The political organization of steppe empires and their contribution to Eurasian inter-connectivity

Comparative studies of Eurasian empires in general are without a doubt a relatively recent phenomenon. The comparative analysis of the history and political organisation of Eurasian empires of the 4th and 5th centuries AD in particular has never been seriously attempted. Yet, in these two centuries the various regions of the Eurasian continent China, Persia, India and Rome, underwent a similar experience, the invasion and settlement of Inner Asian peoples mostly called the Huns or Xiongnu. What was the impact of this near ‘global’ phenomenon? Purely wanton destruction as traditional historiography has claimed or was it the facilitation of interconnectivity, interaction and an active impetus for political transformation? As Prof. Skaff in chapter 2 and Dr. Adali in chapter 3 of this volume also demonstrate clearly, it is now time to abandon the false dichotomy of the supposedly ‘incompatible’, ‘barbarian’ nomads vs. ‘civilized’, ‘sedentary’ peoples paradigm and begin to appreciate the reality of “entangled histories”.1 The history of Antiquity and the so-called ‘Middle Ages’ could in fact arguably be described as the history of intense engagement and interaction between the Inner Asian world and the peripheries of Eurasia (China, Europe, India and Iran).2

This chapter will argue that Inner Asian steppe empires and peoples were the active facilitators of political innovation in late antique and early medieval Eurasia. The quasi-‘feudal’ (for want of a better term) system of political organisation developed by Inner Asian peoples such as the Xiongnu/Huns and the Scythians/Saka may have had a significant impact on the political organisation of the Tuoba Xianbei Northern

2 This chapter draws inspiration from the content and conclusions of my two previous books on the Huns: Kim (2013); Kim (2015).
Wei Empire of Northern China, the later Sassanian Empire of Persia and the Frankish Empire in Europe. Because of the lack of space available this chapter will focus specifically on the political organisation of the Xiongnu/Huns and their impact on the development of incipient Frankish ‘feudalism’ in Western Europe.

In traditional historiography it has long been assumed (erroneously) that Inner Asia from which the Huns of Europe originated, was a region of politically and culturally ‘backward’ peoples. The Huns were thought to be politically ‘primitive’ with only rudimentary, if any at all, political organisation in the mid 4th century AD, when they first appear in our Greco-Roman records, and culturally backward (whatever that implies), a savage people with nothing to contribute to the development of European ‘civilization’. This astonishingly flawed understanding of the political organisation of the Hunnic Empire and the culture of the Huns in general largely stems from the partial acceptance and internalization of certain elements of the pseudo-ethnography on the Huns found in the work of the contemporary 4th century AD Roman historian Ammianus Marcellinus. Numerous scholars in both Classics and Inner Asian Studies have repeatedly pointed out that Ammianus’ account of Hunnic society belongs in the category of fairytales. It is most certainly not fact-based ethnography or history. Yet, the myth of the ‘primitive Huns’ has proven to be surprisingly enduring both among the general reading public and even in academia.

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3 On the Hun-Xiongnu identification see La Vaissière (2005), 3-26. See also Kim (2013), 26-9, for an extended summary of scholarship in support of the identification.
4 For instance Kelly (2009), whose engaging book on the Huns, unfortunately uses the heading ‘a backward steppe’ as the title for one of its chapters, 17-28.
5 Maenchen-Helfen (1973), 9-15; King (1987), 77-95; Bona (1991), 41; Barnes (1998), 95-6; Haussig (2000), 257; etc. Maenchen-Helfen was highly critical when discussing the accuracy of Ammianus’ descriptions of the Huns. He, however, was still inclined to believe that there was some historically valid information in Ammianus’ pseudo-ethnography. This assessment is rightly rejected by King.
6 Thompson (1948), 6-8; Heather (2009), 215-6, Halsall (2007), 171-2, and Matthews (1989), 332-42, 353, whose otherwise admirable scholarship has been led astray by the belief in the essential accuracy of Ammianus’ portrait of a primitive Hunnic political community. This view, however, cannot be substantiated and is due to the neglect of the latest scholarly research on Central Asian history and
The fallacy of taking literally (or seriously) any of the fictitious descriptions of the Huns in Ammianus, has already been criticized and analysed in exhaustive detail by Maenchen-Helfen, Richter⁷ and King. They have proven beyond any reasonable doubt that Ammianus’ ‘ethnography’ on the Huns is based on much earlier Greco-Roman ethnography on steppe nomads. It is definitely not an eye-witness description of the contemporary Huns and their political organisation. There is therefore neither the need nor the space here in this chapter to demonstrate yet again the error of every detail of Ammianus’ description in full. However, it is necessary to address further the long-standing supposition, ultimately derived from Ammianus, that the Hunnic Empire, because of its origin in the so-called ‘primitive steppe’, was merely a ‘primitive tribal society’, which could not have contributed anything to European political developments.

