in turn the Church also spreads the remaining achievement late Hellenistic culture. These achievements, even when purged of any pagan content, were nonetheless not insignificant.

Therefore one might say, that European medieval culture was largely forged in the glow of the embers left by the Roman Empire, which did not expire for centuries to come.

Christianity, the myth of the Roman Empire, the traditions of the post-Hellenistic culture, the role of the Germanic groups in the ruins of the Empire – all combine to form European medieval culture which is generally not questioned. The discussions in academic circles deal with details and the extent of the interaction of these elements. However there are areas where research has not been extensive and where there are fewer sources from the beginning of medieval culture. One of these areas concerns the East, influence even from the far corners of Asia, an influence which prevented European medieval culture from simply continuing in a straight line from Antiquity.

For the first time in its history Europe stood at the threshold of the Medieval period faced with such continuing invasions by nomads from the east. These invasions did not stop at the eastern borders nor the Ukrainian steppes or Hungary – as had the Cimmerians, Scythians or Sarmatians. Almost all of continental Europe was to fall prey to the Huns, whose incursions passed through Orleans and northern Italy, as they aimed at Rome, Byzantium managed to save its estates at a great cost. The sudden fall of this gigantic power managed to shield Europe from a simply unimaginable turn of events. However new Asiatic nomads were soon to arrive, the Avars, who settled in the heart of Europe for two centuries, gathering in their Greater Ring (probably somewhere near the Danube and Tisza) unsorted treasures, loot from their invasions or the forced payment of tribute and extortion.

Following their steps came the Bulgars, tearing Thrace away from Byzantium and widening their kingdom to the Balkans, they become a burdensome neighbour of the Eastern Empire, dreaming of the defeat of Constantinople. On the Black Sea steppes appear the Pechenegs and later Polowcy and the dangerous Khazars settle in the Volga delta – the only European people, who converted to Judaism.

Following the long and difficult wars the Carolingians were able to crush the Avars at the very end of the 8th century and capture their fabulous treasure. Before the end of the century the Magyars (Hungarians) appeared, who after crushing the flourishing Slav Kingdom of Great Moravia began their plundering

raids on Germany, reaching France and deep into Italy, almost to her southern frontiers. A further half century had to pass before their defeat by the Germans on the river Lech, made them settle on the lands they still inhabit and conversion to Christianity introduced them into the network of civilised nations.

After Europe had nearly forgotten the Asian peril, the Tartars appeared in mid 13th century...

This entire list of events is only designed to show how early medieval Europe developed under the threat of Asiatic nomads. The actions and influences of these tribes were not limited simply to military and political spheres of life – they also had a cultural aspect, whose effects had important genetic elements of European civilisation.

One more important element of cultural influence should be mentioned, which the Arab invasion brought in a roundabout way via North Africa to Spain: a new form of civilisation, shaped from a mixture of Byzantine, Persian and Hindi culture and rooted in austere traditions of the desert bedouins.

I shall return to the problem of Islam influence and Muslim culture later – here I should like to stop to discuss the influence of the Asiatic nomads.

One of the paradoxes of civilisation associated with the waves of nomads is their introduction into the heart of Europe elements of Chinese and Persian culture. This Far East cultural trait results in – via the Huns, Avars, or Magyars or Tartars – the myth of their indefeatability and terror. In the Slavic tradition the Avars are remembered, as people of giant stature, and the Slavic word for "giant" comes from the name Avar. Anthropological evidence shows us that they were at most of medium stature.

Experience, gained by the Asian nomads on the battlefields near the Chinese borders, battle tactics borrowed from the Chinese and the fighting form and armour made them especially dangerous enemies, or at least in the first phase of fighting. One can say that this cultural diversity led to their victory – for a time. Once their battle tactics and actions had been deciphered they stopped being dangerous and indefeatable.

On hearing that the Huns were approaching, the brave Goths preferred to escape and migrate across Europe, rather than risk battle or being neighbours. The Langobards – although they had allied with the Avars to defeat the Gepids in the settlements on the Danube – preferred migration to northern Italy, to neighbouring with these nomads. However it was noneother than the Visigoths on the fields of Catalaune near Orleans who stopped the Huns and forced them to retreat. Soon after this, after the death of Attila the Hun in 453, the uprising of the "allied" Ostrogoths and Gepids caused the ultimate downfall of the nomad kingdom. Therefore battle experience gained in the Far East was ultimately not a danger for the European peoples. However it should be mentioned, that each subsequent invasion by the nomads was victorious in its initial stage. Sometimes this initial stage – as in the case of the Avars and Magyars – lasted a very long time.

