

Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them in the Eurasian Steppe: The Beast Motif in Origin Stories of Eurasian Steppe Peoples, 4th-9th Centuries

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During the fourth to the ninth centuries, various peoples reached the western and eastern fringes of the Eurasian steppe, establishing their dominions as far as the Carpathian Basin and along the borders of Chinese territory. Here, the new neighbours of these peoples were confronted with a (semi-)nomadic culture in contrast to their own sedentary societies. Contemporary historiographers attempted to fit these mounted newcomers into their respective *Weltordnung* by explaining their cultures and beginnings, writing what modern scholarship now refers to as »origin stories«. Modern historiographical trends have demonstrated the various functions of these narratives in their religious, cultural and source contexts. However, few comparative, global studies have been attempted that analyse both Eastern and Western efforts to place steppe peoples' history and society within their frames of reference. This article interrogates the potential of such a comparative approach in the study of steppe peoples' origin stories to reveal both the interests of external authors as well as the traditions of the peoples from the Eurasian steppe. It focuses on the narratives that preface the majority of surviving ethnographic excursuses on steppe peoples in Latin, Byzantine and Chinese historiographies of the fourth to the ninth centuries, comparing them within a global setting to evaluate the contextual factors that shaped the sources such narratives are embedded within. While many common forms of motif exist within these sources, the comparison here focuses on the use of beasts as fantastical motifs. Through this methodology, this article endeavours to show that many of the key ingredients of these origin stories are not merely the author's inventions, motivated by the derogatory desire to Other their neighbours as barbaric, but were also significant for the steppe peoples themselves, transcending cultural boundaries across Eurasia.

Keywords: Eurasian Studies; Medieval Historiography; Comparative Studies; Mentalities; Social History; Cultural History; Eurasian Steppe Peoples.

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Introduction

When the blue sky was created above and the brown earth was created below, humankind was created between them. Over the humans, my forefathers Bumın Kağan and Iştemi Kağan ascended the throne. Having become kağan, they established the Türk people's realm and laws, and organized them. [The people] in the four directions were all enemies. They campaigned and seized all the people in the four directions. They pacified all [those people]. They caused those who had heads to bow down and those who had knees to kneel down. They settled people in the east as far as the Kadırkan mountain forest and in the west as far as the Iron Gate. Thus, the completely unified Kök Türk people took up residence between the above two places. The kağans were wise and brave. Their ministers were wise and brave too. Their officials and people were impartial. Because of this, they founded such an empire. They established a realm and made laws.¹

This text comes from the Orkhon inscriptions, two monuments erected in honour of the brothers Kül-Tegin and Bilge Khagan in 732 and 735, respectively, both of whom were members of the ruling Ashina family. It recounts the beginning of the world, the creation of humanity and the establishment of the Turkic polity, while legitimising the Heaven-given rule of the Turkic khagans, shaping the Turkic people's group identity and cementing their place in the *Weltordnung* alongside other peoples and polities.² This process of legitimation of rule as well as the statement and formation of a group identity was the primary aim of this type of narrative, which is referred to in modern scholarship as an »origin story«.³

This narrative from the Orkhon inscriptions, which can be dated to the Second Turkic Khaganate (682-744), is a rare example of an origin story provided first hand by a people of the Eurasian steppe, as the vast majority of steppe peoples of the ancient and medieval world left behind few, if any, written narratives of their origin.⁴ However, through regular and protracted contact with sedentary cultures, such as the Latin West as well as the Byzantine and the Chinese empires, these peoples and their supposed origin stories found their way into numerous external historiographies.

In contrast to the aim of the internal narrative from the Orkhon inscriptions, external authors primarily explored the question of where these peoples came from and how they reached the locale wherein they encountered the authors' own Latin, Greek or Chinese-writing culture. The authors thus considered a migration narrative be an integral part of an origin story for fitting these »mounted peoples« into their established worldview.⁵ It is also not uncommon to find different versions of an origin and migration narrative transmitted in the extant material, some of which include fantastical and otherworldly elements, such as

1 Chen, *History of the Second Türk Empire*, 199.

2 Golden, *Ethnogenic Tales*, 306.

3 Plassmann, *Origo gentis*, 12. Reynolds, *Medieval origines gentium*.

4 Lee, *Turkic Peoples*, 30.

5 Plassmann, *Origo gentis*, 360-361.

deities, evil spirits, witches and beasts of a divine and spiritual nature.⁶ However, the inclusion of these fantastical motifs should not be entirely dismissed as the external authors' invention. The role of the wolf in origin stories of Central Asian peoples has been well-discussed in numerous studies, the most recent being Joo-Yup Lee's article on the origin myths of the Turkic Peoples in this volume of *Medieval Worlds*, which have demonstrated the wolf as a significant part of these peoples' traditions, particularly in the surviving archaeological evidence (e.g. Bugut stele).⁷ However, origin narratives include other fantastic beasts that have yet to be thoroughly interrogated in connection with the surviving archaeological evidence.

