From the third century on, the Roman Empire felt pressure from the migration of the Germans and other peoples across the boders of the Roman Empire. An impetus for this expansion was the growth of Steppe empire led by a Turkic people known as the Huns. The growth of similar steppe empires in East Asia (Hsiung-Nu) and Central Asia (Efthalite Huns) casued the breakup of the Han Dynasty in China and the Gupta Empire in India. Below is a description of the "western" Huns by the Roman Historian Ammianus Marcellinus.

Ammianus Marcellinus was a fourth-century Roman soldier and historian. He wrote the penultimate major historical account surviving from Antiquity. His work chronicled in Latin the history of Rome from 96 to 378, although only the sections covering the period 353 –378 are extant[[1]](#footnote-1).

**[Excerpted from Ammianus Marcellinus, *History of Rome from Constantine to Valens,* C. D. Yonge, tr. (London: George Bell and Sons, 1885), pp.**

The swift wheel of fortune, which continually alternates adversity with prosperity, was giving Bellona the Furies for her allies, and arming her for war; and now transferred our disasters to the east, as many presages and portents foreshowed by undoubted signs.

For after many true prophecies uttered by diviners and augurs, dogs were seen to recoil from howling wolves, and the birds of night constantly uttered querulous and mournful cries; and lurid sunrises made the mornings dark. Also, at Antioch, among the tumults and squabbles of the populace, it had come to be a custom for anyone who fancied himself ill-treated to cry out, in a licentious manner: "May Valens be burned alive." And the voices of the criers were constantly heard ordering wood to be carried to warm the baths of Valens, which had been built under the superintendence of the Emperor himself.

All which circumstances all but pointed out in express words that the end of the Emperor's life was at hand. Besides all these things, the ghost of the King of Armenia, and the miserable shades of those who had lately been put to death in the affair of Theodorus, agitated numbers of people with terrible alarms, appearing to them in their sleep, and shrieking out verses of horrible import.

Last of all, when the ancient walls of Chalcedon were thrown down in order to build a bath at Constantinople, and the stones were torn asunder, on one squared stone which was hidden in the very centre of the walls these Greek verses were found engraved, which gave a full revelation of what was to happen:

"But when young wives and damsels blithe,   
in dances that delight,  
Shall glide along the city streets,   
with garlands gayly bright; And when  
these walls, with sad regrets,   
shall fall to raise a bath, Then shall the  
Huns in multitude break forth   
with might and wrath,   
By force of arms thebarrier-stream of Ister  
they shall cross,   
O'er Scythic ground and Moesian lands   
spreading dismay and loss;   
They shall Pannonian horsemen brave,   
andGallic soldiers slay,   
And nought but loss of life and breath   
their courseshall ever stay."

The following circumstances were the original cause of all the destruction and various calamities which the fury of Mars roused up, throwing everything into confusion by his usual ruinous violence: the people called Huns, slightly mentioned in the ancient records, live beyond the Sea of Azov[[2]](#footnote-2), on the border of the Frozen Ocean, and are a race savage beyond all parallel.

At the very moment of their birth the cheeks of their infant children are deeply marked by an iron, in order that the usual vigor of their hair, instead of growing at the proper season, may be withered by the wrinkled scars; and accordingly they grow up without beards, and consequently without any beauty, like eunuchs, though they all have closely knit and strong limbs and plump necks; they are of great size, and bow-legged, so that you might fancy them two-legged beasts, or the stout figures which are hewn out in a rude manner with an axe on the posts at the end of bridges.

They are certainly in the shape of men, however uncouth, but are sohardy that they neither require fire nor well-flavored food, but live on the roots of such herbs as they get in the fields, or on the half-raw flesh of any animal, which they merely warm rapidly by placing in between their own thighs and the back of their horses.

They never shelter themselves under roofed houses, but avoid them, as people ordinarily avoid sepulchres as things not fitted for common use. Nor is there even to be found among them a cabin thatched with reed; but they wander about, roaming over the mountains and the woods, and accustom themselves to bear frost and hunger and thirst from their very cradles. And even when abroad they never enter a house unless under the compulsion of some extreme necessity; nor, indeed, do they think people under roofs as safe as others.

