How Did All These Barbarians Get Here? The (Im)Permeable Gates of the Caucasus in Late Antiquity in Jerome's *Letter* 77 and Claudian's *Aagainst Rufinus*
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Source: *Phasis. Greek and Roman Studies* 27 (2024): 33-66
ISSN: 1512-1046
E-ISSN: 2346-8459
Published by: The Institute of Classical, Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies of the Ivane Javakhishvili Tbilisi State University
DOI: https://doi.org/10.60131/phasis.27.2024.9060

Received: 11.12.2024. Accepted: 26.03.2025.

Phasis 27, 2024

HOW DID ALL THESE BARBARIANS GET HERE? THE (IM)PERMEABLE GATES OF THE CAUCASUS IN LATE ANTIQUITY IN JEROME'S *LETTER* 77 AND CLAUDIAN'S *AGAINST RUFINUS*[*]

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Abstract. The main pass through the central Caucasus Mountains, the present-day Dariali Gorge, had various names in ancient Greco-Latin sources: the Gates of the Caucasus, the Caspian Gates, Gates of Alexander, Sarmatian Gates. These Gates represented the frontier between the known and unknown worlds and were understood as an impermeable barrier to the barbarian groups from the Eurasian Steppe. This paper demonstrates the intersection between rhetoric and historicity and explains how these tropes about the Gates of the Caucasus were recycled in Late Antiquity and given new meaning in the context of the Hunnic invasion of the Near East in A.D. 395-398. This paper argues that Jerome's *Letter* 77 and Claudian's *Against Rufinus* used the perception of this gate as an impermeable barrier to further their literary agendas. Jerome used this perception to highlight the gravity of the

[*] A draft of this article was presented at the conference *Perception of the Caucasus in Myth and Literature from Antiquity till Contemporaneity* in September 2023. I would like to thank the Institute of Classical, Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies at Ivane Javakhishvili Tbilisi State University for their warm hospitality and care. This article has greatly benefited from the helpful feedback of the journal's two referees.

Hunnic incursion to justify why Fabiola, a close friend and a devout Christian, had left Jerome's side and returned to Rome before completing her pilgrimage. The literary associations of the Gates of the Caucasus also supported Jerome's interpretation of the Hunnic incursion as divine punishment and an invitation for repentance. Claudian employed this same perception for a very different purpose: to slander a political opponent.

INTRODUCTION

From their earliest appearances in Greco-Latin sources, up to the present day, the Gates of the Caucasus (*portae Caucasiae*), the present-day Dariali Gorge, at the eastern base of Mount Kazbek, have caused many headaches. Numerous toponyms designated this passage through the Caucasus Mountains, and these toponyms themselves could refer to different geographical locations.[1] Pliny the Elder alluded to this confusion and wrote that the Caucasian Gates were erroneously called "Caspian" (*Caspiae*). He described them as gates made from iron-shod beams beneath which flowed a putrid-smelling stream.[2] Strabo also noted that those who wrote histories of Alexander the Great's conquests in the east manipulated the geography of the Caucasus to have Alexander reach the Caucasus Mountains when in India, to link the myth of Prometheus and Alexander.[3] Even centuries later, there was confusion. In Orosius' geographic excursus in *Against the Pagans*, the Dariali Gorge is referred to as both the Caspian Gates and the Gates of the Caucasus.[4]

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[1] Although the Gates of the Caucasus is the geographically accurate toponym, I will use whichever term the sources discussed employ, as this choice of toponym is purposeful and has meaning.

[2] Plin. *HN* 6.12, ed. König and Winkler 1996, trans. Rackham 1942.

[3] Strabo 11.5.5, 11.6.4, ed. Radt 2004, trans. Roller 2014. In 11.5.4, Strabo mentioned that Cleitarchus, a historian of Alexander the Great, also confused Thermodon and the Caspian Gates, despite both locations being more than 6000 stadia apart. Quintus Curtius Rufus (7.3.19-23, ed. Lucarini 2009, trans. Yardley 1984) recounted that Alexander the Great founded a city called Alexandria at the foot of the mountain on which Prometheus was chained in the Caucasus.

[4] Oros. 1.2.39-40, 1.2.49, ed. Arnaud-Lindet 1990, trans. Fear 2010. See Janvier 1982, 90-93.