This article provides a comprehensive exploration of surviving records from Latin, Byzantine and Chinese historiographies between the fourth to the ninth centuries CE, a period where various steppe peoples from the Eurasian steppe reached its western and eastern fringes, in order to outline and explain key examples of the use of fantastic beasts in origin stories of steppe peoples. It does this by considering the roles of fantastic beasts in the origin stories of various peoples, first as mythical ancestors and second as catalysts for their migrations. While origin stories can exist within a wide variety of texts belonging to different genres, such as chronicles, genealogies and diplomatic texts, this article focuses on narratives included in ethnographic accounts, taking into account preceding historiographies that established recognisable *topoi* and functioned as contributions to the continued transmission of cultural memory.⁸ This article thus builds upon the established concepts of ethnogenesis and cultural memory as developed by the scholars of the Vienna School, further expanding the discussion of »barbarian« cultures.⁹

Faced with the different culture of the peoples from the Eurasian steppe, the ethnographic reports that authors from the Latin West, Byzantine and Chinese empires included in their historiographies reflect the view of a sedentary people imposed onto a (semi-)nomadic culture. This parallel makes them well-suited for a comparative approach that, here, focuses on origin stories featuring a fantastic beast or animal motif.¹⁰ Through this comparative analysis of surviving evidence, this article demonstrates that fantastic beast motifs were not merely inventions of external authors, motivated by the derogatory desire to emphasise Otherness

6 The origin narratives of steppe peoples have been the subject of several modern historical studies, most of which have not gone beyond focusing on specific steppe peoples. See e.g. Pohl, *Avars*, 33-47; Golden, *Ethnogenic Tales*; Maenchen-Helfen, *World of the Huns*, 444-455. Ziemann, *Vom Wandervolk*, 31-43. In his monograph, Lee explores the origins of various Turkic peoples; Lee, *Turkic Peoples*.

7 See e.g. Lee, *Origin myths*; Drompp, *Lone wolf*; Golden, *Ethnogenic Tales*; Jila, *Myths and traditional beliefs*.

8 Wolfram, *et al*, *Origo gentis*, 1.

9 Pohl, *Telling the difference*; Pohl and Wood, *Introduction*.

10 Ford, *Rome, China, and the Barbarians*, 15. While the number of works using the method of historical comparison has increased in recent years, there are very few comparative studies of ethnographic representations of steppe peoples in a global context. The few examples include: Siep Stuurman analyses Herodotus' *Historiae* and Sima Qian's *Shiji*, and Randolph Ford compares the ethnographic writing in Rome with the Chinese empires. Stuurman, *Herodotus and Sima Qian*; Ford, *Rome, China, and the Barbarians*.

or dehumanise these peoples, but were based on well-established ideas transmitted both through textual memory and cultural exchange with the steppe peoples themselves.¹¹

Mythical Ancestry

When authors of ethnographic texts set about exploring the origins of various steppe peoples in their works, it was common to outline the genealogy of a people or their ruling family by tracing them back to their (predominantly mythical) progenitors.¹² In some cases, these ancestors are of a bestial nature. One recurring fantastic beast motif shared by various steppe peoples that appears in Chinese accounts of this period is that of the wolf.¹³ The origin stories of the Turks (known as the *Tujue* in Chinese sources), and another Turkic-speaking nomadic people called the Gaoche, are particularly prominent examples involving a fantastical wolf ancestor, which shall be examined here in more detail.¹⁴

Chinese sources transmit three different versions of the Turk's origin narrative, but only two mention their lupine origins, which Peter Golden refers to as »Wolf Tale I« and »Wolf Tale II«. »Wolf Tale I« is transmitted in three Chinese official histories, namely the seventh-century *Zhoushu*, *Suishu* and *Beishi*. The earliest account is recorded in the *Zhoushu* as follows:¹⁵

The ancestors of the Türks lived on the right bank of the Western Sea. [...] They formed a tribe that was independent of the Xiongnu, but later were attacked by a neighbouring state and all were killed except for a ten-year old boy. When the enemy soldiers saw that he was so young, they did not have the heart to kill him, so they cut off his feet and threw him into a grass-covered swamp. Here, there was a she-wolf who fed the young boy meat. He grew up and had relations with the she-wolf, who became pregnant. When the king of the neighbouring state learned that the youth was still alive, he again sent men to kill him. When they saw a she-wolf beside the young man, they wanted to kill her too. The she-wolf fled to a mountain in the north in the state of Gaochang (Turfan). There was a cave in this mountain in which there was a broad plain with abundant grass. This plain, which stretched out for hundreds of li and was surrounded on all sides by mountains. The she-wolf hid in the mountains. Here, she gave birth to ten sons. When they grew up, they went out of the cave and married women from the outside. They brought many children into the world. Each of these descendants took a family name and one of them took the name Ashina. Their children and grandchildren increased until they constituted some hundreds of families. After some generations, they became subjects of the Ruru. In the period of the Great Yabǧu their lines/families became stronger. They settled/lived in the southern slopes of the Jinshan (Altay Mountains) and worked as blacksmiths for the Ruru. Since the Jinshan

11 Pines, Beasts or humans; Goetz and Wood, Introduction.

12 Ford, *Rome, China, and the Barbarians*, 56-64.

13 Beyond the fourth and ninth centuries CE, the wolf also plays an important part in the origin narratives of other steppe peoples, such as the Wusun and the Mongols. See Jila, *Myths and traditional beliefs*; Drompp, *Lone wolf*; Golden, *Ethnogenic Tales*, 206-310.

14 Joo-Yup Lee's comparative study in this issue of *Medieval Worlds* provides an overview of the origin narratives of different Turkic-speaking groups from the pre- to post-Mongol period. This article focuses solely on the narrative of the Gaoche and the Turks (*Tujue*).