One of the reasons for the military successes of the Asiatic nomads was their dexterity on horseback. As is generally known, the Roman army in Antiquity (the Republic and Empire) was traditionally infantry. The cavalry had a limited role, serving to transport the legions rather than give battle on horseback. An objective difficulty was the lack of any stirrup, which meant that the rider was extremely unstable in battle.

Towards the end of the Western Empire the Roman army hired troops of nomads, mostly Sarmatians from the Black Sea steppes, formed a horse brigade. There were also eastern Germanic tribes: Ostrogoths, Visigoths, Vandals and Gepids, who had lived together for a couple of centuries with the Sarmatians and had learnt from them how to battle on horse.

Through its constant confrontation with Persia, which had in its army, horse formations – also heavily armoured – the Eastern Empire also acquired an army of horses, although the legions were the dominating troop. Without heavily armoured horses Justinians' victory over the Ostrogoths and the Vandals would not have been possible.

However in this field the Huns went far beyond anything known. A nation appeared, which not only moved and fought on horseback, but never left the horse at all. Hunnic shoes were more suited to the shape of the semi-circular stirrup, than to walking. Much to the chagrin of the Europeans, there appeared a people who fought, ate, drank and slept on horseback. This in itself was frightening enough. This group was also well organised, absolutely given to obedience and the strictest discipline which was exacted from each other as well as from outsiders. The alternative was death and ruin, practised with ruthless consistency. The tradition and experience of the Huns strangely combined threat and cruelty with peace and diplomacy. Attila himself treated war as the ultimate weapon.

This policy was generally successful which can be seen by the fact that many people gave up the idea of fighting, surrendering to Hun domination or else left everything and fled at great speed. Wherever battle did take place there were terrible repercussions towards the defeated. Such were the Hun traditions, but they belonged to other nomadic tribes from the Asian steppes, to a greater or lesser extent.

This school of tactics was something new in Europe, it awakened threat and terror, previously unknown. However a greater threat with other causes was impending, and entered the civilised world, which the Huns made real. Nomads generally settled in areas, which reminded them of their homelands, in climate and landscape, and which were best suited to grazing their cattle and horses. For centuries these terrains were the Black Sea steppes and between the Danube and Tisza. From here they organised raids on other countries and tribes. The Huns planned the total defeat of Europe, which would mean the loss of her civilisation, a change from arable farming lands to pastures and from the pulsating activities of

towns into temporary camps. It was a great threat of fundamental importance to the further existence of European civilisation in her current form and to her continuous development. One can say without any exaggeration that the mid 5th century, the fate of the existence of Europe was in question, as a result of the Huns.

It so happened that Europe survived one of the greatest threats in its history. However Asiatic nomads had a open road to her interior and their presence became a new and constant element in politics and culture throughout the entire Middle Ages. It was characteristic that contemporaries often called the Avars and other tribes from the Asiatic circles Huns, although this name was used more as an adjective and description of culture. The almost constant presence of nomads in Europe made its mark, especially in the Christian countries, where they were looked upon as the "Empire of Satan". Studies of the early Medieval European culture continued to disregard the place and importance of the Asiatic nomads in the transformation process of civilisation. Only the destruction is noticed, without acknowledging any positive contribution. The importance of this question is so great it cannot be overlooked.

This discussion of the early Medieval period is further complicated by the strange phenomenon, the sudden appearance and veritable demographic, cultural and settlement explosion of the Slavs.

This subject is problematical at the very basis. Researchers of the early culture and Slavonic ethnicity are torn between two main schools, which remain in conflict: autochthonic and allochthonic. The first maintains that the genesis of the Slavs was nurtured from the Bronze Age between the Oder and the mid-Dniepr and the general changes accompanying the breakdown of Antiquity freed a new creative strength of this group and opened the way for their widespread expansion. The second school says that the Slavs appeared in central Europe migrating from the east, no earlier than in 6th century A.D.