In current Inner Asian scholarship there is an unresolved debate on how one should classify early steppe empires such as the Xiongnu (in early Middle Chinese, possibly pronounced Hun-nu⁸). This debate is of particular importance because the Xiongnu provided the political model on which the Huns and other Inner Asian peoples later built their empires and states/proto-states. Although all Inner Asian specialists are in complete agreement on the reality of the existence of impressive political complexity within Inner Asian steppe empires, some argue that these Inner Asian empires were sophisticated super-complex tribal confederacies with imperial dimensions rather than actual ‘supra-tribal’ state entities⁹. The weight of the evidence, however, increasingly

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⁸ Golden (2009), 83.
suggests that Inner Asian empires prior to the rise of the Huns achieved what could be termed statehood or an early form of statehood\textsuperscript{10}.

That the Huns did not originate from a region mired in ‘political backwardness’ is amply demonstrated when we observe in greater detail the political system of the famous Xiongnu. The Xiongnu and other Inner Asians are frequently labelled nomads (a more accurate designation would be hybrid agro-pastoralist). This categorization as nomads, however, is an error, if we are equating nomadism with decentralization and absence of political order. The Xiongnu and other so-called ‘nomad’ polities possessed fixed territorial boundaries and excellent organizational capacity. For these ‘nomads’ regular movements under the control of an authoritative leadership and corresponding organization was essential for the survival of their community in a very fragile ecological environment and this necessity eventually contributed to the formation of tightly organized state entities capable of controlling vast territories in the steppes and adjacent regions\textsuperscript{11}.

This Inner Asian political model, for want of a better term, has been called quasi-feudal\textsuperscript{12}. It was a hierarchical system concentrating power in the hands of an emperor called the Shanyu/Chanyu (單于, dàn-wà, representing darywa in Early Middle Chinese\textsuperscript{13}). The central government, which the Shanyu/Chanyu headed, was in practice run by elite officials called the Gu-du marquesses, who had the responsibility of managing relations between the central government and provincial governments.

\textsuperscript{10} Krader (1978), 93-108; Di Cosmo (2011), 44-5. For discussion on what constitutes an ‘early state’ see Claessen and Skalnik (1978b), 22-3 and also Scheidel (2011), 114. See also Khazanov (1984).


\textsuperscript{12} de Crespigny (1984),178; Pritsak (1954c), 239.

\textsuperscript{13} Pulleyblank (2000), 64.
within the Xiongnu Empire. To the East and West of the central government there were two principal kings (representing the two principal wings of the empire in a dual system\textsuperscript{14}), the Wise King of the Left (ruler of the East with orientation to the South, usually the heir to the throne) and the Wise King of the Right (ruler of the West). Ranking right below these two kings were the Luli kings of the Left and Right, who together with the Wise Kings administered the 4 main subdivisions of the Xiongnu Empire. The four kings (the sons and brothers of the reigning emperor) constituted the so-called 4 horns and were each supported by his own administrative bureaucracy\textsuperscript{15}. There were also 6 further kings labelled the 6 horns. They were the Rizhu kings of the Left and Right (titles also held exclusively by the sons and younger brothers of the Shanyu at least initially), Wenyuti kings of the Left and Right, and the Zhanjiang Kings of the Left and Right\textsuperscript{16}.

The Xiongnu Empire also possessed 24 major provinces or governorships controlled by the twenty-four imperial leaders/ministers called ‘Ten thousand Horsemen’\textsuperscript{17}. These leaders usually consisted of members of the imperial clan and nobles of the three Xiongnu aristocratic clans\textsuperscript{18}. For the government of the more distant regions under the suzerainty of the Xiongnu, e.g. the oasis cities of the Tarim basin, the

\textsuperscript{14} Kradin (2011), 93, argues that there was originally a tripartite administrative system within the Xiongnu Empire that gradually evolved into a dual system.

\textsuperscript{15} The 4 kings are called ‘horns’ in the \textit{Hou Hanshu}, a Chinese source compiled in the 5\textsuperscript{th} century AD recording the history of the Later Han Period (25-220 AD). See also Kradin (2011), 89; Christian (1998), 194; de Crespigny (1984), 176-7. The 4 preeminent kings reappear in later Hunnic contexts and are found among the Volga Bulgars (Hunnic descendants in Europe). See Pritsak (1954a), 379. The institution is also found among the Gôktûrs who ruler Inner Asia after the demise of the Huns and the Rouran Khaganate, see Pritsak (1954b), 186.