15 Golden, *Ethnogenic Tales*, 297.

had the appearance of a helmet (兜鍪 *doumou*); and they called a ›helmet‹ *tujue*, they called themselves *Tujue*.¹⁶

In the course of the narrative, the she-wolf takes on several different roles in support of the Turk's ancestor: as a nurse, she ensures his survival; as his sexual partner, she saves the boy's, and thereby the group's, genealogical line from extinction. With the boy's descendants' safety assured, the she-wolf disappears from the narrative, no doubt because she had fulfilled her roles as nursemaid, partner, mother and saviour. The she-wolf plays a ›typical‹ female role in this origin stories, namely by giving birth to and protecting the progenitor or, in this case, the progenitors of a people, one of whom is especially emphasised and who turns out to be the ancestor of the ruling family, the Ashina.¹⁷ While the nursing-wolf motif is used in various origin narratives in western and the eastern Eurasia, such as in the well-known story of Romulus and Remus or the origin narrative of the Wusun, the transition from nurse to sexual partner is far rarer.¹⁸ Drompp suggests that ›myths and folktales involving animals [sic] nurses may be sanitised versions of earlier tales in which animals are indeed the true, original ancestors of a given people‹.¹⁹

The version of ›Wolf Tale I‹ from the *Suishu* offers an intriguing distinction to the narrative from the *Zhoushu*. Despite the close proximity of the *Zhoushu* and the *Suishu* – the compilation of both works being completed at the Historiography Institute under emperor Taizong (r. 626-649) in the year 636 CE – a comparison reveals key differences between their accounts.²⁰ According to the *Zhoushu*, the animal fled to the mountain; however, the *Suishu* adds a divine flavour to the story and recounts how the wolf ›seeming possessed, suddenly reached the west of the sea and stopped on the top of a mountain‹.²¹ By further emphasising the role of a divine power in the narrative, the text makes it clear that the Ashina family were supported by more than natural forces alone, as they also had a supernatural power on their side.²²

Turning our attention to ›Wolf Tale II‹, which is transmitted in the *Zhoushu* and the *Beishi*, it is interesting that the lupine ancestry of the Ashina is only mentioned at the beginning of the narrative, which states:²³ ›The leader of the group was called Abangbu, who had seventeen [*Beishi*: seventy brothers]. One of them was called Yizhi Nishidu, who was born of a wolf.‹²⁴ In contrast to ›Wolf Tale I‹, only one of the brothers was descended from a she-wolf,

16 Linghu Defen, *Zhoushu* 50.907-908, trans. Golden, *Ethnogenic Tales*, 298-299. A slightly different version of ›Wolf Tale I‹ can be found in the *Suishu* and the *Beishi*. Wei Zheng, *Suishu* 84.1863-1864; Li Yanshou, *Beishi* 99.3285. Golden, *Ethnogenic Tales*, 297-300.

17 Geary, *Women*, 3.

18 Drompp, *Lone wolf*, 524. The Turkic example is the only one in this period of which I am aware.

19 Drompp, *Lone wolf*, 525.

20 The *Beishi* merges these two versions of ›Wolf Tale I‹ together. On the context of origin of the *Zhoushu*, the *Suishu* and the *Beishi*, see: Pearce, *Zhou shu*; Xiong, *Sui shu*; Graff, *Bei shi*.

21 ›[...]其狼若爲神所憑，歟然至於海東，止於山上。‹ Wei Zheng, *Suishu* 84.1863, trans. Wabnitz.

22 Drompp, *Lone wolf*, 525.

23 Golden, *Ethnogenic Tales*, 300-304.

24 Linghu Defen, *Zhoushu* 50.908; Li Yanshou, *Beishi* 99.3286; For the English translation see Golden, *Ethnogenic Tales*, 301.

which implies that Abangbu's father had sexual intercourse with a wolf, who bore Abangbu's brother Yizhi Nishidu, while also having other female human partners. When reading further, it soon becomes obvious that, unlike his brothers, who are described as »dull-witted«, Yizhi Nishidu was extraordinary and possessed supernatural powers, which he most likely inherited from the wolf. Similar to »Wolf Tale I«, »Wolf Tale II« legitimises the authority of the ruling family, as Yizhi Nishidu was the ancestor of Ashina and, though subtler, ties this legitimacy to the supernatural abilities of men with lupine ancestry.

Why, then, did the Chinese authors include these fantastical tales in their ethnographic accounts? Gerard Clauson argued that the Chinese historiographers aimed to depict the Turks as more bestial than human in emphasising their lupine origins.²⁵ However, his work was published before the Bugut stele was discovered in 1956, an archaeological find that suggests something more to the lupine origin than simple, dismissive Othering on the part of external authors. The sandstone stele, which was created by the Turks themselves, is the earliest source for the First Turkic Khaganate (mid-6th century-c. 603 CE) and includes an interesting depiction on the top of the stele, which seems to be a child beneath a wolf.²⁶ This archaeological evidence shows that this animal was an integral part of local Turkic culture and further suggests that »Wolf Tale I« and »Wolf Tale II« were not simply meant to degrade the Turks but perhaps captured something of their own origin legend.²⁷

These historiographies were compiled in a period when the Tang empire was in direct and frequent contact with the Turks, which suggests that the information found in these narratives could have been based on oral traditions transmitted from the Turks themselves. That the Turks were proud of their lupine ancestry is further implied in the ethnographic reports from the *Zhoushu* and the *Suishu*, when mentioning the wolf-guard of the Turkic Khagan and reporting that their standards are crested with a wolf's head so they do not forget their origins.²⁸ While the Chinese historiographers may have deduced, and simultaneously denigrated, the lupine ancestry from the wolf banners when searching for an explanation for the depiction, this does not preclude a symbolic pride among the Turks for their association with the wolf, one which they intentionally presented, and which is also reflected in the Orkhon inscriptions when comparing Ilterish Khagan – the father of Bilge Khagan and Kül-Tegin – and his army to wolves and their enemies to sheep.²⁹

The lupine origin of another steppe people, the Gaoche, differs interestingly from other wolf-featuring origin myths in that it reverses the genders of the wolf and the human ancestor.³⁰ The earliest version of this narrative appears in the sixth-century *Weishu* and recounts the Gaoche's mythical descent from a union between a Xiongnu princess and a wolf:

25 Clauson, *Turks and wolves*, 20.

26 Golden, *Ethnogenic Tales*, 307. For different interpretations of the depiction on top of the Bugut stele, see Stark, *Alttürkenzeit*, 71-73; and Drompp, *Lone wolf*, 520-524.