Scholarship has highlighted the strategic importance of the Caucasus Gates to ancient empires as the main passage through the central Caucasus Mountains, which connected the Eurasian Steppe and Asia.[5] Excavations between 2013 and 2016 of the Dariali Gorge dated the Dariali Fort to the late 4th or early 5th century and have been a very valuable contribution to the archaeology of the Gates of the Caucasus.[6] This paper explores another, less appreciated aspect of the Gates of the Caucasus: their use as rhetorical devices in Late Antiquity, during the so-called "Barbarian Migrations."[7]

The Gates of the Caucasus marked a limit of the *oikoumene*, the known world, in the Greco-Roman imagination.[8] Josephus recounted that Alexander the Great built metal gates to prevent "savage" peoples unfit for contact with the civilized world from bursting into the *oikoumene*.[9] Beyond the Gates of the Caucasus, to the north of the Caucasus Mountains, were unknown lands. Similarly, the Pillars of Hercules, generally understood as the twin peaks that guard the Mediterranean at the Strait of Gibraltar, marked the end of the *oikoumene* in the west, and the beginning of the unknown ocean.[10] Strabo recounted "the tradition that Prometheus was bound at the farthest point of the earth in the Caucasus."[11] The other name for the Gates of the Caucasus, the Gates of Alexander, indicates that this was the furthest point Alexander, the greatest conqueror of Antiquity, had deemed safe and possible to explore. To the north of the Caucasus

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[5] Blockley 1984; 1985; 1987; Bosworth 1976; 1977; 1983; Braund 1986; Preud'Homme 2021.

[6] Mashkour et al. 2017; Sauer et al. 2020.

[7] On the traditional periodisation of the "barbarian migrations," see Halsall 2007, 32-33.

[8] On the Pillars of Hercules as one of the limits of the *oikoumene*, see Romm 1992, 17-20.

[9] Joseph. *AJ* 18.4.4, ed. Niese 1890, trans. Feldman 1965, *BJ* 7.7.4, ed. Niese 1894, trans. Thackeray 1928. See also Plin. *HN* 6.12; Val. Flac. *Argon.* 5.124-125, ed. Courtney 1970, trans. Mozley 1934; Amm. Marc. 23.6.13, ed. Seyfarth, Jacob-Karau, and Ulmann 1978a, trans. Rolfe 1940; Claud. *In Ruf.* 2.22-32, ed. Hall 1985, trans. Bernstein 2023; Jer. *Ep.* 77.6, ed. Hilberg 1912, trans. Wright 1933.

[10] Merrills 2005, 134.

[11] Strabo 11.5.5: καὶ τὸ τὸν Προμηθέα παραδεδόσθαι δεδεμένον ἐπὶ τοῖς ἐσχάτοις τῆς γῆς ἐν τῷ Καυκάσῳ. Trans. Roller 2014, adapted.

Mountains were peoples deemed unfit for civilisation, who had to be kept locked away. To venture beyond the Gates of Alexander could be a great accomplishment or a terrible act of *hubris*. Suetonius recounted that Nero planned an expedition to the Caspian Gates (*Caspias portas*), the Dariali Gorge, with a group of soldiers called the "Phalanx of Alexander."[12] The expedition never happened, but Nero was depicted as attempting to surpass Alexander.

This paper examines how Jerome's *Letter* 77, dated A.D. 399-400, and Claudian's *Against Rufinus,* dated A.D. 397, employed the perception of the Gates of the Caucasus as impermeable barriers preventing the barbarian peoples north of the Caucasus from entering the *oikoumene.* It shows that this trope about the Gates of the Caucasus was given a new life in the late antique context of the Hunnic incursion in the East in A.D. 395-398. I argue that the perception of the Gates as impermeable played specific rhetorical roles in Jerome and Claudian's narratives.

The first section presents a brief account of the Hunnic incursion into Asia of A.D. 395-398 to provide the historical context necessary to understand the significance of the portrayals of the Gates of the Caucasus and the Huns within the argumentations of Jerome and Claudian. The second section contends that Jerome rhetorically employed the Greco-Roman understanding of the Gates of Alexander as impenetrable for groups beyond the confines of the *oikoumene* to justify his use of Herodotean references about the Scythians and to bolster the threat of the Hunnic incursion. This, in turn, supported two of his important goals in *Letter* 77: (1) to justify why Fabiola, Jerome's close friend and a devout Christian, had left Jerome's side and returned to Rome before completing her pilgrimage; (2) to present the Hunnic incursion as divine punishment and as an invitation for Romans to repent before it was too late. In the third section, I argue that Claudian harnessed the associations of the Gates as impermeable to those beyond the *oikoumene,* at least without the help of an agent from the *oikoumene,* to accuse Stilicho's opponent in the East, Rufinus, of treason. To explain how the Huns had been able to enter

[12] Suet. *Ner.* 19.2, ed. Ihm 1907, trans. Hurley 2011. On the projected Neronian expedition, see Greatrex 2007, 137-139.

the *oikoumene* through the Caucasus despite the existence of this impermeable gate, Claudian presented Rufinus, the praetorian prefect of the East, as the Huns' guide. This depicted Rufinus as a traitor who let in the Huns who ravaged the East.