They wear linen clothes, or else garments made of the skins of field-mice; nor do they wear a different dress out of doors from that which they wear at home; but after a tunic is once put round their necks, however much it becomes worn, it is never taken off or changed till, from long decay, it becomes actually so ragged as to fall to pieces.

They cover their heads with round caps, and their shaggy legs with the skins of kids; their shoes are not made on any lasts, but are so unshapely as to hinder them from walking with a free gait. And for this reason they are not well suited to infantry battles, but are nearly always on horseback, their horses being ill-shaped, but hardy; and sometimes they even sit upon them like women if they want to do anything more conveniently. There is not a person in the whole nation who cannot remain on his horse day and night. On horseback they buy and sell, they take their meat and drink, and there they recline on the narrow neck of their steed, and yield to sleep so deep as to indulge in every variety of dream.

And when any deliberation is to take place on any weighty matter, they all hold their common council on horseback. They are not under the authority of a king, but are contented with the irregular government of their nobles, and under their lead they force their way through all obstacles.

Sometimes, when provoked, they fight; and when they go into battle, they form in a solid body, and utter all kinds of terrific yells. They are very quick in their operations, of exceeding speed, and fond of surprising their enemies. With a view to this, they suddenly disperse, then reunite, and again, after having inflicted vast loss upon the enemy, scatter themselves over the whole plain in irregular formations: always avoiding the fort or an intrenchment.

And in one respect you may pronounce them the most formidable of all warriors, for when at a distance they use missiles of various kinds, tipped with sharpened bones instead of the usual points of javelins, and these bones are admirably fastened into the shaft of the javelin or arrow; but when they are at close quarters they fight with the sword, without any regard for their own safety; and often while their antagonists are warding off their blows they entangle them with twisted cords, so that, their hands being fettered, they lose all power of either riding or walking.

None of them plough, or even touch a plough handle; for they have no settled abode, but are homeless and lawless, perpetually wandering with their wagons, which they make their homes; in fact, they seem to be people always in flight. Their wives live in these wagons, and there weave their miserable garments; and here, too, they sleep with their husbands, and bring up their children till they reach the age of puberty; nor, if asked, can any one of them tell you where he was born, as he was conceived in one place, born in another at a great distance, and brought up in another still more remote.

In truces they are treacherous and inconstant, being liable to change their minds at every breeze of every fresh hope which presents itself, giving themselves up wholly to the impulse and inclination of the moment; and, like brute beasts, they are utterly ignorant of the distinction between right and wrong. They express themselves with great ambiguity and obscurity; have no respect for any religion or superstition whatever; are immoderately covetous of gold; and are so fickle and irascible that they very often, on the sameday that they quarrel with their companions without any provocation, again become reconciled to them without any mediator.

This active and indomitable race, being excited by an unrestrainable desire of plundering the possessions of others, went on ravaging and slaughtering all the nations in their neighborhood till they reached the Alani, who were formerly called the Massagetae; and from what country these Alani came, or what territories they inhabit - since my subject has led me so far - it is expedient now to explain, after showing the confusion existing in the accounts of the geographers, who, at last, have found out the truth.

The Danube, which is greatly increased by other rivers falling into it, passes through the territory of the Sauromatae [Scythians], which extends as far as the river Don, the boundary between Asia and Europe. On the other side of this river the Alani inhabit the enormous deserts of Scythia, deriving their own name from the mountains around; and they, like the Persians, having gradually subdued all the bordering nations by repeated victories, have united them to themselves and comprehended them under their own name. Of these other tribes the Neuri inhabit the inland districts, being near the highest mountain chains, which are both precipitous and covered with the everlasting frost of the north. Next to them are the Budini, and the Geloni, a race of exceeding ferocity, who flay the enemies they have slain in battle, and make of their skins clothes for themselves and trappings for their horses. Next to the Geloni are the Agathyrsi, who dye both their bodies and their hair of a blue color, the lower classes using spots few in number and small; the nobles broad spots; close and thick, and of a deeper hue.

