

COMPETING NARRATIVES BETWEEN NOMADIC PEOPLE AND THEIR
SEDENTARY NEIGHBOURS

Studia uralo-altaica 53

Redigunt

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Competing Narratives between Nomadic People and their Sedentary Neighbours

Papers of the 7th International Conference on the Medieval History
of the Eurasian Steppe
Nov. 9–12, 2018
Shanghai University, China

Edited by Chen Hao

Szeged, 2019

This publication was financially supported by the MTA-ELTE-SZTE Silk Road Research Group

© University of Szeged,
Department of Altaic Studies,
Department of Finno-Ugrian Philology
Printed in 2019

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Printed by: Innovariant Ltd., H-6750 Algyó, Ipartelep 4.

ISBN: 978-963-306-708-6 (printed)

ISBN: 978-963-306-714-7 (pdf)

ISSN: 0133 4239

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Personal Hygiene and Bath Culture in the World of the Eurasian Nomads

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Written sources on nomadic peoples often draw attention to the appearance of these tribes, including their garb, hairstyles and also personal hygiene. Although, in many instances it is a difficult task to uncover what the authors of such sources thought about the clothing, the headdress or the personal hygiene of any individual nomadic person.¹ In most cases, these accounts reflect general impressions only. Moreover, it is a verifiable fact that the authors who wrote about such nomads had never met a single one. Thus it is not a coincidence that there are lots of stereotypes and hostile statements in these sources.

In the last decades, a great number of scholars have dealt with the “general picture” of the nomadic peoples’ origins since Antiquity. Most of them noted that we have to reckon with a number of *topoi* in this picture (Kradin 2002, Beckwith 2009 etc.). Nevertheless we cannot think that every characterization of these accounts is mostly *topos*. One of the main reasons is that these accounts differ significantly when it comes to the question of the neatness of these peoples.

The remarks on the slovenliness of these groups harmonize well with the depreciative picture (that these peoples were barbarous, cruel, inhuman etc.) that the sedentary civilizations had of the nomads.

The Greek Agathias said: “*the hair of the Turks and Avars is unkempt, dry and dirty and tied up in an unsightly knot*” (Szádeczky-Kardoss 1998: 18; cf. Nechaeva 2011: 176).

According to Ibn Faḍlān: “*Then we halted in the lands of a Turkic people, the Bāshghirds. We took every possible precaution against them, for they are the worst of the Turks, the dirtiest and the readiest to kill.*” (Lunde & Stone 2012: 23; Györffy 1986: 96–99; Kmoskó 1997: 48–49).

We could go on with this enumeration with other examples, but it is very surprising that not all of our sources describe them in this way.

For example, according to Gardīzī: “*The [nomadic] Magyars are handsome and pleasant looking, their bodies are bulky*” (Kristó et al. 1995: 38 cf. Zimonyi 2005: 259–260).

We might then ask: why these two very different attitudes exist?

¹ On the importance of haircuts in written sources and on the ethnospecific character of different hairstyles in Antiquity and in the Middle Ages see: Bálint 2006: 332.

This contradiction might be solved by supposing that the hygienic conditions of various nomadic groups differed hugely. Besides chronological and geographical reasons there might be other reasons as well. The problem is that there are some nomadic peoples (for example the Inner-Asian Turks or the early Hungarians) for whom there are really positive and absolutely hostile descriptions at the same time. That is why we cannot schematize this problem by assuming chronological or geographical differences. So, this problem is much more complicated.

Certainly to make a decision about whether a human group in a certain historical era was neat or untidy is impossible, because we cannot use our 21st century ideas of cleanliness in the cases of long-ago historical periods and no longer existing peoples. The well-groomed or clean communities of Antiquity or medieval times might seem to be untidy according to contemporary standards. So neatness is a very relative category. It is a very difficult task to decide whether the neatness of a certain nomadic man (for example an envoy in the Byzantine court) mirrored only his own preferences or was a general feature of his people. In my opinion, we will not be able to ever decide this question. But there is a social question related to the topic as well. A diplomatic envoy was always an aristocratic or a distinguished person in history, so if he was a clean and tidy man could that prove that every man and woman in his society was clean and tidy too? Did every social class live in the same hygienic conditions? I do not think so!