THE HUNNIC INCURSION OF 395-398

In Jerome's *Letter 77* and Claudian's *Against Rufinus*, the Gates of the Caucasus are mentioned in the context of the Hunnic incursion of 395-398, as the Huns had passed through the Dariali Gorge to reach Asia from the Eurasian Steppe. Although Jerome and Claudian's descriptions of the Hunnic incursion and the Gates of the Caucasus are highly rhetorical, they responded to contemporary historical events. This section provides a brief overview of this barbarian incursion, to contextualize how Jerome and Claudian presented this historical event in such a way as to promote their literary agendas. Despite being mentioned in numerous contemporary and later sources,[13] this Hunnic incursion has only garnered cursory attention in scholarship; what work has been done focuses on establishing a timeline for the invasions and the movement of the Huns, as well as determining which cities were raided.[14]

Presumably from where Ammianus placed the Huns in A.D. 376, at the back of a landslide of barbarians pushed from present-day Ukraine and southwest Russia onto the Danube frontier, the Huns were in the region north of the Caucasus Mountains.[15] In 395, they ventured southward into

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[13] Sources about this incursion include Jer. *Ep*. 60.16, ed. Hilberg 1910, trans. Wright 1933, 77.8; Claud. *In Ruf.* 2.28-35; *In Eutr.* 1.16-17, 1.245-251, 2.569-575; *Cons. Stil.* 1.110, ed. Hall 1985, trans. Bernstein 2023; Socrates *Hist. eccl.* 6.1, ed. Hansen 1995, trans. Zenos 1890; Sozom. *Hist. eccl.* 8.1, ed. Bidez and Hansen 1995, trans. Hartranft 1890; Philostorgius 11.8, ed. Bidez and Winkelmann 1981, trans. Amidon 2007; Priscus fr. 11.2, ed. and trans. Blockley 1983; Cyrillona, *Madrasha (Hymn) on the Locusts, the Punishment and the Invasion of the Huns*, ed. and trans. Griffin 2011; Auson. *Precationes Variae* 1, ed. Green 1991, trans. Evelyn-White 1921; *Chronicle of Ps.-Joshua the Stylite* 243, ed. Chabot 1927, trans. Trombley and Watt 2000.

[14] This incursion is discussed in Maenchen-Helfen 1973, 52-59; Greatrex and Greatrex 1999; Thompson 2000, 30-32; Greatrex and Lieu 2002, 17-20; Heather 2007, 502; C. Kelly 2008, 51-53, 300; Meier 2019, 298-302.

[15] Amm. Marc. 31.3, ed. Seyfarth, Jacob-Karau, and Ulmann 1978b. See Heather 2007, 501-502; Stickler 2007, 47.

the Dariali Gorge, through the Gates of the Caucasus and into Asia.[16] They raided Armenia and then split up into three groups.[17] The first group crossed the Euphrates after raiding Roman territories and was defeated by the Romans. A second group, led by Basich and Kursich, went into Persia as far as Ctesiphon and was defeated by the Sasanians.[18] The remainder of this group abandoned most of their plunder and fled back to the Eurasian Steppes, either through the Gates of the Caucasus or through the narrow passage at Derbent on the Caspian Sea (the geographically accurate toponym for the Caspian Gates). The third group pillaged Syria, Palestine (towards Jerusalem), and eastern Asia Minor. The most exact date for this invasion is given in the *Chronicle of Edessa*: "And in the month of Tammuz of the same year [July 395], the Huns crossed over to the territory of the Romans."[19] There was more raiding in 396.[20] Jerome presented this Hunnic incursion in the Roman Near East as particularly devastating because the Roman Empire was busy with civil war, a reference to the usurper Eugenius (r. 392-394).[21] Indeed, Theodosius' army was still in the West. Furthermore, Eutropius and the Eastern Roman Empire were occupied by Alaric, who had been raiding the Balkans. Eutropius resolved the conflict diplomatically by appointing Alaric

[16] Some scholars, following Philostorgius 11.8, stated that the Huns crossed the frozen Danube into the Roman Empire in 395. This is likely a transposition of later events. As Heather states, the Huns' passage through the Gates of the Caucasus indicates that they were likely in the Eurasian Steppe, north of the Caucasus Mountains, not on the banks of the Danube. Heather 2007, 501-502; Meier 2019, 301; *contra* Thompson 2000, 29-31; cf. Maenchen-Helfen 1973, 52-59.