Next to those are the Melanchlaenae and the Anthropophagi, who roam about upon different tracts of land and live on human flesh. And these men are so avoided on account of their horrid food that all the tribes which were their neighbors have removed to a distance from them. And in this way the whole of that region to the northeast, till you come to the Chinese, is uninhabited.

On the other side the Alani again extend to the east, near the territories of the Amazons, and are scattered among many populous and wealthy nations, stretching to the parts of Asia which, as I am told, extend up to the Ganges, a river which passes through the country of the Indians, and falls into the Southern Ocean.

Then the Alani, being thus divided among the two quarters of the globe - the various tribes which make up the whole nation it is not worth while to enumerate - although widely separated, wander, like the nomads, over enormous districts. But in the progress of time all these tribes came to be united under one generic appellation, and are called Alani.

They have no cottages, and never use the plough, but live solely on meat and plenty of milk, mounted on their wagons which they cover with a curved awning made of the bark of trees, and then drive them through their boundless deserts. And when they come to any pasture land, they pitch their wagons in a circle, and live like a herd of beasts, eating up all the forage - carrying, as it were, their cities with them in their wagons. In them the husbands sleep with their wives - in them their children are born and brought up; these wagons, in short, are their perpetual habitation, and, wherever they fix them, that place they look upon as their home.

They drive before them their flocks and herds to their pasturage; and about all other cattle, they are especially careful of their horses. The fields in that country are always green, and are interspersed with patches of fruit-trees, so that, wherever they go, there is no dearth either of food for themselves or fodder for their cattle. And this is caused by the moisture of the soil and the number of the rivers which flow through these districts.

All their old people, and especially all the weaker sex, keep close to the wagons and occupy themselves in the lighter employments. But the young men, who from their earliest childhood are trained to the use of the horses, think it beneath them to walk. They are also all trained by careful discipline of various sorts to become skilful warriors. And this is the reason why the Persians, who are originally of Scythian extraction, are very skilful in war.

Nearly all the Alani are men of great stature and beauty. Their hair is somewhat yellow, their eyes are terribly fierce; the lightness of their armor renders them rapid in their movements, and they are in every respect equal to the Huns, only more civilized in their food and their manner of life. They plunder and hunt as far as the Sea of Azov and the Cimmerian Bosporus, ravaging also Armenia and Media.

And as ease is a delightful thing to men of a quiet and placid disposition, so danger and war are a pleasure to the Alani, and among them that man is called happy who has lost his life in battle; for those who grow old, or who go out of the world from accidental sicknesses, they pursue with bitter reproaches as degenerate and cowardly. Nor is there anything of which they boast with more pride than of having killed a man; and the most glorious spoils they esteem the scalps which they have torn from the heads of those whom they have slain, which they put as trappings and ornaments on their war horses.

Nor is there any temple or shrine seen in their country, nor even any cabin thatched with straw, their only idea of religion being to plunge a naked sword into the ground with barbaric ceremonies, and they worship that with great respect, as Mars, the presiding deity of the regions over which they wander.

They presage the future in a most remarkable manner, for they collect a number of great twigs of osier, then with certain secret incantations they separate them from one another on particular days; and from them they learn clearly what is about to happen.

They have no idea of slavery, inasmuch as they themselves are all born of noble families; and those whom even now they appoint to be judges are always men of proved experience and skill in war. But now let us return to the subject which we proposed to ourselves.

The Huns, after having traversed the territories of the Alani, and especially of that tribe of them who border on the Gruthungi, and who are called Tanaitae, and having slain many of them and acquired much plunder they made a treaty of friendship and alliance with those who remained. And when they had united them to themselves, with increased boldness they made a sudden incursion into the extensive and fertile districts of Ermenrichus, a very warlike prince, and one whom his numerous gallant actions of every kind had rendered formidable to all the neighboring nations.

He was astonished at the violence of this sudden tempest, and although, like a prince whose power was well established, he long attempted to hold his ground, he was at last overpowered by a dread of the evils impending over his country, which were exaggerated by common report, till he terminated his fear of great danger by a voluntary death.