In my opinion nothing but the nomadic peoples' own, intrinsic sources and their archaeological remains may help us to solve these difficult problems. Unfortunately the written sources are really few in number (inscriptions in the Orkhon valley or the *Secret History of the Mongols* (Berta 2004; Ligeti 1962; Rachewiltz 2006),² but there is an interesting passage in the *Secret History* where Naiman, Chinggis' last major rival in the eastern steppe said that the Mongols' scent was strong and their clothing dark, that is, grimy (Rachewiltz 2006: 98). Thomas T. Allsen in connection with this passage drew attention to the long-lasting water taboo of the nomadic peoples. In the Mongolian period, there are lots of references from travellers and chronicles to a ban on the cleaning of one's person or clothing (Allsen 1997: 89). It was probably because that water was deemed to be one of the four basic constituents of the universe and had cosmological significance for Turks and Mongols as well. "*Moreover, form of rain it descended from heavens and therefore partook of Tengri, the sky deity and chief god*

² In these sources there are some indirect pieces of information as well like the mentions of different perfumes and ointments, for example "musk-scented brocade" (Bilgä Qayan N 11, Berta 2005: 192 - cf. King 2017: 27-28).

of the nomads. To use water in washing the body or the clothing was to pollute a cosmological element.” (Allsen 1997: 89).³

Thomas Allsen is right about the most of the nomadic peoples, but the sources discussed below somewhat shade this seemingly uniform picture. Not to mention that this does not explain our initial problem as to why some sources consider the nomads clean and others dirty.

The related minor archaeological finds are also small in number. We know mirrors,⁴ combs, tweezers and scent-jars from the nomadic cemeteries, mostly from the tombs of women (cf. Pálóczi Horváth 1996: 17; Révész 1998: 524–525; Garam 2001: 165; Lőrinczy–Straub 2003: 172 etc.). But because of their number and their limited scope, we cannot use them to reconstruct the hygienic customs of a bigger community or of the whole nomadic society. But the lack of remarkable related archaeological finds does not mean that hygiene procedures were absent. For instance, Herodotus wrote the following in connection with the Scythians: “...the Scythians cleanse themselves in the following way:—they soap their heads and wash them well, and then, for their body, they set up three stakes leaning towards one another and about them they stretch woollen felt coverings, and when they have closed them as much as possible they throw stones heated red-hot into a basin placed in the middle of the stakes and the felt coverings.” IV, 73 (Muraközi 2000; cf. Fritsche 1978: 3–8).

“The Scythians then take the seed of this hemp and creep under the felt coverings, and then they throw the seed upon the stones which have been heated red-hot: and it burns like incense and produces a vapour so thick that no vapour-bath in Hellas would surpass it: and the Scythians being delighted with the vapour-bath howl like wolves. This is to them instead of washing, for in fact they do not wash their bodies at all in water. Their women however pound with a rough stone the wood of the cypress and cedar and frankincense tree, pouring in water with it, and then with this pounded stuff, which is thick, they plaster over all their body and also their face; and not only does a sweet smell attach to them by reason of this, but also when they take off the plaster on the next day, their skin is clean and shining.” (IV, 75) (Muraközi 2000; cf. Fritsche 1978: 3–8).

It is not too difficult to see that the archaeological identification of an ‘object’ like this – a felt tent with hot stones and incense – is almost impossible. But we can see the same situation in the case of the “Turk bath” mentioned by

³ “It seems likely, too that this taboo was further reinforced by the belief that the aroma of the body is somehow associated with an individual’s essence or soul, an essence which should be preserved, not removed. Like shadows, reflection, and breath, body odor is insubstantial yet detectable and is therefore identified with the soul or spirit in some cultures”. (Allsen 1997: 89). I would like to thank Dr. Florence Hodous for drawing my attention to Thomas Allsen’s important book.

⁴ Mirrors of the barbarians of the Carpathian Basin from late Antiquity and the early Middle Ages have been collected by Eszter Istvánovits and Valéria Kulcsár (Istvánovits–Kulcsár 1993: 9–58). This topic has most recently been researched by Alexandra Caroline Moyer in her PhD thesis: Moyer 2012.