[17] The most complete and detailed accounts for the Hunnic incursion of 395-398 are Maenchen-Helfen 1973, 52-59; Meier 2019, 299-302.

[18] Priscus fr. 11.2.

[19] *Chronicle of Edessa*, entry 40, ed. Guidi 1903, trans. Cowper 1864.

[20] The chronology of events between 396-398 is little known. Maechen-Helfen (1973) believed that Claudian projected events from 395 into 397 to slander Eutropius and that Eutropius' victory was over barbarian groups in the Caucasus, not specifically the Huns. Meier (2019, 301) proposes that Eutropius did defeat the Huns around Cappadocia and Armenia.

[21] Jer. *Ep.* 77.8, 60.17.

as *magister militum per Illyricum* in 398.[22] With the threat of Alaric out of the way for the time being, Eutropius led a military campaign against the Huns in Cappadocia and Armenia in the summer of 398. Rather than appointing a commander, he led the Roman force himself.[23] Eutropius was victorious and was given a triumph in Constantinople. For this victory over the Huns, Eutropius was granted a consulship the following year, in 399.[24]

The Hunnic incursion has convincingly been proposed as the impetus for the construction of the Sasanian fortification at the Dariali Gorge, an important frontier zone to check the advances of nomadic groups from the Eurasian Steppe. The joint British-Georgian excavation showed that the construction of extant fortifications began in the late 4th century and suggested that the motivation for the construction of these frontier fortifications was to halt the Hunnic incursion of 395 or to prevent future incursions from the Eurasian Steppe into Asia, through the Dariali Gorge.[25] The Sasanians built Dariali Fort and a tower and a road-blocking wall to the north-northwest of the Fort. Before the 19th century, traffic would pass on the road to the west of the fort because the area to the east was blocked by insurmountable rock cliffs and, for much of the year, the strong currents of the Tergi River.[26] A barrier, Bakht'ari ridge-top walls, was also built one kilometer north of the Fort, perhaps at the narrowest part of the gorge in Late Antiquity.[27] The fort and road-blocking wall were completed by the first decades of the 5th century, but the barrier may

[22] Synesius' *De regno* responded to (and disapproved of) Alaric's appointment and Eutropius' use of Alaric's Goths in the Eastern Roman army. See Heather 1988; Kulikowski 2007, 167-168.

[23] Eutropius taking the military command for himself and celebrating his victory may have angered Tribigild, a Gothic commander, who may have felt like he and his men were not sufficiently recompensed for their involvement. Liebeschuetz 1990, 99-103.

[24] On Eutropius' consulship and Claudian's scathing invective *In Eutropium*, see Cameron 1970, 124-155.

[25] Sauer et al. 2020, 5-6, 19-52, 162-166, 231-241.

[26] Sauer et al. 2020, 7-8.

[27] The Dariali Fort likely housed around 300 soldiers. Combined with the topography of the Dariali Gorge and the Sasanian fortifications, this would have been

only have been completed by the 6th century.[28]

Based on the radiocarbon analysis of two bone samples found in the excavation of the Dariali Fort, with modelled date ranges of A.D. 360-418 and 353-412 at 95.4% probability, the construction of the Fort and road-blocking walls likely began in the late 4th or very early 5th century.[29] When the Huns passed through the Dariali Gorge, the construction of the fort and the road-blocking wall may have commenced but it was likely not completed in time to halt the Huns.[30] Sauer et al. deem it likely that there had been an earlier fort in the same location. However, the excavation did not yield any evidence of this because the bedrock was cleared of virtually all earlier soil and occupation debris to allow the fort to be built directly on it for greater stability.[31] Whatever the state of previous fortifications at the same location as the Dariali Fort or the state of completion of the Fort, the Gates of the Caucasus were permeable to the Huns in 395. Nevertheless, the Sasanian fortifications on the Dariali Gorge were effective when finished. There is no evidence of major incursions from the Eurasian Steppe through the Gates of the Caucasus during its Sasanian occupation in the 5th to 7th centuries A.D. Once fortified, this pass through the Caucasus Mountains lived up to its reputation as an "impermeable" barrier.

JEROME'S (IM)PERMEABLE GATES OF ALEXANDER

The Christian priest and theologian Jerome of Stridon (A.D. 347-419) lived in Palestine during the Hunnic incursion.[32] He did not witness the Hunnic onslaught but had heard accounts of their raids.[33] The Huns caused panic amongst monastic communities in the Near East and Jerome, with many others, flocked to the coast and prepared to evacuate by boat. Ultimately,

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sufficient to contain most foes, even when greatly outnumbered. See Sauer et al. 2020, 880-883.

