Book Review

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BOOK REVIEWED: HYUN JIN KIM, *THE HUNS, ROME, AND THE BIRTH OF EUROPE* (CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS, 2013). 344 PP. ISBN 978-1107009066.

This is a book with a mission: to show how the Roman Empire was brought down by the Huns. As such, it is likely to be polarising and I certainly found myself in significant disagreement with the author throughout. Some of this is disciplinary. The fifth century AD is an exciting place, where the fading world of the classicist meets the emerging world of the Middle Ages. Where I as a Romanist see the collapse of traditions sustained for almost a millennium, my medievalist colleagues see rebirth and escape from the shackles of a restrictive past. My classical perspective inevitably permeates my view of the various societies north of the Roman Empire, leading me to privilege factors such as writing, urban civilization including the provision of running water, and a single currency and legal system. And maybe I also am so wedded to the Roman way of doing things that I can only see empires in these terms, and thus am not receptive to a description of the Hun Empire as 'well-organised and long-lived' (p. 2). Attila may have been able to threaten, cajole, or influence many people and tribes between the Rhine and the Caucasus in the 440s, but for me that doesn't make an Empire. It does, however, for Kim.

Kim accepts the recent linguistic arguments of de la Vaissière that the Xiongnu nomads in second century China migrated to become the Huns in fourth century Europe. Some modern scholars follow these arguments; others do not. For Kim, the identification allows him to interpret the Huns as part of an underappreciated cultural continuity of steppe nomads. These Huns (and their

Eurasian cousins) have great influence, so much so that institutions occurring in the classical world such as banquets (p. 55), two rulers (p. 56), and hunting on horseback (p. 153) are argued to be Hunnic or Eurasian. By the sixth century, Kim suggests that the Frankish practice of 'levying tribute on conquered or vassalized peoples….rather than just taxing them in the Roman way is also reminiscent of the practice found in Inner Asian and Iranian tributary empires' (p. 148). While accepting Kim's point that nomads had some impact on the classical and post-classical world, I think too much is made of this impact.

Some of my discontent is methodological. I'm accustomed to seeing the primary evidence laid out for discussion, not referred to via secondary authors cited in notes. Here, Kim is not helped by the decision (presumably by CUP) to use endnotes rather than footnotes which results in about 160 pages of text and 140 pages of notes. Nonetheless, if an argument is being made that, for example, the Visigoths followed 'a drastic shift from infantry-based warfare to mounted warfare of the steppe type' (p. 149), I would like to see some primary sources that back this up. When checked, the reference cited was to a general survey which itself cites no primary sources. Our knowledge of Visigothic warfare is sparse, but assertions like this are misleading at best. With the range of material covered, i.e. Eurasia from the fourth to the sixth centuries and frequent digressions, this is demanding (too demanding?) on the writer, but failure to follow it erodes trust. I also would like to see more awareness that authors write at a place, a time, and for a reason. Here Kim is inconsistent. There are moments of inspired interpretation, like the relation of the Battle of the Catalaunian Fields to the Battle of Marathon (pp. 77-78), but all too often his confident style of writing makes it easy to forget that all of our information about the Huns in Europe between the fourth to sixth centuries comes from non-Hunnic authors. Even when we have eyewitness accounts, care is needed in using them; in this respect, an unfortunate omission from the bibliography is Maas, M., 'Fugitives and ethnography in Priscus of Panium', *BMGS* 19 (1995), pp. 146-60.

Europe is also a big place, though admittedly much smaller than the steppes. Nonetheless, I think time and space matter more than Kim wants to accept. In the sixth century, he argues, there was a Hunnic confederation 'stretching from Romania to the eastern end of the Kuban steppe… The only thing that makes us feel there is no order in this region is a general unfamiliarity with names which baffle us, not actual realities. In a region as large as Germany and Italy put together there existed a Hunnic confederation under Attila's heirs' (p. 142). To reach this conclusion, however, requires some violence to the primary sources. Two sixth-century lists, one of five peoples in Jordanes, the other of thirteen peoples in Pseudo-Zachariah, are edited down to four peoples. I find it easy to accept that these contemporaries (and other sixth-century writers like such as Procopius and Agathias both of whom also think the Kutrigurs were different from the Utigurs) had some reason for claiming that they were separate peoples. I prefer this conclusion to un-argued statements such as 'Utigurs, Kutrigurs and Onogurs were in all likelihood identical with the Bulgars' (p. 141).

Again, maybe because I'm a Romanist, I also wanted to know more about Hun interaction with the Romans. Kim rejects Heather's influential (though controversial) 1995 *English Historical Review* article, though still laying responsibility for the fall of the Western Empire firmly on the Huns. My meta-narrative is obviously different from Kim's (and Heather's for that matter), but I still think the reasons for the fall of the Roman Empire are not agreed on by historians, many of whom might suggest causes other than the Huns. I also remain unconvinced that Attila's empire 'from its foundation as an imperial entity in the 370s persisted in continuous expansion until the 450s' (p. 89). I would have liked to see Kim deal with some of the problems presented by the evidence for his argument. In particular, I would point to the fact that although the Huns arrived in Europe in the mid-late fourth century, no Hun ruler can be named until the early fifth century. Nor can we trace succession from one Hun ruler to another until we reach the succession of Rua in the 430s by his nephews Bleda and Attila. And I wanted to know much more about how this imperial entity was run when there is no evidence of Hunnic administration comparable to what we know of settled Empires, i.e. no evidence of written administration, administrative structures such as provinces or officials, professional administrators, or codes of law. Of course the Huns had hierarchies, aristocrats, and secretaries, but I find it hard to reconcile this sort of evidence with the claim that 'their Empire was a politically advanced military state' (p. 156). There is more evidence of administrative structures in thirteenth century BC Knossos (Linear B tablets), sixth century AD Gaul (various law codes), or seventh century AD England (Tribal Hidage) than there is of the fifth century AD Hun Empire, none of which I would describe as politically advanced.

I'm clearly guilty of many of the blinkered points of view warned about in the beginning of the book (p. 2). Despite this, I was very much engaged by this short and easy to read book. For a graduate seminar on medieval history it would be an excellent text to start discussions. If readers (students) have time to read two or three books on the Huns this volume is well worth considering; if there is only time for one then Christopher Kelly's *Attila the Hun* is a better introduction to the role played by the Huns in the end of the Western Roman Empire.