27 For other examples of archaeological evidence see, for example, Stark, *Alttürkenzeit*, 145.

28 Linghu Defen, *Zhoushu* 50.909; Wei Zheng, *Suishu* 84.1863. Golden, *Ethnogenic Tales*, 300.

29 Chen, *History of the Second Türk Empire*, 200.

30 Pulleyblank, *High Carts*, 21-22. Both well-established and more recent historiographical trends argue that the name »Gaoche« was commonly used in Chinese historiographies of the mid-fourth to the mid-sixth centuries

People say that the Xiongnu *chanyu* had two daughters, with very beautiful appearance that all the people of the state considered them divine. The *chanyu* said: »I have these daughters, how can they marry a men? I shall I give them to Heaven.« Thereupon he constructed a high terrace in an uninhabited place in the north of his territory and placed his two daughters on it and he said: »Please Heaven accept them.« Three years passed by, and their mother wanted to take them back, the *chanyu* said: »It is not allowed, it is still not thoroughly completed.« Another year passed. Thereupon an old wolf warded the terrace day and night, howling and growling, thence he dug a hole underneath the terrace and did not leave for a while. The younger daughter said: »My father placed me here desiring to give me to heaven. Now a wolf came or may it be a divine creature [神物] sent by Heaven [天].« She was about to go down to him. The elder sister said in great surprise: »He is an animal. Do not disgrace our parents!« The younger sister did not obey and went down to the wolf. She became his wife and gave birth to a son. Later, they consequently multiplied and established a state. For this reason, the people are pleased with stretched sounds and long songs, which resemble the wolf's howl.³¹

In comparison to the she-wolf motif, a male wolf is a far rarer ancestor in narratives of a people's origin, as are women with active roles. Both sisters believe that they are acting according to their father's wishes while taking opposing positions: following the principle of filial piety, the older sister tries to prevent her younger sister from joining the wolf, while the younger sister sees the wolf as a sign from Heaven (*tiān* 天) and acts according to what she perceives as her father's desire. The younger princess, trusting in her own judgement and humble before the possibility of heavenly intervention, goes to the wolf. By contrast, the older sister, more concerned with familial honour, proudly refuses the possibility outright and remains on the terrace. Hence, by taking her faith into her own hands, the younger Xiongnu princess becomes the mother of a new people.

Despite the younger Xiongnu princess and her sister playing important parts in the narrative, neither are named throughout the whole story. This comes as no surprise, as female characters were usually not the focus of origin stories beyond the »typical« role of giving birth to the progenitor of the people or their ruling family.³² More unexpected, however, is the fact that the Xiongnu *chanyu* also remains nameless, as does the progenitor of the Gaoche. The decision to leave all of the characters nameless inevitably leads to a vague genealogy, in stark contrast to the origin stories of other steppe peoples in Chinese accounts, which usually include a genealogy of the people or the ruling family with their names.³³

A lack of information on the Gaoche beyond their ethnonym could be one possible explanation for the missing names, especially considering the imprecise geographical description

in reference to the Turkic-speaking Dingling. For the discussion on the terms Dingling, Gaoche and Tiele and their history see Pulleyblank, High Carts; Golden, *Introduction*, 93-95; Lee, *Turkic Peoples*, 12-21.

31 Wei Shou, *Weishu* 103.2307, trans. Wabnitz. The same version can be found in the *Beishi*. Li Yanshou, *Beishi* 98.3270. See also Lee, *Turkic Peoples*, 17.

32 Geary, *Women*, 3.

33 In addition to the origin story of the Turks, which is discussed in this article, the origin stories of the Rouran (Wei Shou, *Weishu* 103.2289) and the Tuyuhun (Wei Shou, *Weishu* 101.2233) follow the same pattern.

in this narrative.³⁴ However, the ethnographic report on the Gaoche that follows the origin story seems, according to Pulleyblank, »to be based on direct observation and goes beyond the usual *topoi* found in standard Chinese descriptions of nomadic people«.³⁵ Despite the existence of derogatory remarks about the Gaoche (e.g. »Their customs are unclean«³⁶), a typical narrative strategy employed by Chinese authors to emphasise the uncivilised Other, the description of the Gaoche in the *Weishu* includes distinctive information not provided by other ethnographic reports, which further suggests the author had more immediate sources at their disposal.³⁷ The *Weishu*, the official history of the Northern Wei dynasty (386-534 CE), was compiled by the official Wei Shou under the Northern Qi dynasty (558-577 CE). The Northern Wei dynasty was the first non-Chinese imperial dynasty, also referred to as a »conquest dynasty«,³⁸ as it was founded by the Tuoba, a branch of the Xianbei steppe people. The Tuoba and the Gaoche had been military adversaries not long before the Tuoba founded their dynasty and it is reasonable to suggest that the Tuoba were interested in gathering information about their enemy's customs and origin.³⁹ As Wei Shou himself was a court official under the Northern Wei dynasty and participated in the writing of this dynasty's history, he would have had access to such first-hand information that was transmitted in the dynasty itself. Hence, his description of the Gaoche is likely to be the closest available reflection of their culture in the mid-fourth century.⁴⁰