Constantinus Porphyrogennetos in the 10th century: “(The minsourator also brings) a Turkish bath, called in Scythian *tzerga* (τζεργά), with a hide cistern of red leather; 12 three-measure pitchers, 12 grates for the bath, bricks for the hearth, folding couches...” (De ceremoniis aulae Byzantinae 466₄₋₅; Moravcsik 1988: 34; Kristó et al. 1995: 136).

Presumably *tzerga* was a special felt tent with a “travelling shower” made of red leather (Gyóni 1943: 133; Németh 1965: 231–234; Berta–Róna-Tas 2011). But these materials decompose in the soil that is why we have no exact information on the spread of these utensils among nomadic peoples. But since Constantinus suggested that the Byzantine soldiers use the *tzerga* it is likely that this kind of tool was well-known in the nomadic world as well.⁵

One thing is certain: important evidence could come from a bath built in the territory of nomadic peoples of abiding materials (stone, brick etc.). Maybe it is not an impossibility. The rhetorician Priscus who visited the camp of the Hunnic ruler Attila in the 5th century, wrote about an exciting bath: “After the king’s compound Onegesios’s was magnificent and also itself had an enclosing log wall. His was not equipped with towers like Attila’s rather there was a bath, not far from the enclosing wall, which Onegesios, as the pre-eminent man among the Scythians after Attila, built large by conveying stones from Paionia (Pannonia). The barbarians of the region do not have a stone nor even a tree, but they use imported wood in this way. The bath’s architect brought in from Sirmium as a prisoner of war, was expecting to receive his freedom as a wage for his contrivance, but he unexpectedly fell into worse hardship than slavery among the Scythians. Onegesios made him the bath attendant to serve him and his comrades while they were bathing.” (Blockley 1981–1983).

If we accept the most popular theory on the location of Attila’s headquarters, then we have to put Onegesios’ stone building on the Great Plain of Hungary near the river Tisza (Bóna 1993: 59–62; Thompson 2003: 91–103 etc.).⁶ Unfortunately up to now Hungarian archaeologists have not found the remains either of the capital city of Attila or of the bath of Onegesios.

Moreover we do not know what Onegesios’ nationality was. Most likely he was not of Hunnic origin (Maenchen-Helfen 1973: 389; Martindale 1980; Pritsak 1982: 459–460), so we have no clear evidence that the Huns used a bath. But we have

5 At the same time among the findings of the tombs of the Carpathian Basin from the Avar period we can find a special object type, that is, a bone mouthpiece. We cannot totally exclude the possibility that these objects also served to seal the water tanks made of skin mentioned by Constantinus Porphyrogennetos (cf. Erdélyi–Németh 1969: 180; Tomka 1971: 72, 80; Balogh–P. Fischl 2010: 203–204, 222, 253, 396, 404. etc.)

6 Moreover, we know of many Roman baths built before the arrival of the Huns in Transdanubia, the former Roman province of Pannonia, in the first half of the 5th century. It is a frequently expressed opinion that Roman infrastructure, such as roads and certain buildings could have been used in the Hun period as well. Thus we cannot exclude that during the migration of the Huns into Transdanubia these tribes could have seen (or used?) former Roman baths too.

some pieces of evidence in the case of other nomadic groups, for instance the 6th–7th-century Avars and the 11th-century Qumans. The Byzantine author, Theophylact Simocatta, wrote down the following story about one of the raids of the Avars:

“The Chagan [...] after destroying Augustae and Viminacium [...], he immediately encamped and blockaded Anchialus, and laid waste the surrounding villages; it is said that he did not disturb the hotwater baths: a story has reached us that here the Chagan's harem cleansed themselves, and that as reward for their pleasure they asked him not to demolish the bathhouses. It is said that these waters are beneficial for bathers and conducive to their health.” (Theophylactus Simocatta I, 3–4 cf. Whitby & Whitby 1997: 55; Szádeczky-Kardoss 1998: 60; Olajos 2012: 78).