\textsuperscript{16} \textit{Hou Hanshu} 79. 2944. See also Kradin (2011), 92, and de Crespigny (1984), 177. Mori (1973), 22-3, argues that the 6 horns were added to the Xiongnu political system well after 97 BC and was a feature specific to the Southern Xiongnu and not the original Xiongnu Empire. His view has been widely criticized and is based on the observation that these titles do not appear in the earlier \textit{Shiji}. Less problematic is his observation (pp. 30-1) that the office of Rizhu kings was later transferred from members of the imperial clan to those of aristocratic Huyan clan who were related to the Chanyus by marriage. See also Brosseder and Miller (2011), 20.

\textsuperscript{17} See Kürsat-Ahlers (1994), 276.

\textsuperscript{18} Ishjamts (1994), 158; Kollautz and Miyakawa (1970), 44.
Xiongnu allowed local rulers who had submitted to retain their positions under the supervision of the Xiongnu ‘Commandant in charge of Slaves’. This overseer was himself placed under the supervision of the Xiongnu Rizhu king and as the head of both the civil and military administration of the locality had the power to tax local city-states and to conscript corvée labour.\(^{19}\)

At the bottom of this highly complex administrative hierarchy there were subordinate tribal leaders who were issued titles such as sub-kings, prime ministers, chief commandants, household administrators, chü-ch’ü officials, and so on. They were placed under the rule of major Xiongnu governors, but could also at times exercise a degree of local autonomy, provided they efficiently collected their due taxes for the Xiongnu government.\(^{20}\) A system of decimal ranks (thousands, hundreds, tens) was used to mobilize troops under a single command structure during times of war\(^ {21}\) and censuses were also taken to determine the empire’s reserve of manpower and livestock.\(^{22}\)

A replica of this earlier highly elaborate political system is later found among the Huns in Europe in the 4\(^{th}\) and 5\(^{th}\) centuries AD. The Xiongnu system of appointing sub-kings under the authority of a paramount ruler is also a feature of the Hun system of government in Europe. We can note that king Uldin, the first Hunnic ruler to be named by our Greco-Roman sources, was a \textit{regulus} (sub-king) and according to Olympiodorus the Hunnic sub-king Donatus was a vassal of his overlord the ‘\(\text{	extit{	extipa{1}}} \tau\ta\nu\v\)’

\(^{19}\) Yü (1990), 127-8.
\(^{21}\) Barfield (1981), 49. For archaeological evidence of this highly sophisticated social hierarchy among the Xiongnu see Honeychurch and Amartuvshin (2006), 264-5. See also Kürsat-Ahlers (1994), 289-90, for the importance of Xiongnu military organization in the formation of Xiongnu political administration.
\(^{22}\) Christian (1998), 194.
ῥηγὼν πρῶτος’ (the first of the kings) Charaton. The strict hierarchy that characterised the Xiongnu system discussed above was likewise the dominant feature of the Hun system. We learn that in one of the Hunnic subdivisions in the Ukraine, the Akatziri, their leader Kouridachus, who was senior in office (πρεσβύτερον ὄντα τῇ ἄρχῃ), was given his gifts second by the Roman ambassador by mistake. This was interpreted as a slight and denying Kouridachus the honours due to his rank (οὐ κατὰ τάξιν) Later Attila the Hun appoints his eldest son Ellac as overlord of this rebellious eastern subdivision. Ellac’s appointment to rulership over the Akatziri incidentally also shows the old Xiongnu practice of giving key ‘fiefs’/provinces to members of the royal family. The Hunnic Empire disintegrated after the death of Attila because of an unresolved dispute between Attila’s heirs over the distribution of these ‘fiefs’.