The ethnographic description provides another more probable explanation for the nature of the (lacking) genealogy, as it states at the beginning that »they [the Gaoche] are not led by a Great Leader; each group has a leader«⁴¹. Not only would this make a detailed genealogy unnecessary or even impracticable, the lack of detail also works in the Gaoche's favour as a malleable origin story that can easily be applied to all of their groups, however disparate. While origin stories from other steppe peoples (e.g. the Turks, Rouran, or Tuyuhun) are actually narratives of their leading families, the Gaoche's story recounts the royal, even »divine« origins of a whole people, whose songs – which are reminiscent of a wolf's howl – serve as a reminder of their beginnings, and make them a worthy enemy of the founders of the Northern Wei dynasty.⁴²

34 It continues to be debated whether the origin of the name Gaoche, which literally means »High Carts«, is purely descriptive of their custom of using high-wheel waggons or whether, following James Hamilton's argument, it derived from a Turkish name. Pulleyblank, *High Carts*, 22.

35 Pulleyblank, *High Carts*, 24.

36 Wei Shou, *Weishu* 103.2308.

37 For example, the *Weishu* describes the marriage customs and marriage ceremony of the Gaoche, pointing out that they do not practice levirate marriage, unlike other steppe peoples, such as the Turks. Wei Shou, *Weishu* 103.2307.

38 Klein, *Wei shu*, 368. The Northern Wei dynasty united northern China for the first time after the disintegration of the Han dynasty (206 BCE-24 CE; 25-220 CE). For more details on the Tuoba and the Northern Wei dynasty, see e.g. Müller, *Nomads*; Pearce, *Northern Wei*.

39 Pulleyblank, *High Carts*, 22.

40 Klein, *Wei shu*, 368-369; Pulleyblank, *High Carts*, 23.

41 Wei Shou, *Weishu* 103.2307.

42 Lee notes that the Northern Wei ruling elite included some elements from the Tiele, one group of which, the Tiele Hetulin, intermarried with the ruling elite. This could further explain the detail of Wei Shou's ethnographic report. Lee, *Turkic peoples*, 15.

Taken alongside the archaeological evidence, the prevalence of the wolf motif outside singular historiographical traditions demonstrates that the wolf ancestor was not merely a derogatory invention of Chinese authors to depict various steppe peoples as an animalistic Other, but rather hints at a symbol that was significant to various steppe peoples. While the wolf undoubtedly had negative connotations within the cultures of sedentary societies, among the steppe peoples themselves, the wolf was seen as an admirable creature associated with the strength and vigour of the warrior-hunter.⁴³

The association between the wolf and the warrior is also found in early medieval West-Eurasian texts; however, Christian authors tended to describe the wolf as an adversary of humans and even as a devilish beast, which can be traced back to biblical depictions of the wolf and the well-known phrase: »the good Christian as a sheep among the wolves«.⁴⁴ Furthermore, Bishop Isidore of Seville wrote in his influential seventh-century *Etymologies* that the wolf was »a violent beast, eager for gore«.⁴⁵ In contrast to his negative characterisation, some Christian authors also mention the »good« wolf as an instrument of God that demonstrates His divine power through which He changes the wolf's character.⁴⁶ The eighth-century historiographer Paul the Deacon, for example, mentions that his great-grandfather Lopichis was led by a wolf, sent by God, to show him the right path to Italy: a powerful statement of divine intervention but one that has more in common with an animal guide, a motif discussed in detail further below, than a lupine ancestor.⁴⁷ Nevertheless, while the wolf is mentioned in Western texts, there is no mention of the wolf in connection with steppe peoples – even in the case of the Western Turks – or their origin stories, unlike in Chinese historiography of that period.

While Latin and Byzantine historiographies use fantastical ancestors in origin stories of steppe peoples (e.g. the Huns' decent from evil spirits), animal ancestors are only mentioned in Chinese historiographies in this period. Several potential reasons for this difference present themselves: firstly, that those steppe peoples who reached the Western fringes of the Eurasian steppe did not have their own animal ancestor traditions; secondly, that authors from different areas either had access to different levels of information or were simply not interested in the same manner of detail. Building on the latter, a third explanation presents itself; namely, the aforementioned »sanitisation« of narratives. Whereas pre-Christian Europe had its zoo-sexual myths where human children had »animal parents« – such as the well-known stories of Zeus in animal form having sexual intercourse with human women – for Christian authors »bestiality« was a serious taboo, as outlined by Leviticus 18:23, and the resultant progeny of such a devilish act were nothing but monstrous creatures.⁴⁸ In Chinese

43 Drompp, *Lone wolf*, 524.

44 Marshall, *Wolves*, 7; 7, FN 44.

45 Isidore of Seville, *Etymologiae* XII.II.24, trans. Barney, *et al*, 253.

46 Marshall, *Wolves*, 206.

47 Pohl, *Avars*, 247.

48 Stuhmiller, Introduction, 12-19. Line, *Humans*, 321-326; Lutterbach, *Sexualität*, 33-34; 161-165. A recent volume edited by Jacqueline A. Stuhmiller explores the topic of bestiality and its complexity in medieval Christian European culture. Stuhmiller, *Animal Husbandry*.

folklore and mythology, the belief in the possibility of a sexual relationship and successful procreation between different species remained prevalent.⁴⁹ Such cultural distinctions undoubtedly had an impact on the type and style of information that the authors wished to record, as well as embellish, within their texts.

Spirit Guides and Mythical Adversaries

While they do not appear as ancestors in Latin and Greek accounts of steppe peoples' origins from the period, animals nevertheless regularly take on important fantastical and practical roles in these narratives as catalysts of movement, a motif that can also be observed in Chinese historiographies.

