

Preface

The Avars dominated much of eastern central Europe from the late sixth to the end of the eighth century and were one of the big powers of the period: as powerful as Attila's empire, and as time-resistant as Mongol rule in eastern Europe. Still, historians have mostly neglected the Avar khaganate. The only longer study available in the English language is a ninety-page article by H. H. Howorth in the *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* published in 1889.¹

The present book therefore fills a gap. It was first published in German in 1988 and is now in its third edition.² I am grateful to Cornell University Press for accepting to publish an English translation. Preparing it was not an easy task and has taken a number of years to complete. I first cut some sections dealing with outdated debates or regional problems. Then the text was translated into English. I continued working on the basis of the translation and ended up introducing major revisions and updates. The basic approach, set out in the first chapter, remains the same. Fortunately, relatively little had to be changed in the historical narrative. Caution in reconstructing events on the basis of patchy or doubtful sources had been part of the initial approach; in some respects I have become even more cautious over the years. Still, my aim remained to provide a historical narrative where feasible, even though sometimes alternative reconstructions would be possible. The bottom line of a six-hundred-page book should not be that ultimately we cannot tell what happened.

In some fields, new evidence and lively debates have made substantial revisions necessary. Much has happened in research on the central Eurasian steppes, which was relevant both for the Eurasian background of Avar history and for structural comparison. There is also much recent research and debate about the early Slavs that I had to take on board; readers may notice that I have further developed my own position on the subject, already sketched in the German version. Even more has changed in archaeology, where an enormous amount of new evidence has emerged in the last thirty years. Some of the paradigms current when I wrote the German book were also transformed. Therefore, thanks to the advice of a number of eminent archaeological colleagues, I have completely rewritten the archaeological sections of this book. On the whole, I cannot claim to have done full justice to all the new works on different aspects of the topic that have appeared in thirty years. In the course of revising the manuscript, I frequently had to refrain from going deeper into many issues that are somehow connected

to the topic of the book, but not central to it. Unfortunately, I have not been able to consult two books still in the making while I finished mine: Georgios Kardaras was preparing an English version of his Greek book on the Avars and Byzantium; and Csanád Bálint will present a larger, more archaeologically oriented synthesis of the same subject.³ On the whole, I am confident that my book provides an overview of Avar history that, as far as possible, corresponds to the state of the art in the various disciplines involved and offers a number of new ideas, also as compared with the German version.

This book, which already has a history in itself, owes a lot to more people than I can possibly acknowledge here. Before and all the more since it appeared in German I had many opportunities to exchange ideas with numerous scholars who know much more about aspects of the topic than I would ever be able to master. The first thanks go to my academic teacher, Herwig Wolfram, who suggested to me to work on the Avars early in my career. Falko Daim provided the opportunity (and the funding) to concentrate on the Avar book in his part of a large project in the 1980s. C. H. Beck publishers accepted the book for publication and have kept it on the market since it appeared. A number of eminent British and American colleagues then sought a publisher for an English translation but were told that both the Avars and the author were too little known to promise relevant sales. Therefore, I am particularly grateful to Florin Curta for having raised interest in the book at Cornell University Press, and of course to Cornell for having accepted it. Will Sayers has swiftly translated it. Since that time, I have taxed the patience of John Ackerman, Peter Potter, and Mahinder S. Kingra, under whose guidance the book has finally gone to press. Thanks are also due to the scholarly institutions that I could rely on during my work: the University of Vienna, with its Institut für Österreichische Geschichtsforschung; the Institute for Medieval Research of the Austrian Academy of Sciences, which has offered me a generous research environment during the time when I worked on the English version; and not least, the Austrian Research Fund FWF and the European Research Council, which at different stages supported my research with grants and projects.⁴

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THE AVARS