Dualism, representing the two wings (Left and right or East and West) of the steppe imperial system, which we have already noted as a key feature of Xiongnu political organisation, was also a characteristic feature of the Hunnic Empire. The Hun king Ruga is known to have ruled together with his brother Oktar. According to the Getica (35.180), ‘germani Octar et Roas, qui ante Attilam regnum tenuisse narrantur’. The brothers were followed in the Hunnic kingship by their nephews Bleda and Attila. Attila, once he attained supreme power, also apportioned the East to his son Ellac in

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23 Olympiodorus fr. 19 (Bibl. Cod. 80, 173), Blockley (1983), 182.
25 Ibid.
26 See also Pritsak (1954c), 240.
27 Priscus fr. 25 (Jordanes Get. 50, 259-63), Blockley (1983), 319-21. The word ‘fief’ is a loaded term which means different things for different historians. See Reynolds (1994), 12, 48-74. For the sake of convenience, the term in brackets is used here as a synonym for appanage and grants of large territories by the king to his close vassals.
28 Findley (2005), 33.
30 Sinor (1990), 188; Croke (1981), 160, 164.
the familiar dual system. Priscus calls Attila the ‘praecipuus Hunnorum rex’, the high king of the Huns, which points to the existence of other Hunnic sub-kings under his rule. In the 460s AD during the brief restoration of Hunnic rule along the Danube we again see two rulers, Dengizich and Ernakh (the sons of Attila in the West and East respectively). The so-called ‘Bulgar’ successors to the Hunnic Empire in the Pontic steppes also had two wings, the Kutrigurs in the West and the Utigurs in the East, ruled, according to their foundation legend recorded in Procopius, by the two sons of a dynastic founder, presumably Ernakh.

Of particular interest also is the group of high-ranking officials in the Hun hierarchy whom Priscus calls the logades. This group included men such as Onegesius, the ‘grand vizier’, Edeco, the Hunnic ruler of the Sciri and Berik ‘the ruler of many villages in Scythia’ due to his noble birth. These officials were clearly the equivalent of the Gudu marquesses and the 24 governors of the left and right (lords of ten thousand horsemen), which we have seen in the Xiongnu system. This is confirmed by the fact that these logades in different stages of their career function as ambassadors and communiqués to vassal tribes (Onegesius for instance was sent to the Akatziiri to supervise the appointment of Ellac as the overlord of that tribe, Edeco to negotiate with the Eastern Roman government in Constantinople). As among the Xiongnu the Huns also assign key military commands to members of their royal family, e.g. Basich and Kursich, who commanded an expedition against Sassanian

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32 Procopius 8. 5.1-4. See Golden (1992), 103, for an excellent discussion on the Bulgar prince list, which features Attila and Ernakh as the founding ancestors of the Bulgars (including the Kutrigurs and Utigurs).
33 Priscus, fr. 13, Blockley (1983), 284. Again indicative of the Hunnic practice of distributing ‘fiefs’ to royal family members and top ranking nobles as among the earlier Xiongnu. See also Thompson (1996), 181, and Demougeot (1979), 533, 541-2.
34 For discussion on similar functions (diplomatic missions and military assignments) performed by Xiongnu governors/sub-kings dispatched by the central government see Pritsak (1954b), 194.
35 Priscus fr. 11, Blockley (1983), 258.
Persia in the 420s AD\textsuperscript{36}. The name or rather the title of one of these Hunnic nobles is telling, Emmedzur, which is a Latinized corruption of Hunnic ämäcur, ‘horse lord’. This of course must be a reference to the Xiongnu title for governor, ‘lord of ten thousand horsemen’\textsuperscript{37}.

Priscus also helpfully notes that there was a strict regulated hierarchy among the logades. This is revealed through the distinctly Inner Asian seating arrangements during the state banquets organized by Attila for his vassals and the visiting Roman ambassadors. Onegesius and Berik, both important logades, according to Priscus, were seated to the right and left of the Hunnic king respectively. However, Onegesius who outranked Berik in the Hunnic hierarchy sat to the right of the king, which was the position of honour. The right, denoting the East with orientation towards the north, always had precedence over the left (west) in steppe political systems\textsuperscript{38} and this passage of Priscus confirms that the same organisational arrangement was in existence among the Huns in the 5\textsuperscript{th} century AD. Members of the royal family who ranked even higher than the logades, e.g. Oebersius, the paternal uncle of the king, and Ellac, the king’s eldest son (presumably the equivalent to the Xiongnu Wise Kings of the Left and Right), were seated in conspicuous positions of honour right next to the king himself on the same couch\textsuperscript{39}.