In their ethnographic reports on various steppe peoples, Latin, Byzantine and Chinese historiographers point out how these peoples lacked a place of permanent settlement, given their nature to constantly moved around, which stood in stark contrast to the authors' own sedentary lifestyles.⁵⁰ The idea that these peoples were constantly wandering, which was connected to the movement of animals – either following their herds, hunting animals or retreating from dangerous fellow predators – may have influenced the narratives and served as an explanation of how these peoples reached the respective realms wherein they encountered the authors' societies. Some of these migration stories, which are an inherent part of the origin narrative, shifted the role of animals towards the fantastical and cast them as spiritual guides or mythical adversaries that encouraged or enforced a peoples' migration; the second half of this article explores how and why these fantastical elements came to be included.

The animal guide is an important motif in these origin narratives; a trope that is by no means unique to the peoples of the Eurasian steppe that has been shared by various cultures and spread through different geographical spheres, with varying aims and contexts.⁵¹ In the context of the steppe peoples' migration narratives, however, two examples reveal striking similarities: the report on the migration of the Huns in the sixth-century *Getica*, written by the historian Jordanes, and the migration of the Tuoba in the *Weishu*, as both groups followed a cervid-like creature to reach their respective new territories.

The *Weishu* recounts the migration of the Tuoba as follows:

They [the Tuoba] moved into a hilly terrain with valleys, gorges, natural defences and passes. There they wanted to settle, but an animal spirit appeared. It was shaped like a horse and bellowed like an ox. It led them south for several years and then disappeared.⁵²

49 Sterckx, *Animal and the Daemon*, 195; de Groot, *Religious Systems*, 253-271.

50 See e.g. Ammianus Marcellinus on the Huns: Ammianus Marcellinus, *Res Gestae* XXXI.2.10, ed. and trans. Rolfe, 384, 385. Chinese sources often use the phrase »follow water and grass« (隨逐水草) to describe these peoples' nomadic way of life; see, for example, the *Suishu* on the Turks, Wei Zheng, *Suishu* 84.1864.

51 See above 192; Nick Allen, for example, explores the motif of the animal guide in the context of Himalayan foundations myths, Allen, *Animal Guides*.

52 Wei Shou, *Weishu* 1.6, trans. Holmgren, *Annals of Tai*, 52.

A similar version of this migration narrative is included in the chapter on the Spiritual World of the *Weishu*.⁵³ Both versions tell us that the Tuoba were led south by a spirit guide in form of a cervid-like creature, with the version in chapter on the Spiritual World clearly stating that they were led south to the »former lands of the Xiongnu«⁵⁴, i.e. the northwest of China, where the Tuoba were to subjugate various peoples and establish the Northern Wei dynasty in the following century.⁵⁵

The *Getica* describes similar events when reporting on the migration of the Huns, though in a more derogatory tone:

This wild nation, as the historian Priscus tells, inhabited the further bank of the Maeotic swamp and knew hunting alone and no other labour, except, when they had grown in numbers, to disturb the peace of nearby peoples with deceit and pillaging. And so, some hunters of this nation, as they were wont to do when they were looking for game on the bank of the interior Maeotic swamp, saw how a doe suddenly presented itself to them, entered the swamp and, now moving, then halting, offered itself as a guide to the way across. Following it, the hunters crossed the Maeotic swamp on foot, which, like the sea, they thought impossible to ford. Soon enough the land of Scythia, of which they had been ignorant, appeared to them and the doe disappeared. This, I believe, was the work of those spirits, from whom they derive their origin [...].⁵⁶

This seemingly non-fantastical story of hunters following a doe, and thus discovering a path through the swamp, ends with a supernatural twist as the doe suddenly disappears. This fantastic turn of events upgrades the subsequent migration of the Huns from one of chance to the work of supernatural powers, which, in Jordanes' opinion, are the same spirits from whom the Huns had descended. Referring back to the origin narrative of this people, he writes:

Filimer, the king of the Goths [...] entered the lands of the Scythians alongside his people, found among his subjects some sorceresses, whom he in his own language, called Haliurunnae. Holding them in suspicion, he expelled them from the midst of this people and forced them to wander in solitude, driven far away from his host. When unclean spirits saw these women wandering through the desert they embraced and had intercourse with them. They gave birth to this most ferocious people, who at first lived in swamps, dwarfs, hideous and feeble, only a semblance of humanity and distinguished by no other sound except that which marked an imitation of human speech. Born from such an origin, then, the Huns came to the frontiers of the Goths.⁵⁷

Jordanes' aim is clear: he portrays the Huns as uncivilised and evil fiends who are more beast than human, placing them in stark contrast to his heroes, the Goths. By sending a spirit guide in the form of a doe, knowing that hunting was their primary food source, the

53 Wei Shou, *Weishu* 112b:2927.

54 Wei Shou, *Weishu* 112b:2927

55 See above, 191, fn 39.

56 Jordanes, *Getica* 24.123-124, ed. Mommsen, 89-70, trans. Van Nuffelen, *et al*, 280-281.

57 Jordanes, *Getica* 24.121-122, ed. Mommsen, 89, trans. Van Nuffelen, *et al*, 279-280.

Huns became instruments of these spirits to bring evil and chaos upon the different peoples of these new lands. This narrative strategy of depicting the Huns as messengers of evil can be found in various historiographies; already two centuries earlier, the fourth-century *Res Gestae* by Ammianus Marcellinus describes them as »the seed and origin of all the ruin and various disasters«⁵⁸ and in later texts Attila would become known as the »scourge of God«.⁵⁹