[28] Sauer et al. 2020, 875-876.

[29] Sauer et al. 2020, 870-875. The date ranges cited are the updated and recalibrated datings of modelled samples, provided in Sauer et al. 2021, 105.

[30] Sauer et al. 2020, 372-375; Sauer et al. 2021, 105.

[31] Sauer et al. 2020, 870-871.

[32] On Jerome's life, see Kelly 1975.

[33] Jer. *Ep.* 77.8.

Jerome and Paula, his female companion who founded the monastery where Jerome lived from 389 until his death, would remain. Fabiola, who had come to visit holy sites mentioned in the Bible, would return to Rome, where she would establish a hospice at Portus, the port of Rome. In 399, Fabiola died, and in that same year or the following one, Jerome wrote *Letter* 77, addressed to Oceanus, as her eulogy.[34] In this letter, Jerome mentioned the Gates of the Caucasus, which he referred to as the Gates of Alexander (*Alexandri claustra*), in the context of an ethnographic digression on the Huns, whose incursion into the Near East had cut short Fabiola's trip to the Holy Land.

This section argues that Jerome employed the literary tropes associated with the Gates of Alexander, particularly its understanding as a barrier between the Greco-Roman *oikoumene* and the unknown, to support his agenda of praising Fabiola, while also reinforcing the importance for Christians to reform their behavior. To support this latter point, Jerome's *Letter* 60, dated 396 and one of our main extant sources for the movements of the Huns in the Near East from 395-398, will also be analyzed. In both these letters, the Huns (and in *Letter* 77, the Gates of Alexander), represent digressions in the overall arc of Jerome's narrative, but they play important roles in his argumentation.

Letter 77, written in A.D. 399-400, functions as a eulogy to Fabiola, a widow from the eminent *gens Fabia*.[35] Jerome wrote about her sins, penitence and her devotion to God. As Kelly remarked, the contents of the letter, in particular his sensitive and personal understanding of her second marriage, betray Jerome's fondness for Fabiola.[36] She is praised for her earnestness in the study of scripture, which prompted her to travel to the Near East in the autumn of 394, to study the Bible under Jerome and to retrace the path of the Israelites after their exodus from Egypt. She

[34] *PLRE* I: "Oceanus."

[35] *PLRE* I: "Fabiola." Fabiola is the addressee of Jerome's *Letters* 64 (A.D. 396-397), ed. Hilberg 1910, and 78 (A.D. 399-400), ed. Hilberg 1912, which is addressed to her posthumously.

[36] Jerome (*Ep.* 77.3) deemed Fabiola's second marriage sinful, yet was also sympathetic to her situation as a young woman full of physical passions. See Kelly 1975, 210-212.

had likely planned to stay in Bethlehem with Jerome permanently, but by the summer of 395, she returned to Rome by boat, founded a hospice for travelers at Portus and died shortly thereafter.[37] In haste, Fabiola would leave the Near East before she had time to complete her pilgrimage, which consisted of visiting the 42 halting places of the Israelites. Jerome attached *Letter* 78, a treatise about the halting places visited by the chosen people on their way to the Promised Land, to *Letter 77*. Jerome had promised Fabiola this treatise, but he had not yet completed it when she died.

Letters 77 and 78 were not only for Oceanus' eyes; Jerome anticipated a vast readership.[38] Jerome intended his correspondence with Fabiola to signal to his audience that his Hebrew scholarship was in demand by the Roman elites and could help Christians reach Heaven.[39] Fabiola's life story was an ideal model to demonstrate this and provide an example of how Jerome's exegesis and her pilgrimage allowed her to repent for past sins.[40] By sending *Letters* 77 and 78 together, Jerome intended to signal to his audience that his treatise on the halting places of the Israelites could guide Christians who intended to embark on a pilgrimage to follow the itinerary of the 42 stations. Consequently, it was essential for Jerome to explain and justify why Fabiola, ever enthusiastic about Scripture and its interpretation, had cut her journey short and not finished her pilgrimage.

Jerome's mention of the Gates of Alexander provided a justification for Fabiola's early departure from Palestine. Jerome employed the literary tropes about the Gates of Alexander as an impermeable barrier between the *oikoumene* and the north of the Caucasus to present the Huns, who originated north of the Caucasus, as a great, savage threat and a legitimate reason for Fabiola to prematurely end her trip to the Holy Land.

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[37] Jer. *Ep*. 77.8; cf. *Ep.* 64.8: *tu quidem optato frueris otio et iuxta Babylonem Bethlemitica forsitan rura suspiras.* See Cain 2009, 173.

