Competing Narratives between Nomadic People and their Sedentary Neighbours

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The Tether and the Sling in the Tactics of the Nomadic People

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The written sources primarily highlight the importance of light cavalry in connection with the tactics of nomadic peoples. The strategies (like horseback-archery tactics) first outlined by Herodotus are mentioned also by later authors and applied by them to the actually appearing nomadic peoples during the Middle Ages. The topoi used by contemporary authors have been accepted and emphasized by modern research for a long time in regard to the tactics used by nomadic peoples. While it is true that the utilization of light cavalry was dominant among the tactics of nomadic warfare, in the eyes of contemporary observers of that period it was a novelty. Therefore, it has been better highlighted by the sources. In addition, after analysing written and archaeological sources and taking a closer look at visual representations, it can be stated that alongside light cavalry, heavy cavalry, infantry and siege techniques were also used (for example Sinor 1981; Golden 2002; Zaseckaja 1994: 39; Keller 2004: 50; Nagy 2005: 135–148; Nagy 2010: 71–83; Pintér-Nagy 2017a).

The scholarship has examined and evaluated the armament of the nomadic peoples from the point of view of the archaeological material. In my present work, I analyse two types of weapons, the tether/lasso and the sling, which can be inferred primarily from the data of written sources. It should also be emphasized that researchers have paid relatively little attention to the role they played in the tactics of nomadic peoples.

Lasso/tether

Gyula Moravcsik was the first to deal with tethers in detail. He was the one who collected the significant part of the Greek and Latin language sources recording the use of tethers by the early medieval nomadic peoples. The Byzantinologist concluded that the habit of tether-throwing spread among the tactics of nomadic peoples of Eastern Europe in the 2nd–6th centuries A.D.. According to him, the sources do not mention their use by later nomadic peoples (Moravcsik 1967: 276–280). Following the work of Gyula Moravcsik, Katalin Kőhalmi (1972: 92), Denis

Sinor (1981: 141–142)[1] and Peter Golden (2002: 151) mentioned the tool in relation to the battle tactics of nomadic peoples.

The tether can be regarded as a traditional nomadic tool that was primarily used on horseback during the shepherding of bigger animals. In the meantime, its role in the warfare tactics of nomadic people can be observed as well. In this case, the tether was used to catch the enemy either in order to ask for ransom or to sell them as slaves (Róna-Tas 1961: 81; Moravcsik 1967: 276–280; Kőhalmi 1972: 82; Sinor 1981: 141; Golden 2002: 151). Herodotus (VII. 85. cf. Muraközi 2000a: 485) was the first to acknowledge the use of tethers as weapons. He mentions a nomadic people called the Sagartians – who belonged to the Persians, and who used a net-ended lasso. We also know from written sources that this tool played a significant role in the life of the Parthians. Their army also had a separate tether throwing unit (*Suda* 942). Written sources also mention the use of tethers in the battle tactics of the Sarmatian tribes living on the South Russian steppes (Pausanias I. 21, 5; Pomponius Mela I. 114). In connection with the Alans, Josephus Flavius mentions the tool while describing a specific combat event.[2] Pseudo Hegesippus (V. 50), who used the work of Josephus Flavius, wrote in a general way that the Alans were very skilled in throwing tethers and that it was a characteristic part of their battle tactics. In addition to the Greek and Latin sources, the tethers of the Huns are also mentioned in Syrian sources. Sozomenos recorded a specific case of the use of tethers by the Huns in his church-related work.[3] There are other historical works concerning the use of tethers as a weapon by the Huns, such as Ammianus Marcellinus (XXXI. 2, 9–10. cf. Szepesy 1993: 587) and Syrian sources and the works of Pseudo-Kallisthenes (264), Pseudo-Ephraem (189 [6]), and Joshua the Stylite (63) (cf. Kmoskó 2004: 77, 85, 121).