Returning to the migration narrative of the Huns, it is notable that, at the beginning of the text, Jordanes highlights that this story is based on the fifth-century account written by the historian Priscus of Panium, who had been sent on a diplomatic mission to the court of Attila, the leader of the Huns, by the Eastern Roman Emperor Theodosius II (408-450) in 448.⁶⁰ Priscus' account, of which only fragments survive in various historiographical texts, nevertheless provides a detailed description of his journey and of the events at Attila's court, as well as interesting insights into the customs of the Huns. Priscus' report therefore stands in contrast to the more demonising descriptions of this people. We can only speculate whether Priscus' account was influenced by stories or artistic depictions he had heard and seen during his diplomatic mission, or whether he explained the migration of a nomadic people by connecting it to their way of life. As there is no fragment of Priscus' work that recounts the origin story of the Huns, we cannot be sure if Priscus came to the same conclusion as Jordanes, who is convinced of the role of the evil spirits in this migration. The sixth-century Byzantine historiographer Procopius of Caesarea expresses a similar opinion to Jordanes when describing the migration of the Huns, whom he refers to as Cimmerians. Procopius, most likely aware of Priscus' report, also tells the story of the doe showing them the way through the Sea of Azov, also known as the Maeotic swamp. Unlike Jordanes, Procopius does not include the origin story of the coupling spirits and witches, but is of the same opinion that the migration was the work of evil forces.⁶¹ Priscus was likely responsible for the basic elements of the story concerning the Hunnic hunters following the doe from the swamp to Scythia, while Jordanes and Procopius derogatorily emphasise that the doe was the instrument of evil spirits.⁶²

The *Weishu*, the *Getica* and the *Wars* inform us about the migratory movements of these peoples as influenced by supernatural powers. While the former is more oblique, the Latin and Greek sources end on a more explicitly negative note when hinting at the work of evil spirits. In contrast to the demonisation of the Huns, the migration story of the Tuoba in the *Weishu* does not include any derogatory remarks. This is directly related to the aforementioned context of the *Weishu*, based as it was on the state history of the Northern Wei dynasty and compiled during their reign.⁶³ The emperors had direct oversight over these records and those

58 Ammianus Marcellinus, *Res Gestae* XXXI.2.1., ed. and trans. Rolfe, 381.

59 For more details on the demonisation of the Huns in written sources, see Maenchen-Helfen, *World*, 2-5.

60 Hoffmann, Priscus, 1235.

61 Procopius, *Wars* VIII.5.7-10, trans. Dewing, 470.

62 Blockley suggests that since both Justinian's and Procopius' texts include this derogatory statement, it would have been probably found in Priscus' account as well. Priscus Panites, *Fragmenta*, ed. and trans. Blockley, 379, Note 1. However, there is no demonization of the Huns in the surviving portions of Priscus' account. Unlike Chinese historiographers who never include direct reference to their own opinion in their texts, Jordanes and Procopius both emphasise their opinion with the phrase »I think«, stressing their personal judgements.

63 Klein, *Wei shu*, 368-369.

that produced them, in one case even going so far as to execute an official whom they accused of emphasising »the primacy of Chinese institutions over Tuoba traditions«,⁶⁴ which further indicates that a spiritual guide in the form of a cervid-like creature was not taken as an offence. In his monograph, Chen states that the »cervids were, and still are, often considered sacred animals in Altaic cultures«. ⁶⁵ The Tuoba were a significant example of this phenomenon, as they introduced and intertwined the symbol of the cervid, which for them bore martial characteristics, with the Chinese worship of the peaceful *qilin* (»unicorn«) during their rule as the Northern Wei dynasty.⁶⁶ Latin and Byzantine historiographers were probably also aware of the importance of the cervid in the Eurasian steppe peoples' culture, based on their knowledge of Scythian culture and art, while Priscus may well have come across cervid imagery during his time as an envoy to Attila's court. As such, the spiritual cervid guide was likely not only the product of external historiographers, but also held symbolic importance within steppe peoples' culture, considering the numerous surviving depictions in artistic and archaeological evidence.⁶⁷

While these examples relate to spiritual guides who served to aid steppe peoples and were focal points of cultural symbolism, fantastic beasts do not always appear as allies in origin stories concerning steppe peoples, but also take the role of antagonists who compel peoples to retreat from them. One such example can be found in a story concerning the Avar migration, which has been attributed to Priscus and is transmitted in the *Suda Lexicon*, a late tenth-century Byzantine encyclopaedia. In contrast to the version of Priscus' text in the *Excerpta de legationibus*, which records that the Avars were driven off by other peoples living on the shore of the Black Sea, the text in the *Suda Lexicon* has a rather fantastical twist:⁶⁸

These Avars drove out the Sabinores having themselves been displaced by the tribes [sic] who lived by the shore of the Ocean. The latter had left their land on account of the mist which came from an inundation of the Ocean and because a flock of gryphons had appeared. It is said that they would not leave until they had eaten the whole race of men. Therefore, driven out by these evils, the ocean dwellers fell upon their neighbours, and since the attackers were more powerful, the Avars who could not resist their onset, were displaced.⁶⁹

This version of Priscus' account was most likely influenced by the report from the *Histories* written by Herodotus in the fifth century CE, which is one of the earliest written sources mentioning a griffin.⁷⁰ It provides a geographical description of the griffin's homeland and thus establishes where these fantastic beasts can be encountered:

64 Klein, *Wei shu*, 368.

65 Chen, *Multicultural China*, 52.

66 Chen, *Multicultural China*, 52-53.

67 Archaeological evidence includes the finds from the Pazyryk site, see Huntington, *Range of the "Cosmic Deer"*.

68 Pohl, *Avars*, 38.

69 Priscus, frag. 40.1, ed. and trans. Blockley, 344; *Suidae Lexicon* A 18, ed. Ada Adler, vol 1, 4.

70 Although the earliest depictions of the griffin can be traced back to the Bronze Age, the earliest appearance of the fantastic beast in written sources dates back to the fifth century BCE. In addition to Herodotus' *Histories*, they are mentioned in the early-fifth-century tragedy *Prometheus Bound*, which has been ascribed to Aeschylus. For more details, see McClanan, *Griffinology*, 11-23.