[38] Jer. *Ep.* 77.5; Cain 2009, 172.

[39] Jerome had a strong reputation as a biblical scholar and much of his correspondence in the late 390s and early 400s addressed requests regarding exegesis from around the Roman Empire. See Kelly 1975, 212-214.

[40] Jer. *Ep.* 64 is addressed to Fabiola and is a treatise on the garments of the High Priest.

Jerome enhanced this threat by leveraging Herodotus' authoritative account about the military successes of the Scythians. The Gates of Alexander, which had kept barbarian groups beyond and within the *oikoumene* unmixed, explained Jerome's equation of the past Scythians with the contemporary Huns.

Jerome's account of the Hunnic invasion and his historical digression on the Huns may be quoted in full:

> ... ecce subito discurrentibus nuntiis oriens totus intremuit, ab ultima Maeotide inter glacialem Tanain et Massagetarum immanes populos, ubi Caucasi rupibus feras gentes Alexandri claustra cohibent, erupisse Hunorum examina, quae pernicibus equis huc illucque volitantia caedis pariter ac terroris cuncta conplerent. Aberat tunc Romanus exercitus et bellis civilibus in Italia tenebatur. Hanc gentem Herodotus refert sub Dario, rege Medorum, viginti annis Orientem tenuisse captivum et ab Aegyptiis atque Aethiopibus annuum exegisse vectigal. Avertat Iesus ab orbe Romano tales ultra bestias! Insperati ubique aderant et famam celeritate vincentes non religioni, non dignitatibus, non aetati, non vagienti miserebantur infantiae. Cogebantur mori, qui dudum vivere coeperant et nescientes malum suum inter hostium manus ac tela ridebant. Consonus inter omnes rumor petere eos Hierosolymam et ob nimiam auri cupiditatem ad hanc urbem concurrere. Muri neglecti pacis incuria sarciebantur Antiochiae; Tyrus volens a terra abrumpere insulam quaerebat antiquam.
>
> While I was seeking a dwelling suitable for so great a lady [Fabiola], whose desire for solitude included an unwillingness not to visit the place where Mary once lodged, suddenly messengers flew this way and that and the whole Eastern world trembled. We were told that swarms of Huns had poured forth from the distant Sea of Azov, midway between the icy river Tanais and the savage tribes of the Massagetae, where the Gates of Alexander keep back the barbarians behind the rocky Caucasus. Flying hither and thither on their swift steeds, said our informants, these invaders were filling the whole world with bloodshed and panic. At that time the Roman army was absent, being kept in Italy by reason of civil war. Of this race Herodotus tells us that under Darius, king of the Medes, they held the East captive for twenty years, and exacted a yearly tribute from the Egyptians and the Ethiopians. May Jesus

> save the Roman world from such wild beasts in the future! Everywhere their approach was unexpected, they outstripped rumour by their speed, and they spared neither religion nor rank nor age; nay, even for wailing infants they had no pity. Children were forced to die, who had only just begun to live, and in ignorance of their fate smiled amid the brandished weapons of the foe. The general report was that they were making for Jerusalem, and that it was their excessive greed for gold that urged them to flock to that city. The walls of Antioch, neglected in the careless days of peace, were hastily repaired. Tyre, desirous of cutting herself off from the land, sought again her ancient island.[41]

In this passage, Jerome synchronized Fabiola's arrival in Palestine and the Hunnic incursion to justify why Fabiola had left the Holy Land so quickly. Jerome's preferred toponym for the Gates of the Caucasus is the Gates of Alexander, which recalls the myth that Alexander built a physical barrier during his travels to the East to keep the most savage barbarian groups away from the *oikoumene*. The earliest extant account of this legend seems to be in Quintus Curtius Rufus' late 1st or 2nd -century *History of Alexander the Great*, derived from Cleitarchus' lost *History of Alexander*.[42] Although Alexander the Great was never in the Caucasus, he did travel to another of the three attested locations of the Caspian Gates, the pass through the Alborz Mountain near ancient Rhagae (the other two locations being Dariali Gorge and the pass at Derbent).[43] Through the

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[41] Jer. *Ep.* 77.8, trans. Wright 1933.