A weakness in the first theory is that, relying on archaeological and in part written evidence one cannot prove, the almost total change in material culture which took place amongst the autochthonic Slavs at the turn of the medieval period. A flaw in the allochthonic concept is, that neither on the basis of archaeological nor written evidence, can a starting point be found for the Slav expansion.

The rift still exists, although there are attempts to come to some sort of compromise - but neither side in this controversy can be convinced.

Despite the opinions on the genesis of the Slavs it remains an indisputable fact that in the short time of two centuries (6th and 7th century) a huge area of central, eastern and south-eastern Europe were flooded by Slavic settlements. In the West it reached the Elbe, in the northern section of the river it even crossed it, it also entered the foothills of the Austrian Alps, reaching the borders of northern Italy. The whole of the central and lower valley of the Danube was settled and from there the entire Balkan peninsula, including the Peloponnese, excluding the

territories nearing Constantinople and coastal Adriatic towns. Single groups of Slavs reached the Dodecanese Islands and even the coast of Asia Minor. To the north-east the settlements tore into the centuries old domain of the Finns, reaching Lake Ladoga. Everywhere there were settlements of farming people, whose basis of livelihood did not differ from those of the Germanic groups or Celts. The main difference was in the social structure.

The level of development of the Slav society remained on the level of tribal community, similar to the contemporary Balts and Finns, however then dynamic forces set them apart, and they soon left the others behind.

The early stage of Slavic settlement and expansion is accompanied by the uniform picture of a fairly primitive material culture. As of the 7th century one of the typical features of this culture is the construction of defended settlements, which were later to become "hillforts and baileys".

One of the important features of the Slavs was their co-existence and cooperation with the nomads, despite their completely different traditions and economic interests. We know nothing about to what extent the Huns harnessed the early Slavs into their military or political campaigns, there are clues – in this case linguistic – that this was very likely. There is fairly strong evidence – of various origins – showing that the Avars played an active role during the stormy history of the Slav settlements. This role – both in a positive and negative sense – engrained itself in written and archaeological evidence, as well as in legends and sayings.

Therefore there is no reason to doubt, that in the mighty expansion in the Balkans the Slavs were allies of the Avars and that moreover they reaped by far the greatest and far reaching profits. On the other hand convincing reports written by the Franks certify that in military cooperation with the Avars the Slavs were used in the most difficult and heaviest jobs and also in the Slav-Avar co-existence (especially true in the central Danube region) they were the underdog, humiliated and oppressed by their nomad allies.

This led to many anti-Avar uprisings and the first known state in the history of Slavs, the state of Samon, founded c. 623 in Moravia as a result of a rebellion against the Avars. This state, most probably a federation of tribes under the rule of a chosen king, was ephemeral and fell apart after 25 years of rule of its creator. However before this happened it withstood many Avar invasions as well as the important outflanking offensive of the Merovingian king Dagobert.

After the downfall of the Avars, the Slavs founded their own kingdom in Moravia, in the first decades of the 9th century, called the Great Moravian Kingdom; its culture was full of Avar traditions. If we were not aware of the history of this political creation and if we were left only with evidence from archaeological excavations, then we would think, that it was here that the Avars experienced their golden period economically, culturally and politically in direct symbiosis with the Slavs.

However before the foundation of the Great Moravian Kingdom, there is clear evidence in the Danube valley of a peaceful Avar-Slav co-existence, the so-called the Kesztel culture, in which we see threads, belonging to both of these groups harmoniously interwoven. In general terms the Avar contribution was everything concerning the strong social organisation, its military aspect, along with armoury, horse equipment and male uniform. The Slavic contribution was everything to do with farming, building and the homestead. It would seem that everything which eludes archaeological studies, such as the whole spiritual aspect, was dominated by Slavic elements. One can suppose, with a lot of probability, that in this mixed ethnic society the Slavic language was dominant.

Almost identical processes of Nomad-Slav symbiosis may be observed in the early history of Bulgaria, where in 679 the nomadic Bulgars invaded the region occupied by eight Slavic tribes. Here too a deep symbiosis occurred, which resulted in a strong state of mixed ethnic character, dominated entirely in respect of language and culture by the Slavs.