There is also a story related by Aristeas [...] This Aristeas, being then possessed by Phoebus, visited the Issedones; beyond these (he said) dwell the one-eyed Arimaspians, beyond whom are the griffins that guard gold, and beyond these again the Hyperboreans [...].⁷¹

Herodotus claims that the Greek poet Aristeas of Proconnesus provided this information in his, now-lost work *Arimaspea*, written in the seventh century BCE. On his travels searching for the sanctuary of Apollo, Aristeas met the Issedonians who told him about a realm where a one-eyed people called the Arimaspians dwelt, who regularly stole gold from monsters. According to Herodotus, Aristeas called these monsters griffins, or in Greek *gryps*, meaning »hooked«, which refers to their beak.⁷² Later in the *Histories*, Herodotus points out that the Scythians were also familiar with the stories of Arimaspians fighting the gold-guarding griffin. Since the griffin-fighting Arimaspians were incorporated into Scythian art, as surviving archaeological evidence shows, Herodotus' report was likely based on observations or a reasonably widespread oral tradition rather than pure invention.⁷³ In addition to Scythian art, the Pazyryk tattoo and the felt fabric found in Noin Ula, the well-known Xiongnu burial site, provide further examples that the griffin or griffin-like motifs were widespread among the peoples of the Eurasian steppe.⁷⁴ In the eighth century, the griffin became a popular motif among the Avar community, which might have been a result of reciprocal influences between the cultures of the steppe and their sedentary neighbours.⁷⁵ Since the griffin was a well-known phenomenon among the peoples of the Eurasian steppe and the sedentary populations, the version of Priscus' account in the *Suda Lexicon* follows a motif already deeply-rooted in various forms of material culture and narrative to explain the migration of a people, which in turn caused a cascade of movement. The griffins as evil adversaries provided a credible explanation for contemporaries in accordance with their historiographical tradition as well as an excitingly frightening justification for the movement of peoples and its consequences.

Conclusion

This article has discussed just one aspect of many fantastical motifs that can be encountered in origin stories on steppe peoples within Latin, Greek and Chinese historiographical sources between the fourth and ninth centuries. Although the origin stories featuring a fantastic beast are not great in number, this motif appears in various origin and migration narratives from these sources, in which they take on various roles, ranging from ancestors to spirit guides. The comparative analysis demonstrates that Chinese sources were particularly pre-occupied with animal ancestry in regard to steppe peoples, though (mythical) animals have important roles in the migration tales of both eastern and western sources. The difference could be related to opposing cultural and religious beliefs, as »bestiality« was a taboo in the

71 Herodotus, *Histories* IV.13, ed. and trans Godley, 212-215.

72 McClanan, *Griffinology*, 30-32; Mayor, *First Fossil Hunters*, 23.

73 Herodotus, *Histories* IV.27, ed. and trans. Godley, 226-227.

74 McClanan, *Griffinology*, 68-71; Duan, *Legends*, 28.

75 Pohl, *Avars*, 48, 347; Daim, *Der awarische Greif*. On the ongoing discussion on the origins of the griffin motif see Mayor, *First Fossil Hunters*; McClanan, *Griffinology*, in particular 33-35.

Christian West and animals bearing human children a more far-fetched proposition for Latin and Byzantine authors. By contrast, the possibility of procreation was more deeply rooted in Chinese intellectual culture, as reflected by the inclusion of animal ancestry – in particular, lupine – in origin narratives of various steppe peoples, such as the Turks and the Gaoche. Considering that Chinese authors mostly ascribed animal ancestry to Turkic-speaking groups, and taking archaeological evidence into account, the wolf seems to have played a significant part in these peoples' own traditions. A similar observation can be made in regard to the migration narrative: the historiographies from both sides of Eurasia mention spirit guides in the form of cervid-like creatures, who led peoples to new realms and opportunities. These narratives perhaps reflect the authors' understanding that these peoples' migrations were connected to the movement of animals, but, as archaeological and artistic evidence shows, the steppe peoples themselves also regarded the deer as an important and even sacred animal. The griffin, taking on the role of a mythical adversary in one migration narrative, was also a well-established and widespread motif in Eurasian art though, interestingly, Chinese texts do not mention this mythical beast in the context of steppe peoples. There is no doubt that the authors shaped their narratives according to the various concerns and interests of their intellectual culture. However, as this article has demonstrated through a contextual and comparative approach to our examples from Latin, Byzantine, and Chinese historiographies of the fourth to the ninth centuries, the inclusion of fantastic beast motifs were not merely derogatory inventions of external authors to depict the various steppe peoples simply as the bestial Other. While these authors may have looked down upon the steppe peoples as not part of their »civilised« culture, the textual and archaeological evidence reveals that fantastic beast motifs were familiar themes in both the authors' own cultures and the external cultures about which they wrote, providing a glimpse into what symbols and stories were significant to the steppe peoples themselves in explaining their origins.

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Abbreviations

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