[42] The most famous accounts of Alexander as the architect of the Gates, however, are the *Syriac Alexander Legend* and *The Apocalypse of Pseudo-Methodius*, itself based on the material from the *Syriac Alexander Legend*. These two 7th-century sources recount that Alexander the Great had built the wall to contain 22 kings and nations, including Gog and Magog. However, over two centuries earlier, at the time when Jerome was writing, there was no conception that Alexander had built the Gates to contain Gog and Magog, whose invasion the Hebrew Bible foretold as a sign of the end of days. The conflation of both narratives would only first occur in the *Syriac Alexander Romance*, dated to *c.* A.D. 600-630. See Anderson 1932, 16-28; Meserve 2008, 255-256; Garstad 2016; Zadeh 2017, 106-110. On its dating, see Ciancaglini 2001, 138; Debié 2024, 158-162.

[43] No evidence indicates that Alexander the Great fortified the pass through the Alborz Mountains.

mention of the Gates of Alexander, Jerome created a landscape in which the Huns had remained isolated from other barbarian groups with which the Greeks and Romans had interacted in the *oikoumene*.[44] This premise about the impermeability of the Gates of Alexander supported Jerome's use of Herodotus, written over eight centuries earlier, as his reference for his digression on the military exploits of the Huns.

The barbarian group that Jerome equated with the Huns are Herodotus' Scythians. Only the Huns are mentioned by name, not the Scythians. However, through Jerome's explicit reference to Herodotus, it is clear that he referred to the Scythians. In Herodotus' *Histories*, the Scythians defeated the Medes, held the East captive for 28 years — not Jerome's 20 years — and were bribed by the Egyptians with gifts (and prayers).[45] Unlike in *Letter* 77 (8), Herodotus placed the Scythian victory over the Medes in the reign of the third king of the Medes, Cyaxares, not in the reign of Darius, the third Achaemenid king. *The Histories* also does not mention a Scythian victory over the Ethiopians, but Herodotus did recount that the Ethiopians paid tribute to the Persians every three years during the reign of Darius.[46] Jerome was more concerned with conveying to his audience that the Huns were a barbarian group with an established history as great warriors capable of bringing ancient civilizations to their knees, than in accurately citing Herodotus.

Why did Jerome equate his contemporary Huns with Herodotus' Scythians, and how did he explain this decision to his audience? There were certainly no Huns in the 5th century B.C., when Herodotus wrote his *Histories*, just like there were no Scythians in the late 4th-early 5th century A.D. Scythian history is believed to have come to an end in the 3rd century A.D., with the

[44] Cf. Plin. *HN* 6.12.

[45] Hdt. 1.104-106, ed. Wilson 2015, trans. Waterfield 1998.

[46] Hdt. 3.97. Perhaps Jerome meant to imply that the Ethiopians paid the tribute they would give the Persians during the reign of Darius to the Scythians, who had defeated the Medes. Furthermore, as is discussed below, late antique sources tended to associate new and old barbarian political groupings. The Achaemenid and Sasanian Empires were equated with the Parthians and Medes, other Iranian peoples. Nevertheless, Jerome's chronology remains erroneous.

fall of Scythian Neapolis.[47] The impermeability of Alexander's Gates, which were built by Alexander after the events Herodotus mentioned, provided a rational argument for equating the Huns and the Scythians: the Gates had kept the Huns / Scythians isolated from other barbarian groups with which the Greeks and Romans had interacted in the *oikoumene*, and were thus the same peoples, only with different ethnonyms.

When Jerome wrote *Letter* 77 in 399-400, there were no authoritative historical or ethnographic accounts about the Huns because they had only become known to the Romans in the 370s, probably mainly through the tales of the Goths and Alans who had fled from the Huns. As Ammianus wrote, the Huns were "not much known from ancient records" (*Hunorum gens monumentis veteribus leviter nota…*).[48] Herodotus' authoritative account and the *Histories*' established pedigree as a recognized, universal portrayal of the Scythians allowed him to paint this new fearsome people as having a long history of military successes, which would justify why Fabiola had left Palestine pre-emptively in the face of such a grave danger.

Another contemporary source, Synesius' *De regno*, written in 398, justifies using archaic ethnonyms.[49] *De regno* attacks Eutropius' policy towards barbarians (especially the appointment of Alaric as *magister militum per Illyricum* in 398) and advocates for an aggressive foreign policy towards barbarians, as well as the expulsion of Goths from the Roman army and public office.[50] Synesius wrote that contemporary barbarian groups took on new names as an intimidation tactic, by weaponizing the

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[47] On the absorption of the Scythians by the Goths and other peoples from the Eurasian Steppe, see Geary 1999, 115-116.

[48] Amm. Marc. 31.2.1, trans. Rolfe 1939, adapted. Despite this statement, Ammianus did not hesitate to make ample use of stereotypes about nomadism to create his ethnographic description of the Huns. See Burgersdijk 2016.