The Bulgarian example is more apt than the Avar one in showing that there existed a strong attraction to Slavic culture, which – despite its initial social underdevelopment – made its acquisitions a permanent feature and assimilated many peoples, collected during the process of migration.

Wherever a long-lasting combination of Nomad-Slav symbiosis came about powerful and large states emerged, with Slavonic languages and to a greater or lesser extent Slavonic culture. The one exception here are the Magyars, who maintained their language, as the only nomadic one in Europe, the Slavs only managed to give them a large vocabulary mainly associated with farming.

The examples given illustrate the nomads had a sizable influence in many fields in the shaping of European culture and made their mark, not only in horsemanship or various military aspects.

Analysis of the elements shaping the beginnings of European Medieval culture undoubtedly leads to a search beyond the borders of the Continent. Earlier I have referred to the eastern and central Asia, as a cultural region which inspired the nomads before their arrival in Europe. The picture cannot be complete without mentioning the strongest centre of cultural inspiration, especially in the fields of the arts, whose influence resounded in Europe as well as in the distant tracts of Asia. This is the Persia of the Sassanides, whose lively designs were copied greedily almost all over the contemporary known world.

The pageantry of the Persian court was zealously imitated by the Byzantine emperors. The motif of the ruler in majesty, presented many times in Persian human art, was copied in Christian iconography. The decoration of Persian ceramics is even imitated in Chinese ceramics, which had no match in the contemporary world.

The designs of decorative tapestries, also carpets with characteristic figural motifs in medallion composition were imitated from China to Gaul. Fantastic

animals, gryfs, dragons etc., are even imagined in far away Scandinavia and Ireland. The Persian male dress became the ideal fashion and was eagerly copied by the nomads, as it was best suited to horse riding. The heavily armoured Persian warrior on horesback from the 6th century reminds one of a warrior in Europe in the... 15th century. The capital Ktezifon becomes for the contemporary world what Paris, London, New York and Los Angeles put together – the highest authority in fashion and style.

The Sassanide influence reaches early medieval Europe in various ways and shows signs of the various transformations. The nomads distributed the Persian dress, first amongst the Slavs. When in 865 the Bulgarian ruler Boris was contemplating conversion Christianity, his first question was whether Christians may wear trousers. Only when he received approval from the Pope did he decide to become baptised. Many Persian aspects are mingled into the minor decorative arts of the nomads, especially of the Avars.

Probably through the Avars these decorative aspects appeared in abundance in minor decorative arts and in the military wear of the Franks and Langobards, even reaching the Germanic circles in the British Isles.

Sassanide art had a very strong influence on Byzantine art, not only in specific decorations and designs but also through a general "orientalisation", expressing itself in loud and colourful hues, ostentatious gilt and flashing semi-precious stones (which were even mounted in the walls of monumental buildings) all of which was alien to the spirit of Greaco-Roman art. Via Byzantine art Sassanide influence reached southern Italy, northern Africa and the Visigoth court.

In the distribution of Sassanide influence a significant role was played by Palestine and Coptic Egypt. Here they underwent a selection and transposition, taking on various Christian attributes. An interesting point is that this Christian society had a strong influence over all of Europe and not only in Christian cultures. Various aspects of the decorations, for example intertwining, or the iconographical standards of biblical origin, for example Daniel in the lion's den, Jonas inside a whale, Christ entering Jerusalem were woven into pagan legends or embellished with fantastic animals. These motifs were widespread all over Europe in minor decorative arts and were copied or used as prototypes of this art in pagan circles, as for example in Scandinavia or by the pagan Anglo-Saxons.

This trend of mutual influence is associated with the close contacts linking the early monasteries of western Europe to their counterparts in Syria, Palestine and coptic Egypt. Pilgrimages to the Holy Lands were, important in maintaining this trend, especially prior to the Arab invasion. An interesting point is the large Near Eastern influence in such a far country as Ireland, no doubt caused by the insular Irish (or Iro-Scottish) Christianity, which took its inspiration from the simple monasteries of the Holy Land. Also the large migration of the "Levantine", mostly Syrians, to various west European centres, may explain the conveyance of such inspirations from there and the maintenance of contacts with the homeland.