After the fall of the Hun Empire, in the first half of the 6th century, in the case of the nomadic peoples of South Russian steppes, written sources mention the use of tethers as a weapon. For example, Malalas (XVIII. 21. cf. Jeffreys et al. 1986: 254) mentions the use of tethers in relation to the attempt to capture three Eastern Roman generals. Written sources do not mention this tool in relation to nomadic peoples after the 6th century. It only appears again in references in "The Secret

1 Sinor (1981: 142) also mentioned a quotation from the work of Plano Carpini which might have been related to the Mongolians' use of tethers. He has suggested the possibility that the ropes the Mongolians used for towing war-machines could also have been used as tethers (Plano Carpini VI. 4. cf. Györffy 1965: 79; Sinor 1981: 142).

2 The author describes in relation to the Alanian attack against Armenia that the Alans threw a tether on the king of Armenia, Tiridates, and almost captured him. However, Tiridates cut the loop with his sword and escaped (Josephus Flavius VII. 7. cf. Révay 1999: 518).

3 Sozomenos has recorded a fascinating story in relation to this. Its star is Theotimos, the bishop of the city of Tomis and Scythia Minor, who tamed the *"bestial"* Huns with his gifts and hospitality. In spite of this, one of the Huns cooked up a trick and while talking with the bishop leaning on his shield, he tried to fling a tether on him and capture him. His arm, however, stiffened and did not move, until Theotimos begged God and asked him to remove the *"invisible shackles"* (Sozomenos VII. 26, 8; Moravcsik 1967: 278).

History of the Mongols" and sources from the Mamluk Age.[4] The use of this device as a weapon could have been adopted by the people who settled adjacent to the nomads, for which we have some information in relation with the Goths in the work of Olympiodoros and Malalas.[5] We can also observe the tether as part of the equipment of Byzantine soldiers in two Byzantine strategy works, *Strategikon* by Maurikios (I. 2. 7.) and *Taktika* by Leo the Wise (V. 3; VI. 10).

Authors use various terminology to describe the tethers of nomadic people and some of these terms can be used to deduct the tool's structure and also its type. In the case of the nomadic people called the Sagartians by Herodotus, the author uses the simply built-up term σειρά meaning 'tether and lasso'.[6] In the *Suda* lexicon (942) the term σειρά can be found in the context of the tether of the Parthians. Pausanias (I. 21, 5) also uses the term σειρά in relation to the Sarmatians (Györkösy–Kapitánffy–Tegyey 1990: 952), and we can find the term rope with a knot (*laqueus*) used by Pomponius Mela (I. 114; Finály 1884: 1109). The tether of the Alans is called βρόχος by Josephus Flavius (VII. 4), a term which has several meanings: 'rope, rope with a knot, tether and net' (Györkösy–Kapitánffy–Tegyey 1990: 196; Liddel et al. 1958: 331). Pseudo Hegesippos (V. 50), who used the work of Josephus Flavius, used the term *laqueus* – a 'rope' fit with a simple knot – which originated in the works of Pomponius Mela. Among the sources mentioning lasso throwing by the Hun army, the term *lacinia* that can be found in the work of Ammianus Marcellinus (XXXI. 2, 9–10), meaning 'tape' (Glare 2000: 994).[7] In Sozomenos' work (VII. 26, 8), this weapon is represented by two terms: βρόχος and σχοινίον. Of these, the term σχοινίον means 'lace, rope', which was also used to refer to tether (Györkösy–Kapitánffy–Tegyey 1990: 1046; Liddel et al. 1958: 1747). The term βρόχος could mean rope, rope fitted with a knot, tether, or net (Györkösy–Kapitánffy–Tegyey 1990: 196; Liddel et al. 1958: 331). In this case, in relation to the same event (the unsuccessful capture of Bishop Theotimos), this author of ecclesiastical history refers to the same weapon using two separate terms (Sozomenos VII. 26, 8). The term *prwyē/prwyē* used by the three Syrian authors to refer to tether most probably means 'strap' (Kmoskó 2004: 77, 85, 121).