\begin{footnotesize}
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\item Blockley (1983), 386.
\item Altheim (1959), vo. 1, 27.
\item The late Muslim geographer Ibn Fadlan (922 AD) notes that the Khazars and the Volga Bulgars (descendants of the Huns) also held the right (East) as the place of honour. The most important princes were thus seated to the right of the ruler in ceremonial settings, as in the Hunnic context. See Velidî Togan (1939), 43, 212. See also Pritsak (1954a), 379.
\item Priscus fr. 13; 14, Blockley (1983), 284, 290. These logades were clearly not random selections of men, but are identical with the ranked graded-officials of the Xiongnu. This is confirmed by the later East Roma/Byzantine usage of the same term to describe graded-officials within the Avar Empire that succeeded the Huns, see Pohl (1988), 186.
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The Huns thus possessed a governmental apparatus of the Inner Asian variety, significantly different from the more rudimentary political organization found among the contemporary Germanic confederacies, possessing a tighter political command structure, precise ranks among government officials and allocation of clearly defined roles to subject peoples. In this regulated Inner Asian empire taxes and tribute were also regularly collected by presumably the lower-ranking officials under the direction of the logades and the central government. Taxes seem to have been collected usually in the form of agricultural produce of various kinds from the empire’s sedentary agrarian subject population.

We have thus noted that the Huns had their equivalent of the Xiongnu dual kingship, Gudu marquesses, Lords of Ten Thousand Horsemen, system of taxation and elaborate hierarchy. It is also highly probable that they likewise possessed the above-mentioned Xiongnu political institutions of the 4 horn kings and 6 horn kings. We have already noted earlier that in Volga Bulgaria founded by a branch of the Bulgars (later Huns) there were 4 pre-eminent sub-kings, the equivalent of the old Xiongnu 4 horns kings representing the 4 main sub-divisions of the Empire, who sat to the right of the supreme ruler. Although there is no direct evidence that the Huns possessed this institution, given the fact that they are shown to have retained every other aspect of the old Xiongnu political system, it is almost certain that they too possessed their own version of the 4 horn kings.

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40 Burns (1984), 46-7, 189.
41 Chelchal, a Hun in Roman service, during Dengizich’s invasion of the Roman Empire in the late 460s vividly describes this Hunnic practice of tax/tribute collection to the Goths in the Hunnic army. The unpleasant memory of these tax collections drives the Goths to mutiny against their Hunnic officers, Priscus fr. 49, Blockley (1983), 356.
42 See Ishjants (1994), 158, for a description of the 6 horns nobles. See also de Crespigny (1984), 177.
43 Pritsak (1954a), 379.
The evidence for the existence of the 6 horn kings among the Huns is more substantial. In the Xiongnu Empire these 6 horn kings consisted of members of the royal family (Xulianti) and other select aristocrats (usually those linked to the imperial family by marriage) from three other high-ranking noble families, the Huyan, Lan, Xubu (later also the Qiulin clan). When rendered in Turkic this institution would have been called Alti (common Turkic, six) or Ultta (Chuvash, six) cur (nobles). In the Greek transliteration this was rendered Oultizouroi in the Hunnic context. The institution would later evolve into the College of 6 boliades (boyars/nobles) in the Danubian Bulgarian Empire formed by Hunnic descendants.

The transfer of Xiongnu political practices from Inner Asia to the Huns in Europe is remarkable enough. However, we discover that a very similar political system is also found among the Franks of Western Europe under the famous Merovingian dynasty (ca. 450-752 AD), whose kingdom/empire absorbed the Gallic territories of the former Western Roman Empire and the western Germanic territories of the Hunnic Empires. The Hunnic system of ‘fief’ allocation to royal family members, division of the patrimonial inheritance (the kingdom) among royal heirs, the gradation of rank among nobles and territorial/tribal lords, and the allocation of political office based on these ranks, is very similar to the system found among the Merovingian and Carolingian Franks, who also divided their kingdom into counties and territorial

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45 In Chuvash, the only living descendent of the Oghuric Turkic language of the Huns alti (six in common Turkic) is rendered ultta, hence ulticur instead of alticur. This reconstruction is rejected by Doerfer (1973), 20. However, Doerfer’s argument is based on the false premise that the Volga Bulgarian inscription from the late Middle Ages in which six is rendered alti, rather than ultta, accurately reflects the original Oghuric Turkic of the earlier 5th century AD. The actual linguistic evidence from the 5th century suggests otherwise and this rendering of Ultta as Alti in the 13th/14th century inscription is a reflection of the impact of Kipchaq Turkic on contemporary Volga Bulgarian, not a reflection of the Hunnic-Bulgur Oghuric Turkic language of the early Middle Ages.
46 Referred to as a tribe in Agathias 5.11.2, Frendo (1975), 146. It is, however, a reference not to a specific tribe, but to tribes led by the six lords. See Altheim (1959), vol. 1, 27.
47 Constantine Porphyrogenitus, De Cerimonis Aulae Byzantinae, 2.47. See also Haussig (2000), 277.
principalities that were distributed as ‘fiefs’ to royal family members and to a class of ranked military nobles\textsuperscript{48}. This can hardly be a coincidence.