After his death Vithimiris was made king. He for some time maintained a resistance to the Alani, relying on the aid of other tribes of the Huns whom by large promises of pay he had won over to his party; but, after having suffered many losses, he was defeated by superior numbers and slain in battle. He left an infant son named Viderichus, of whom Alatheus and Saphrax undertook the guardianship, both generals of great experience and proved courage. And when they, yielding to the difficulties of the crisis, had given up all hope of being able to make an effectual resistance, they retired with caution till they came to the river Dniester, which lies between the Danube and the Dnieper, and flows through a vast extent of country.

When Athanaric, the chief magistrate of the Thuringians, had become informed of those unexpected occurrences, he prepared to maintain his ground, with a resolution to rise up in strength should he be assailed as the others had been.

At last he pitched his camp at a distance in a very favorable spot near the banks of the Dniester and the valleys of the Gruthungi, and sent Muderic, who afterward became duke of the Arabian frontier, with Lagarimanus and others of the nobles, with orders to advance for twenty miles, to reconnoitre the approach of the enemy; while in the mean time he himself, without delay, marshalled his troops in line of battle.

However, things turned out in a manner very contrary to his expectations. For the Huns - being very sagacious in conjectures - suspecting that there must be a considerable multitude farther off, contrived to pass beyond those they had seen, and arranged themselves to take their rest where there was nothing at hand to disturb them; and then, when the moon dispelled the darkness of night, they forded the river, which was the best plan which presented itself, and fearing lest the pickets at the outposts might give the alarm to the distant camp, they made all possible speed and advanced with the hope of surprising Athanaric himself.

He was stupefied at the suddenness of their onset, and, after losing many of his men, was compelled to flee for refuge to the precipitous mountains in the neighborhood, where, being wholly bewildered with the strangeness of this occurrence, and the fear of greater evils to come, he began to fortify with lofty walls all the territory between the banks of the River Pruth and the Danube, where it passes through the land of the Taifali; and he completed this line of fortification with great diligence, thinking that by this step he should secure his own personal safety.

While this important work was going on, the Huns kept pressing on his traces with great speed, and they would have overtaken and destroyed him if they had not been forced to abandon the pursuit from being impeded by the great quantity of their booty. In the mean time a report spread extensively through the other nations of the Goths, that a race of men, hitherto unknown, had suddenly descended like a whirlwind from the lofty mountains, as if they had risen from some secret recess of the earth, and were ravaging and destroying everything which came in their way. And then the greater part of the population which, because of their want of necessaries, had deserted Athanaric, resolved to flee and to seek a home remote from all knowledge of the barbarians; and after a long deliberation where to fix their abode, they resolved that a retreat into Thrace was the most suitable for these two reasons: first of all, because it is a district most fertile in grass; and also because, by the great breadth of the Danube, it is wholly separated from the barbarians, who were already exposed to the thunderbolts of foreign warfare. And the whole population of the tribe adopted this resolution unanimously.

Accordingly, under the command of their leader Alavivus, they occupied the bank of the Danube, and having sent ambassadors to Valens, they humbly entreated to be received by him as his subjects, promising to live quietly, and to furnish a body of auxiliary troops if any necessity for such a force should arise.

While these events were passing in foreign countries, a terrible rumor arose that the tribes of the North were planning new and unprecedented attacks upon us; and that over the whole region, which extends from the country of the Marcomanni and Quadi to Pontus, a barbarian host, composed of different distant nations, which had suddenly been driven by force from their own country, was now, with all their families, wandering about in different directions on the banks of the river Danube.

At first this intelligence was lightly treated by our people, because they were not in the habit of hearing of any wars in those remote districts till they were terminated either by victory or by treaty.

But presently, as the belief in these occurrences grew stronger, being confirmed, too, by the arrival of the foreign ambassadors, who, with prayers and earnest entreaties, begged that the people thus driven from their homes and now encamped on the other side of the river might be kindly received by us, the affair seemed a cause of joy rather than of fear, according to the skillful flatterers who were always extolling and exaggerating the good fortune of the Emperor; congratulating him that an embassy had come from the farthest corners of the earth unexpectedly, offering him a large body of recruits; and that, by combining the strength of his own nation with these foreign forces, he would have an army absolutely invincible; observing further that, by the yearly payment for military reinforcements which came in every year from the provinces, a vast treasure of gold might be accumulated in his coffers.