4 In "The Secret History of the Mongols", it can be observed in one section, when Temüjin was pursued with a tether on a rod (SHM: 91). Sources form the Mamluk Age mention that the Mongols also used tethers in order to displace heavy armored fighters from their saddles (Waterson 2007: 166).

5 From the works of Olympiodoros (18. fc. Blockley 1983: 183) it turns out that Sarus was captured with the help of a tether by Ataulf, the king of Goths in 412. Olympiodoros used the term σοκκος for this device (Olympiodoros 18). According to Malalas (XIV. 23. cf. Jeffreys et al. 1986: 199), around 435, the Goth Areobindos used a tether to pull his opponent off his horse.

6 This term pertains to a simple type of tether ending in a loop (Györkösy–Kapitánffy–Tegyey 1990: 952), but the author also briefly describes the device made of leather and ending in a mesh (Herodotus VII. 85).

7 This term cannot be observed in relation to other nomadic peoples' tether.

The tethers/lassos that are mentioned in the sources can be classified into three types. We can distinguish a lasso made of leather, with a net fitted on its end, which can be observed with the Sargatian people. This type is mentioned by Herodotus (VII. 85) who describes how they approached the enemy, threw their tether fitted with a net on them and dragged the person or the horse that got caught up in the net away. We can also observe the tethered stick; its main part was a pole, a couple of meters long, that the tether's user equipped with loose loops of rope; which he could use by hurling the loop attached to the V-shaped fork at the end or using it to punch with its pointy end. This type appears in sources related to the Mongols (SHM: 91).[8] However, most of the data in the sources point to the conclusion that tethers had simple, looped ends. In the case of Eastern European nomadic peoples – the Sarmatians, Alans and Huns – this type can be assumed. The authors most often used the Greek terms βρόχος, σχοινίον, σειρά, and the Latin term *laqueus*. Some of the authors also mentioned how this tool was used. From the description of Pausanias we can find out that the Sarmatians approached the enemy, threw their tethers on them, then turned their horses around and started racing in the opposite direction, thus pulling the enemy to the ground and dragging them away (I. 21, 5. Trans. Muraközy 2000b: 34). A similar description can be found in the *Suda* lexicon (942) of the Parthians, who, upon approaching the enemy, threw their tethers on them before dragging/jerking the captured prisoners away. It is clear from the data of the sources that tethers were used on horseback for military purposes as well as for livestock farming (Fig. 1, 2).[9]

8 There are also ethnographic dimensions of the use of the tether on a rod, which seems to have been used primarily in animal husbandry in order to catch large animals. By affixing a tether to a stick, it was easier to place the rope on the neck of the animals (Szabadfalvi 1981: 386). This tool is approximately the size of a person. There is a loop at the upper end of the stick, which is attached to it, and the other end of the rope is a sliding loop, which slips up and down. The rider held this tool in his right hand or under his arm (Róna-Tas 1961: 81).

9 In connection with Sozomenos' source-segment about the Huns (see footnote 13) Maenchen-Helfen has raised the possibility that the nomads could have used the tether in infantry tactics. Sozomenos describes (VII. 6, 8), that a Hun was standing against his shield while negotiating with Theotimus, the bishop of the city of Tomis and then attempted to capture the clergyman with his tether. Considering that before the action against Theotimus the Hun was leaning against his shield, Maenchen-Helfen argues that the "barbarian" was trying to capture the bishop on foot (Maenchen-Helfen 1997: 184). However, Nikonorov, on the other hand, believes that this argument is unfounded. In his opinion, it cannot be unambiguously decided whether the Hun warrior was standing on the ground or sitting on a horse (Nikonorov 2010: 269). Indeed, Sozomenos' work only reveals that the Hun, before attempting to cast a tether on Theotimus, was leaning on his shield while negotiating with the bishop. It is important to emphasize in connection with the source-segment that this event did not take place during the battle.