Among the Franks we observe the entrenchment of the Inner Asian concept of rulership, quite alien to Western Europe before the arrival of the Huns. Inner Asian political entities were distinguished by their strict observance of the dynastic principle buttressed by the concept of the sacred, legitmizing, hereditary charisma of the ruling dynasty. The concept is found among the earlier Xiongnu (whose ruling dynasty lasted well over 500 years) and also in the Rouran Khaganate (Avars (?) in Mongolia, whose ruling house lasted for ca. 200 years) which co-existed with the Huns (Wei Shu 103.2294–Bei Shi 98.3255). The Bulgars who succeeded the Huns in Europe also likewise in the old Inner Asian manner stressed the sacred, divine origins of their ruling dynasty\textsuperscript{49}. The Merovingian Franks, whose kingdom was probably established with Hunnic military aid\textsuperscript{50}, similarly emphasized the legitmizing sacred charima of their ‘long-haired kings’ who traced their lineage to the founding kings Childeric and Clovis.

The Franks like the Inner Asian Huns and Turco-Mongols showed an astonishing attachment to this dynastic principle in sharp contrast to the Romans and earlier Germanic tribal confederacies, among whom the dynastic principle was never fully established or even accepted. So-called dynasties in the Roman Empire for instance never lasted for more than three or four generations at the most. As a matter of fact, right up to the 6th century AD an imperial house ruling for even just 3 or 4

\textsuperscript{48} See Bloch (1961), 394-5.
\textsuperscript{49} See Khazanov (2001), 4-5; Krader (1958), 79; Stepanov (2001), 17.
\textsuperscript{50} See Kim (2013), 81-3, for a detailed discussion on the Hunnic involvement in the enthronement and rise to power of Childeric, the father of Clovis.
generations was highly exceptional by Roman standards. Most ‘dynasties’ lasted barely two generations. In contrast the Merovingian dynasty armed with the Inner Asian variety of legitimacy and dynastic principle (suitably buttressed by newly adopted Christian ideas of legitimacy also) maintained their rule for an astonishing 300 years.

Instead of the old Germanic confederacy in which virtually independent and largely equal petty kings and chiefs of different dynastic lineages regularly defied the authority of the judge or over-king (who exercised greater power than his peers only during emergencies and times of war), in Frankish Europe we find a much stronger, regulated kingship, which is confined to a single dynasty, and an elaborate hierarchy of the steppe Inner Asian sort where the supreme ruler reigns in conjunction with his brothers (in some instances also male cousins) in a collective system with a clearly stratified ranking system for subordinate, inferior sub-kings and dukes. Thus in exactly the same way as among the Huns, the Frankish kings allocated major ‘fiefs’ to their brothers and cousins who together partitioned the royal realm/patrimony, but at the same time managed to maintain the principle of the unity of the dynastic state.

After the death of Childeric, the dynastic founder, we begin to see this principle being applied in practice. Clovis, Childeric’s young heir, did not immediately start ruling all of his father’s patrimony, but found himself sharing the rule of the Franks with three other kings, a total of 4: Sigibert (King of the Ripuarian Franks), Chararic, and Ragnachar (a cousin of Clovis who ruled at Cambrai). Just like Attila before him

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51 Oosten (1996), 222-3. Hummer (1998), 12, accurately points out that this new form of kingship among the Franks was triggered by influences from the Eurasian steppes.


53 Geary (1988), 117.
Clovis had to eliminate his relatives and allies to seize supreme power according to the principle of Inner Asian tanistry. After this bloodletting, the notion of an undivided Merovingian dynastic state would remain intact despite repeated partitions that followed the death of every prominent king. This is of course clearly reminiscent of the same phenomenon found in Inner Asian states such as the Xiongnu and the Hunnic Empire described earlier.

The division of the realm into two main wings and also 4 constituent parts, an old Inner Asian political practice (recall the dualism and 4 main sub-divisions of the Xiongnu Empire discussed earlier), is repeated time and again in Merovingian history. The Merovingian kingdom in exactly the same way as the steppe empires of Inner Asia had two main wings/divisions, initially the Salian and Ripurian, then later with territorial adjustments Neustria and Austrasia (a dual system). Later Burgundy was added to the mix as the third regnum. However, Burgundy was soon combined with Neustria to re-establish the dual structure (Aquitaine was also at times governed separately as a fourth kingdom, but in a subordinate position). What is revealing is the fact that wherever Inner Asians are found in any substantial numbers, this mode of governing/partitioning the realm was practiced with regularity. For instance in the Alan (Inner Asian) dominated tribal confederacy that conquered Roman Spain in the first quarter of the 5th century AD, the realm was in the familiar Inner Asian manner divided into four territorial sub-divisions. The dominant Alans were allotted the largest and most important share, nearly half of Spain consisting of the old Roman provinces of Lusitania and Carthaginensis. The Siling Vandals were given the

55 Geary (1988), 157; Goetz (2003), 326.
province of Baetica. The Suebi and the Hasding Vandals were each given half of Gallaecia, creating 4 subdivisions\textsuperscript{56}.