Full of this hope, he sent forth several officers to bring this ferocious people and their wagons into our territory. And such great pains were taken to gratify this nation which was destined to overthrow the Empire of Rome, that not one was left behind, not even of those who were stricken with mortal disease. Moreover, having obtained permission of the Emperor to cross the Danube and to cultivate some districts in Thrace, they crossed the stream day and night, without ceasing, embarking in troops on board ships and rafts, and canoes made of the hollow trunks of trees, in which enterprise, as the Danube is the most difficult of all rivers to navigate, and was at that time swollen with continual rains, a great many were drowned, who, because they were too numerous for the vessels, tried to swim across, and in spite of all their exertions were swept away by the stream.

In this way, through the turbulent zeal of violent people, the ruin of the Roman Empire was brought on. This, at all events, is neither obscure nor uncertain that the unhappy officers who were intrusted with the charge of conducting the multitude of the barbarians across the river, though they repeatedly endeavored to calculate their numbers, at last abandoned the attempt as hopeless; and the man who would wish to ascertain the number might as well - as the most illustrious of poets says - attempt to count the waves in the African Sea, or the grains of sand tossed about by the zephyrs.

Let, however, the ancient annals be accredited which record that the Persian host which was led into Greece was, while encamped on the shores of the Hellespont, and making a new and artificial sea, numbered in battalions at Doriscus; a computation which has been unanimously regarded by all posterity as fabulous.

But after the innumerable multitudes of different nations, diffused over all our provinces and spreading themselves over the vast expanses of our plains, who filled all the champaign country and all the mountain ranges, are considered, the credibility of the ancient accounts is confirmed by this modern instance. And first of all Tritigernus was received with Alavivus, and the Emperor assigned them a temporary provision for their immediate support, and ordered lands to be assigned them to cultivate.

At that time the defences of our provinces were much exposed and the armies of barbarians spread over them like the lava of Mount Aetna. The imminence of our danger manifestly called for generals already illustrious for their past achievements in war; but nevertheless, as if some unpropitious deity had made the selection, the men who were sought out for the chief military appointments were of tainted character. The chief among them were Lupicinus and Maximus, the one being count of Thrace, the other a leader notoriously wicked - and both men of great ignorance and rashness.

And their treacherous covetousness was the cause of all our disasters. For - to pass over other matters in which the officers aforesaid, or others with their unblushing connivance, displayed the greatest profligacy in their injurious treatment of the foreigners dwelling in our territory, against whom no crime could be alleged - this one melancholy and unprecedented piece of conduct - which, even if they were to choose their own judges, must appear wholly unpardonable - must be mentioned:

When the barbarians who had been conducted across the river were in great distress from want of provisions, those detested generals conceived the idea of a most disgraceful traffic; and having collected hounds from all quarters with the most unsatiable rapacity, they exchanged them for an equal number of slaves, among whom were several sons of men of noble birth.

About this time also, Vitheric, the King of the Gruthungi, with Alatheus and Saphrax, by whose influence he was mainly guided, and also with Varnobius, approached the bank of the Danube and sent envoys to the Emperor to entreat that he also might be received with the same kindness that Alavivus and Fritigern had experienced.

But when, as seemed best for the interests of the State, these ambassadors had been rejected, and were in great anxiety what they should do, Athanaric, fearing similar treatment, departed, recollecting that long ago, when he was discussing a treaty with Valens, he had treated that Emperor with contempt in affirming that he was bound by a religious obligation never to set his foot on the Roman territory; and that, by this excuse, he had compelled the Emperor to conclude a peace in the middle of the war. And he, fearing that the grudge which Valens bore him for this conduct was still lasting, withdrew with all his forces to Caucalandes, a place which, from the height of its mountains and the thickness of its woods, is completely inaccessible; and from which he had lately driven out the Sarmatians.

1. Fancy word for “survive” or “still living”. i.e. Dinosaurs are extinct, kitty cats are extant. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The Sea of Azov is a sea in south-eastern Europe. It is linked by the narrow Strait of Kerch to the Black Sea to the south. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)