It is apparent from the listed data that the tether was mentioned as a weapon of nomadic peoples by authors between the 2nd and 6th centuries A.D. However, after the 6th century until the Mongolian Age, we do not have data from the sources concerning its use among nomads. Still, we cannot state unequivocally that the nomadic peoples did not use tethers from the 6th century A.D. until the Mongols. On the one hand, it should be emphasized that the tether was not only used as a weapon, but it was also an important tool for nomads in shepherding. Consequently, there is little likelihood that, for example, the Avars, or the conquering Hungarians would not have used it for managing livestock. On the other hand, it could have been an important tool for capturing prisoners. In case of the Avars, sources refer to them dragging away slaves from Slavs and also capturing prisoners from the Byzantine territories (Szádeczky-Kardoss 1998: 21, 219–220; Pohl 1988: 40; Szádeczky-Kardoss 1994: 207; Szádeczky-Kardoss 1996: 21).

We have data from later periods about the slave trade of the Hungarians, Pechenegs, and Cumanians. It can be assumed that these people used this tool not only for managing livestock but also for capturing prisoners (HKÍF 1995: 34, 38, 45; Polgár 2006: 99–112; Kovács 2014: 60). In relation to this issue, it is important to emphasize the significance of two sources.

During this period (7th–13th centuries) the tether was mentioned in two military works (Maurikios: *Strategikon*, Leo the Wise: *Taktika*) as an element of the Byzantine army's weaponry. Maurikios (I. 2. 7) mentions it in one passage, Leo the Wise in two places (V. 3; VI. 10). In all the three cases, both sources use the same term: λωρόσοκκον.[10] This term can be considered unique, as it cannot be found in other sources in relation to the tether. The term is a compound created from the words λωρος and σοκκον. The Latin equivalent of λωρος is *lorum* meaning 'strap' (Liddel et al. 1958: 106). The term σοκκον has two meanings, it can be observed in sources to mean primarily 'sack' (Blockley 1983: 216), while its other meaning 'lasso' was used infrequently by ancient and medieval authors (Liddel et al. 1958, 1620).[11] The translation of λωρόσοκκον is therefore not completely clear in these strategic works, but it is possible to consider it basically a 'tether with a strap'.[12] Thus, in the case of nomadic peoples during the period in question, there is no mention of the tether by the sources, but two authors mention that the tether was used as military equipment in this period (7th–13th century) in the Byzantine Empire. In connection with Maurikios' military work, it is important to notice the origin of the source-segment that mentions the tether. The passage includes the iron stirrup directly next to the tether in the listed equipment and weaponry. While the research does not go into details concerning the problems of the origin of the tether, there are several theories about the origin of the stirrup. Samu Szádeczky-Kardoss believes that even though the author (who is familiar with strategy) of the passage in the *Strategikon* that mentions the stirrup does not

10 Maurikios mentions this tool as an accessory to the saddle, in the enumeration of the armour and instruments of the Byzantine cavalry. According to the Byzantine emperor, who was an expert in generalship, the saddle of the Byzantine army horsemen had two iron stirrups, a tether, a shackle and a saddlebag which could store 3-4 days of food for a Byzantine soldier (Maurikios I. 2. 7. cf. Dennis–Gamillscheg 1981: 81). Leo the Wise took one of his two passages mentioning the tether completely from Maurikios. That passage enumerates the accessories of the Byzantine cavalry's saddle (Leo the Wise VI. 10. cf. Dennis 2010: 87). In another passage by Leo the Wise, he describes the armament and equipment of the Byzantine army in general, and among other things, mentions the tether alongside the large saddlebag (including a flint and tinder), the sling and the shackle (Leo the Wise V. 3. cf. Dennis 2010: 77).

11 Additionally, the use of the term σοκκον can be observed in the works of Olympiodoros, where it describes part of the equipment of the Gothic king Ataulf (Olympiodoros 18).