Possibly, when the Kagan of the Avars, whose name was Bayan, asked for some builders from the Emperor of Byzantium in order to build some baths in his land, this request did not take the Byzantine court by surprise. In addition we are aware of the end of the story: Bayan did not build a single bath but with the help of these builders he managed to build a bridge on the river Savus and finally occupied the city of Sirmium.⁷

The following passage is from the early chronicle of the Kievan Rus, that is, *Povest' vremennih let*. Its events took place 500 years after the siege of Sirmium:

“Vladimir then adopted their advice, and on that same night, sent Slavyata out between the ramparts with a small escort and some Torks [Qumans or Polovec groups]. They first stole Svyatoslav away, and then killed Kÿtan and slew his retinue. It was then Saturday night. Itlar' was passing the night in Ratibor's palace with his escort, completely ignorant of the fate of Kÿtan. On Sunday, the following day, about the hour of matins, Ratibor called his followers to arms, and commanded them to heat a room. Vladimir then sent his servant Bandyuk to Itlar's troop with an invitation to join the prince after they had dressed in the heated room and breakfasted with Ratibor. Itlar' accepted the invitation. But when they had entered the heated room, they were locked in. The Russes then climbed atop it, and made a hole in the roof. Then Ol'beg, son of Ratibor, took his bow, and fitting an arrow to it, shot Itlar' through the heart. They also killed his whole escort. Thus Itlar' lost his life in evil fashion on February 24, the first Sunday in Lent, at the first hour of the day.” (Cross & Sherbowitz-Wetzor 1953: 180–181; Ferincz et al 2015: 167–168; Kovács 2014).

Given the above mentioned details we can establish that it is not a dicey assumption to suppose that those nomads who moved to the neighbourhood of the sedentary civilizations liked to use the baths of the Greeks, Romans or the Rus' (Szádeczky-Kardoss 1998: 228). When the nomads became more distant from these centers of civilization the opportunity to use these achievements of the civilized world was reduced. Maybe it caused a decrease in the cleaning procedures among nomadic peoples as well.

⁷ It appears in the work of Zonaras (XIV, 11, 18–19); Ephraim (1125–1229) and of Iohannes Ephesinus as well (VI, 24) (Szádeczky-Kardoss 1998: 228).

Thus it is not a coincidence that Ibn Faḍlān, who visited the Volga Bulgars, who lived far from these sedentary civilizations, in 921, almost enjoyed particularizing the disgusting details of the untidiness of these nomads:

“They shave off their beards and eat lice. A man will pursue one through the seams of his coat and crack it with his teeth. We had with us a man of this people who had converted to Islām and wo served us. One day, I saw him take a flea from his clothes and, after crushed it with his fingernails, he devoured it and on noticing me, said: ‘Delicious.’” (Lunde & Stone 2012: 23)

Or:

“Then, he stripped off the brocade garment he was wearing in order to put on the robe of honour we have just mentioned. I saw the tunic he was wearing under the brocade. It was so filthy that it was in rags, for it is their custom never to take off a piece of clothing they are wearing until it falls to pieces.” (Lunde & Stone 2012: 20)

Last but not least:

“They do not wash after polluting themselves with excrement and urine. They do not wash after major ritual pollution [i.e., having sexual intercourse], or any other pollution. They have no contact with water, especially in winter.” (Lunde & Stone 2012: 12)

The last item is especially important because it proves to be a key to solve the problem which I mentioned right at the start of this paper, namely: besides the dissimilar traditions of dissimilar groups, what other factors, such as geographical/regional differences (i.e. the distance from a sedentary civilization) or social distinctions or maybe a gender gap can explain the phenomenon of some sources writing about an untidy nomadic people while another group of sources considers the same people neat, clean and handsome?

The sentences of Ibn Faḍlān reveal the fact that the origin, the cultural background and the mentality of the author of any source is vital. Ibn Faḍlān came from a world where he could find thousands of baths in the 10th century. To use the Muslim bath i. e. the *hammāms* was a requirement for religious Muslims (Kiby 1995; Kéri 2002; Wirth 2011). They thought that they should look after their body as a gift from Allāh.

It was also an era when personal hygiene was an unimportant and neglected practice of everyday life in Europe. In the Middle Ages in Europe the authors did not stint on hostile remarks in connection with the raids, demolitions, and the mentality of the nomads but they very rarely wrote about their cleanliness or outfit. This was because after hundreds of years of bath culture of the Roman Empire in the Middle Ages the prevailing idea in connection with getting clean was based on the very popular father of the church, Saint Jerome, who wrote that bathing was not allowed for a professing Christian. So there was not a real gap between the personal hygiene of the nomads and the scripturists of the monasteries of Europe.

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