That none of the above was an accident or simply a coincidence, is shown by what happens at the death of the ruthless Clovis in 511 AD. The Frankish kingdom is again divided among his four sons\textsuperscript{57}. This was not simply because Clovis happened to have 4 surviving sons. Rather what we are seeing is a structural imitation of Inner Asian state organisation. This is shown clearly by yet another partition which occurs after the death of Clovis’ last surviving son Chlotar I in 561 AD\textsuperscript{58}. Again the Frankish realm was divided into four parts\textsuperscript{59}. Despite these partitions, however, the dynastic state was still regarded by the Franks, as among the Huns and other Inner Asians, as a single entity\textsuperscript{60}. This enabled the periodic ‘reunification’ or rather centralization of power within the dynastic state under the authority of a particularly assertive and strong ruler such as Chlotar II in 613 AD\textsuperscript{61}. The Franks also utilized the Hunnic/ Inner Asian practice of appointing sub-kings and regularly distributed ‘fiefs’ to members of the royal family and high ranking nobles. By way of example King Dagobert I who like Chlotar II united the Frankish realm under his authority, before he became the supreme Frankish king was himself a sub-king. In 629 AD Dagobert would appoint or rather concede the appointment of his half-brother Charibert II (629-32) as sub-king of a part of Aquitaine\textsuperscript{62}.

\textsuperscript{56} See Arce (2003), 138-140.
\textsuperscript{57} Bachrach (1972), 18; Kaiser (1993), 28; Wood (1994), 50.
\textsuperscript{58} James (1988), 171.
\textsuperscript{59} Wood (1994), 56.
\textsuperscript{60} Geary (1988), 117.
\textsuperscript{62} Wickham (2009), 116-19.
This Inner Asian system of governance was continued by the Carolingians who in the 8th century AD displaced the 300 year old Merovingian dynasty as the new ruling house of the Franks. The great Charlemagne in 781 AD, following what was by then established Frankish tradition, appointed his two younger sons Louis and Pepin sub-kings of Aquitaine and Italy. In exactly the same fashion as in the earlier Xiongnu and Hunnic empires, less important ‘fiefs’ and buffer zones between the core Frankish territories and the lands controlled by foreign powers were allocated to Frankish dukes who ranked below the royal sub-kings. These dukes controlled more distant territories such as Bavaria, Thuringia, Rhaetia, Provence, and sometimes also Aquitaine. Thus the Frankish political system was without doubt a conscious imitation of the preceding Inner Asian state model, described above, which was imported into Europe by the Huns and other Inner Asians such as the Alans.

Some might disagree with this analysis and argue that the Franks were not imitating Inner Asian practices, but rather they had simply inherited from the Romans the model of the tetrarchy attempted during the reign of Diocletian (284-305 AD) or the Franks were drawing on the subsequent Roman model of the 4 praetorian prefectures. Such arguments are however clearly unsustainable, since the specific, characteristic features of the Frankish system, as demonstrated above, clearly align it with the political systems found in Inner Asia rather than with the proposed Roman models. The tetrarchy in the Roman Empire was a one-off experiment that ultimately failed after just two decades, and was then hastily abandoned. The system of prefectures is also clearly different in nature from the Merovingian dynastic partitions. Both the Roman tetrarchy and the system of prefectures were innovations attempted

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63 Grierson (1965), 290; Ganshof (1971), 278; McKitterick (1983), 53.
65 For instance see Geary (1988), 95.
by the Roman state primarily to resolve critical administrative problems faced by the empire during Late Antiquity. The Merovingian territorial divisions in contrast were not caused primarily by administrative concerns, but rather by the necessity of providing ‘fiefs’/territories to royal heirs according to the very Inner Asian laws of dynastic succession. In Inner Asia any legitimate male heir of the ruling dynasty was entitled to his share of the patrimony (the dynastic state). This necessitated the constant division of territory to satisfy potential heirs and also precipitated struggles over the extent and value of individual shares of the dynastic inheritance, which is exactly what we find happening among the Franks under the Merovingians. The Franks were thus following Inner Asian dynastic precedents, not Roman administrative innovations.