12 Because of the two meanings of σοκκον, the translation of λωρόσοκκον is not clear in the text editions. In the Romanian and German translations of Mihăescu and Dennis of Maurikios' military work, the translation "leather bag equipped with straps" can be found (Mihăescu 1970: 53, 397; Dennis 1981: 81). In the English editions of the *Strategikon* and *Taktika*, the translation is "tether equipped with a strap" (Dennis 1984: 13; Dennis 2010: 77, 87).

specifically describe the fact that the Byzantines had taken over this instrument from the Avars, this can be inferred from the context. According to him, Maurikios recommends imitating the Avar warrior's equipment for the imperial army's leadership concerning the use of the iron stirrup in the Byzantine army, even if he does not specifically refer to this circumstance. Before and after the paragraph mentioning the stirrup, the Avars are clearly named as the ones who set an example for Byzantine warriors with their horse armor and their cavalry-jackets.[13] Recently, however, the idea has been considered that the spread of the European use of the stirrups commenced due to Byzantine and not Avar mediation. The main argument in this regard is that Maurikios does not explicitly point out that the Byzantine Army should take over the use of this device on the basis of the Avars' model. While in other cases the Byzantine emperor gives the exact origin of other weapons, he does not do it with the stirrup. According to Freeden, similarly to other tools/weapons,[14] in the case of the stirrup, it can be said that its connections in the Byzantine area are much clearer (Freeden 1995: 622, 624). The possibility has also been raised that Byzantium could have got acquainted with this instrument through the trade connections of the Silk Road. However, this assumption cannot be proved unequivocally (Csiky 2013: 77; Csiky 2015: 391–399). In any case, the philological arguments of Szádeczky-Kardoss seem more convincing regarding Avar mediation. In this case, the possibility, – which cannot be proved unambiguously – of the Byzantines, having taken over the use of the tether from the Avars (as well) is raised. Additionally, this – fairly uncertain – data besides the listed arguments above may refer to the Avars using the tether in their tactics despite the fact that the authors do not explicitly mention this instrument among the Avars' equipment.

Sling

So far little attention has been paid by scholarship to the use of slings by the nomadic armed forces. This is mainly due to the scarcity of sources mentioning them in relation to the nomads.[15] We have two highly controversial and uncertain sources about the Avars (Theodóros Synkellos XIX 305, 37–306, 12; Plótinos

13 Szádeczky-Kardoss emphasizes that Maurikios' report is consistent with the evidence of archaeological materials, that is, in Europe, the iron stirrup appears first in the archeological materials associated with the Avars (Szádeczky-Kardoss 1983: 323–324).

14 For example, the three-edged arrowhead and the reed-leaf shaped spearhead (Freeden 1995: 622, 624).

15 Even though written sources do not mention slings in relation to the Scythians, the archaeological material suggests that these nomadic people also used this weapon. Scythian graves contain stones that have been identified by researchers as projectiles shot from slings (Meljukova 1964: 68; further references: Scholtz 2015: 125–139).

Thessalonikeos 9–12), and one source about the conquering Hungarians (Gerhard 12).

The use of slings became widespread in the Roman army and also later, during the Middle Ages, in the Byzantine army and in Western Europe (Hahn 1963: 87; Coulston 2002: 13). Since it has a simple structure, it was primarily a weapon of the common people.[16] The sling itself could be easily fabricated; while its use, on the contrary, was only superficially easy, since accurate and precise targeting required great expertise and skill.[17] In the sources, it mainly appeared as a weapon of the light infantry. In addition, it could be found among the weaponry of light cavalry as well, and was also used during sieges (Hahn 1963: 87; Kolias 1988: 257–258; Anonymus 13, 32, 32, 35–37. cf. Dennis 1985: 41, 99, 100, 109; Nikephoros Ouranos 4, 65. cf. McGeer 1995: 91, 159, 209).

The use of slings among the early Avar army can be found in a contemporary and a non-contemporary source, which refer to the Avar use of the sling during the time of Maurikios and the siege of Thessaloniki (Plótinos Thessalonikeos 9–12. cf. Szádeczky-Kardoss 1998: 119) and the siege of Constantinople (Theodóros Synkellos XIX. 305, 37–306, 12. cf. Szádeczky-Kardoss 1998: 187).