The Arab invasion caused a substantial change in the contact routes of western Europe, the Holy Lands and the Christian countries of the Near East. As of the beginning of the 7th century there are difficulties with sailing on the Mediterranean, and from the 8th century, after the occupation of Spain, the situation reaches a point, where Christians along the western coasts of that sea cannot even "drop a board into the sea" to say nothing of a ship. At a time when the Avars controlled the Danube route and the Arabs paralysed communications on the Mediterranean – western Europe is left to its own devices. African, Egyptian and Near Eastern imports disappear. The era of olive lamps comes to an end, as there are no olives, wax candles appear, papyrus totally disappears and is replaced by parchment, Indian granite disappears from decorations and is replaced by glass. Thus one of the routes of Sassanide influence also becomes very limited.

The Arabs drew from the Sassanide culture, however the ban on any representation of figures limited it in art to intertwining and architectural designs. In addition Christianity over the Middle Ages views Islam as its number one enemy, mainly due to the loss of Christ's tomb and in general of the Holy Lands. The Christianity world is left without its most precious relics and neither the access to St. Peter's tomb nor the tomb of the supposed brother of Christ, Santiago of Compostella, are enough to replace these losses. The idea of Holy Wars is instigated, al jihad à rebours, which in time brings about the Reconquest and the Crusades, and with new contacts with the East, also with the Muslim culture of Persia.

Despite the Arab invasion the contacts with the East continue. The latest research shows that sailing and pilgrimages, although limited, continued or changed their route via Constantinople, as Byzantium still controls the eastern waters of the Mediterranean. At times – as it appears from the agreement between Charlemagne and Harinem al Rashydem – they even returned to their previous concentration. Other replacement routes were thought of, roundabout trade routes connecting western Europe with Byzantium and the East. The most important of these routes was first made by the Frisians, who organised the route in part by sea via the North Sea and the Baltic to the Polish coast and then along the Dniepr valley to the Black Sea. The Varegs moved this route even further north and further east in the 9th century stretching the water-land route from Scandinavia via the northern lakes of Rus to the Dniepr and through the Black Sea. In western Europe these communication and trade routes were taken over by the Normans, so called Norwegians and Danes. The pirate like monopoly of this trade, intermingled with plunder and what we would today call state terrorism, gave the Scandinavians a clear right of way as mediators between western Europe and Byzantium and the East, and also a quick way of amassing wealth. At the same time two strong cultural waves reached Scandinavia; strong cultural influences and Iron-Scottish decoration from the British Isles and from the Eastern countries, including the Slavs, new motifs which advantageously



merged with the older tradition, appearing in enriched form, producing a veritable baroque version of an animal intertwining decoration.

At the same time the Normans, thus wealthier and stronger, began to find for themselves new places of settlement in Western Europe, reaching Britain, Ireland and even going as far as Iceland and Greenland up to the coast of Labrador. On the Continent Normandy becomes their important prize and Sicily answers their hopes for a link with the southern sun. It is an interesting point that – with such a background – the settlements among the areas inhabited by eastern Slavs are limited to a small enclave on the strategically important river delta near Smolensk and clearly a merchant settlement in the coastal and trade hillforts of Northern Rus. The appearance of the Varg dynasty Rurykov together with their court was a political event and not indicative of settlement and in no way changed the picture of small Varg settlement in Rus.

The overbearing threat, which fell upon western Europe from the Normans took place when the pressure from the faithless in Spain weakened and the Christian side began to mount a counteroffensive. This new threat was also pagan and resulted in the consolidation of the Christian community. The constant harassments of sea attacks on Ireland at the beginning of the 9th century resulted in the recording of local Celtic legends, history, and all that had always been passed down verbally as epic literature – in face of the threatened loss of those who were the carriers of this ancient tradition. At the same time there was a migration of monks, "wandering bishops" and scholars on the Continent, where on the one hand they were greeted with open hands in the Carolingian court, especially by Charles the Bald, but were also considered uncomfortable visitors by the Church hierarchy. Indeed because of the Norman invasions of Ireland many priceless Iro-Scottish books were taken to the Continent and evaded the destruction and the Carolingian renaissance was filled with a Celtic spirit.

In the face of the Norman threat the city walls of Roman towns were rebuilt and new cities received walls.