This is made even clearer when we observe how territory was distributed to royal heirs. In the event of a partition Frankish kings and sub-kings usually assigned major former Roman administrative centers as the primary residences of royal power. However, larger Roman administrative divisions and Roman provincial boundaries were completely ignored when it came to demarcating and determining the boundary, extent and size of the various territories and sub-kingdoms distributed to contending heirs. This implies that Roman administrative norms and precedents were not the key factor in determining the nature and extent of territorial divisions. What mattered was the comparative value of urban centers and population groups allotted to the specific heirs, which, as in Inner Asian polities, would determine who among the kings had seniority and whether the distribution was ‘fair’ or ‘unfair’ to those involved in the dynastic partition. What is more, the Frankish practice of distributing

smaller and less important territorial ‘fiefs’ to relatives of the royal family and also graded members of the high nobility, is definitely Inner Asian inspired, and has simply no equivalent in the Roman tradition.

Also noteworthy is the fact that the oath of loyalty of the vassals to the king that characterized the Merovingian political order and equally also later ‘feudal’ Europe which arose out of the ‘proto-feudal’ Frankish system of governance, had precedents in the Hunnic Empire where sub-kings and major vassals were required to swear an oath of loyalty and allegiance to the supreme Hun King\(^6\). Other similarities between the Frankish state and Inner Asian polities abound. The annual Frankish assemblies\(^6\), where the rank and file of the Frankish army and the military nobility of the kingdom in the presence of the king/kings discussed critical issues relating to foreign policy and also attended to legal disputes, closely resembles the Inner Asian Turco-Mongol assemblies like the Kuriltai where key foreign policy issues, the all important matter of dynastic succession and legal issues were debated and decided. The Frankish practice of tribute-collection from subjugated peoples and vassal states, e.g. from the Lombard kingdom in Italy, the Saxon tribes in Germany and the Gallo-Romans inhabitants of the core Frankish lands\(^7\), in lieu of the more direct taxation of the Roman sort, may also be partially the result of the influence of the Inner Asian model of tributary empires\(^8\). Furthermore, the Frankish institution of the *missi regii*, closely resembles the functions of the Hunnic *logades* mentioned earlier in the chapter\(^9\).

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\(^6\) Jordanes *Getica* 48.248. Gesimund and the Goths under his rule support Balamber, king of the Huns, against another Gothic ruler by the name of Vinitharius because Gesimund was mindful of his oath of fidelity to the Huns.

\(^7\) Wickham (2009), 122-3.

\(^8\) Geary (1988), 100.

\(^9\) Ganshof (1971), 96; Reuter (1985), 75-6.

\(^10\) Altheim (1959), vol. 4, 25. For the *missi regii* see also Grierson (1965), 291, and Ganshof (1971), 56-8, 126-135, 166-7, 173, for more information.
Naturally, the impact of pre-existing Roman administrative structures on the Merovingian Frankish state must also be considered in order to arrive at a holistic assessment of the nature of the Frankish political system. However, what can no longer be denied or disputed is the fact that the Merovingian kingdoms were built on a highly complex and hybrid political model that combined pre-existing Roman administrative institutions, Christian religious ideology, Germanic traditions and perhaps most importantly of all steppe derived Inner Asian dynastic political practices and stratified hierarchy. Only when we consider all these factors together can we arrive at a full appreciation of the nature of Frankish political organisation in Early Medieval Western Europe.

In conclusion, the various empires of Eurasia in Late Antiquity were intimately connected with each other. Only by adopting a thoroughly comparative perspective can we begin to comprehend to what degree these early states were affected by the extensive exchange and transmission of political practices and traditions across Eurasia. In this imperial exchange and transmission of political ideas and cultural practices the Huns of Inner Asia played a pivotal role. Their arrival marked the initiation of intense political transformations in Western Europe, most notably among the Merovingian Franks. A comparative analysis of Inner Asian, Greco-Roman and Frankish history can therefore yield surprising new revelations about Eurasian interconnectivity and the critical role played by Inner Asian steppe empires in facilitating the spread of political and cultural ideas across Eurasia. A comparative political and institutional history of all Eurasian empires in the 4th and 5th centuries AD will no doubt yield even greater surprises and demonstrate that Eurasia was in

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Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages an interconnected totality. A more comprehensive, comparative, holistic, and interdisciplinary approach is therefore necessary to accurately understand these Eurasia-wide political and cultural transformations facilitated by Inner Asian steppe empires.

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