The term found in written sources, the expression σφενδόνη (and its Latin equivalent *funda*) refers to a simpler type of sling. This weapon consists of two straps that are joined together with a thicker piece of leather that held the projectile. The slinger placed the projectile in the weapon and after that swung it one or more times around his head, released the strap and let the projectile fly away (Kolias 1988: 255–256).[18]

The meaning of the term βολαι χεράδων in the work of Teodóros Synkellos (XIX. 305, 37–306, 12) is not clear; it could have been a device capable of launching some kind of stone/slingstone (Kolias 1988).[19]

In addition to the Avars, we can conclude from the work of Gerhard (Gerhard 12. cf. HKÍF 235) that the Conquering Hungarians also used slings. A contemporary source mentioned that at the siege of Augsburg arrows and rocks

16 According to McGeer's phrasing, it was the poor man's weapon (McGeer 1995: 209).

17 Vegetius also emphasizes the usefulness of this weapon for the earlier period. According to his opinion, the use of slings was easy, it was an easy-to-carry instrument and its use was particularly easy in stone-rich areas (Vegetius I. 17. cf. Várady 1963: 766).

18 Apart from this simple version, there are two known types, but they do not appear in the context of nomadic weaponry. The staff sling (*fustibalus*) is missing the flinging strap which is replaced by a cubit-long hooked staff (Kolias 1988: 255). The bearded sling (*mattiobarbulus*) was a lead bullet fastened to a strap, which was thrown more or less like the hammer of the hammer throwers. This weapon caused very serious wounds. (Vegetius I. 15. cf. Várady 1963: 766).

19 Kardaras believes that it is not clear from the sources that the Avars could have used this type of weapon (Kardaras 2018: 158–159). As I already mentioned, there is limited, doubtful and uncertain data available for the use of slings among the nomadic people. However, it cannot be completely ruled out that they were used in the nomadic armies (for example, the slingstones identified in the Scythian finds – see, footnote 17).

flew across the city. It used the term *lapideus* (Gerhard 12) meaning stone projectile, in addition to the simple term 'stone' (Glare 2000: 1001). Either a sling or a catapult could have been used to launch these projectiles. Even though the author mentions siege instruments (*instrumentum*) in this passage (Gerhard 12), it can be assumed that they used slings as well as catapults during the siege.

The role of slingers, who were deployed in open battles, was to break the opponents' unified frontline. Sources emphasize that the horses became very distracted and untameable by the sling projectiles and, as a result, the military order of the opponent disintegrated (Anonymus 13, 32, 35–37. cf. Dennis 1985, 41, 99, 100, 109). Therefore, they had a similar role as the light cavalry archers in the nomadic armies; maybe this is the reason why slings did not become widespread in nomadic people's armies.

Summary

I have examined two types of weapons (the tether and the sling) and their significance in the strategy of nomadic peoples, as found in the written sources. Of these two, the tether can be considered a traditional nomadic tool. Tether throwing as a battle tactic was widespread among the Eastern European nomadic people – the Sarmatians, Alans, and Huns – between the 2nd and 6th centuries A.D., according to the written sources. However, later this tool cannot be observed in the sources, and it only reappears again in the sources of the Mongol Age. Of course, it cannot be stated unequivocally that nomadic people did not use tethers from the 6th century until the Mongols. It can be assumed that these people did not only use this tool in animal husbandry, but also when they captured prisoners. It appears that the use of tethers became widespread by this time in the Byzantine army, since its use was commemorated by Maurikios and Leo the Wise in relation to the armament of the Byzantine army. Contrary to the tether, the sling was has been mentioned by authors only in a couple of cases in relation to the nomadic people. Its use cannot be verified apart from a couple of uncertain sources.

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Source of figures

Figs 1, 2: http://warfare.ga/Turk/Turkmen-Haz2152.htm?i=2