This all happened at a time when the Christian Slav culture was developing. Founded during the first two decades of the 9th century the Great Moravian Kingdom accepted Christianity in 822 from the Bavarians in Regensburg. Growing in economic strength and wishing to become independent from the eastern Franks (really already Germans) ruled by Loius the German, the Moravians asked for two eminent missionaries and scholars from Byzantium, Konstantine (Cyril) and Methodius, who created for their mission in the Slav environment a slavonic alphabet the so-called glagolic and translated the Gospels, Psalter and liturgical prayers into Slavonic. Up until now the holy languages in Christianity were considered Hebrew, Greek and Latin. This fourth language appeared, regarded as barbarian. In fact already in the 4th century an Arian bishop Germanin Ulfila had translated the Bible into the Germanic language, although this version was never circulated among the faithful.

The Slavonic version of Christianity found great success in Moravia, however the changing politics of the popes towards the usage of the Slavonic language in liturgy, designed to acknowledge it as heretical, as well as the scheming of the German clergy, led to the downfall of the Methodius Church shortly after the death of Methodius in 885. The Slav hierarchy was exiled from Moravia and were welcomed as guests in Bulgaria, where the Slavonic print was continuously developing, not only in liturgical writings, but also in law codes and elsewhere. Twenty years after the death of Methodius the Great Moravian Kingdom ceased to exist, completely shaken by the Hungarians and Germans.

The Great Moravian episode and Bulgarian refuge created and developed Slavonic literature, introducing it to the level of languages of civilised Europe. When it came to the Christianisation of Rus, under the rule of Olga (Christian name of Helen) in the mid 10th century foiled by the apostasy of her son Swiatosław, and ultimately realised by Włodzimierz the Great in 988, this entire written and liturgical slavonic work spread over all of the lands of Rus. Thus, even before the final breakup, which was to follow a century later, Christian Europe was divided into two parts: with west and central Europe under Latin influence, and eastern Europe under Greek, but here most of the faithful used the writing and liturgy of the Slavs. The earlier associations with the Varegs and Rus with Byzantium were strengthened in the cultural and religious community of eastern Europe.

Also here the Christian community was in constant battle against the pagans – in this case with the nomads from the steppes. After the downfall of the great chaganat of the Khazars from the lower Volga, the invasions of the Pechenegs and later Cumans did not stop until finally in the mid 13th century when the Tartars subjugated them.

Also Byzantium was thrown out of most of its Asiatic territories and from all their African lands by the Arabs, a people in the early stage of expansion, still pasture-nomads. Byzantium – the Eastern Empire – became primarily a European state.

The Slav invasions not only brought about destruction. The new settlements of Slavs brought into the Byzantine lands a form of farming in communal territory, which, in the critical situation of farming and countryside in the European part of Byzantine rule, proved to be a surprise rescue. In the economic breakdown of the *latifundia* the Slavic communities used wasted and deserted lands, providing a guarantee to take advantage of all arable lands, as well as making it possible to tax its use. The system of Slavonic agrarian communities was encompassed in the so-called agrarian laws in the 8th century, becoming an official state document. This law led to a renaissance and flourishing of byzantine farming, over the 8th and 9th centuries, which enabled the continuation of the very weakened and divided empire.

It may be said, that the Slavs saved Byzantium and enabled the preservation of all that remained of the Roman Empire through the following centuries.

While the Eastern Empire in the east was dragging itself to its feet, in the West

under the sceptre of the Charlemagne and his successors the idea of the Empire was reforming and their victories spread to lands never touched, following the transient successes of Emperor August – in Germania. *Limes saxonicus vel sorabicus* on the Elbe divided in a visible way the new Western Empire of the Carolingians from eastern Europe, which was now made up of Slavs and Byzantine estates and small islands of nomadic settlements.

In an unusual way this division was repeated in the mid 20th century of the border on the Elbe between the spheres of influence of NATO and European Economic Community in Western Europe and the unity of the Warsaw Pact and the economic community in most of Eastern Europe.

An interesting point is also this, that in the 20th century – partly after the I or after the II World War – in many aspects Europe returned to the borders and divisions of the early Medieval period. The Soviet Union has used its influence to take everything which was the domain of the Slavs of that period, separatism revived languages everywhere: culture and faith (as in northern Ireland). After nearly ten centuries Poland again is a country of one ethnic group and faith. Many territorial divisions made in the early medieval period have shown an uncanny continuation, reaching to our times or again coming to life today.

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