[49] Some late-4th-century examples of using archaic ethnonyms to refer to contemporary groups include Them. *Or.* 15.185b, ed. Schenkl and Downey 1965, *Or.* 30.349, ed. Schenkl, Downey, and Norman 1971; Claud. *In Eutr.* 2.179-180; Amb. *De fide* 2.16, ed. Faller 1962. On the use of the ethnonym "Scythian" in Late Antiquity, see Heather 1988, 154. On the Huns and their association with Scythians, see Maenchen-Helfen 1973, 2-8.

[50] Cameron 1970, 118-119.

fear of the unknown: "But now do these nations [The Parthians, Getae and Massagetae, all mentioned in the previous sentence] spread terror amongst you, crossing over in their turn, assuming other names, and some of them falsifying by art even their countenances, so that another race new and foreign may appear to have sprung from the soil, and they dare to demand an indemnity as the price of peace, 'unless thou arm thyself with valour'."[51] Whereas Jerome used the contemporary ethnonym "Huns," even when referencing Herodotus' account of the Scythians, Synesius only used the ethnonym "Scythian" to refer to the Goths.

Synesius and Jerome's inclusion of justifications for recycling archaic ethnonyms and descriptions is noteworthy because the use of archaic ethnonyms is typically taken for granted in late antique sources.[52] For instance, Zosimus and Themistius, among many others, use the ethnonym "Scythians" to refer to the Goths.[53] Jerome's *Letter 77* and Synesius' *De regno*'s justification for recycling ethnonyms and associating past and present barbarian groups can be understood as an example of a widely shared, common understanding of the world that was rarely mentioned explicitly. Simultaneously, these justifications also supported their authors' agendas. Synesius wrote that the same barbarian groups of the past had taken on new names to appear more fearsome to the Romans to support his argument

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[51] Syn. *De reg.* 15.8, ed. Lamoureux 2008. *De reg.* 10.21-25, trans. Fitzgerald 1930, adapted.

[52] Scholarship has typically understood the frequent late antique practice of using archaic ethnonyms as "the high style of the age" and as a means to display knowledge of classical ethnography. Cameron and Long 1993, 298-300; cf. Halsall 2007, 48-51. On Ambrose, the Goths and Gog, see Humphries 2010. It is also crucial to consider that ancient sources purposefully chose their preferred ethnonyms to convey messages to their audience. For instance, Ambrose of Milan, promoting an eschatological view of the barbarian incursions in the last decades of the 4th century, likened the Goths to Gog from Magog. Amb. *De fide* 2.16. See Maenchen-Helfen 1973, 2-9; Pohl 2018, 7, 12.

[53] The ethnonym "Scythian" was commonly used to refer to northern barbarian groups. For a more exhaustive list of late antique barbarian groups referred to as "Scythian," see "Scythians (Saka)" in *ODLA*. For a similar discussion, but on the Huns, who were also referred to as Scythians, see Maenchen-Helfen 1973, 2-5.

that Romans should launch more attacks against barbarians rather than pay tribute to barbarian groups. Maenchen-Helfen interpreted this passage as a defence mechanism reminiscent of the discourse that "so many Roman generals said so many times on the eve of a battle: our fathers conquered them, we shall conquer them again."[54] Likewise, Jerome mentioned the Gates of Alexander to highlight the perceived savagery of the Scythians / Huns, which explained why Fabiola had left Palestine pre-emptively.

Reading *Letter* 77 in light of *Letter* 60 (A.D. 396), which also mentions the Hunnic incursion in the Near East, reveals another purpose for Jerome's mention of the Gates of Alexander in *Letter* 77. Painting a terrifying portrayal of the Huns, backed by references to an established historical account like Herodotus', also supported his theological understanding of the calamities of his times as divine punishment to promote repentance. *Letter* 60 is a consolation sent to Heliodorus, bishop of Altinum, dated 396, comforting him for the death of his nephew, Nepotianus. The *Letter* is a glowing eulogy of Nepotianus, a former commander who became a priest and engaged in ascetic practices. Jerome exhorted Heliodorus not to mourn the death of his nephew because he was already in the Kingdom of Heaven, at God's side.

In *Letter* 60, the historical and ethnographic digression on the Huns functions as proof that Nepotianus is fortunate to have died when he did, as he will be spared the misery of living through the suffering of present times, in a world crumbling to ruins, partly as a result of barbarian invasions.[55] The Huns are first mentioned by name in a catalogue of barbarian groups and the ravages they had caused:

> Scythiam, Thraciam, Macedoniam, Thessaliam, Dardaniam, Daciam, Epiros, Dalmatiam cunctasque Pannonias Gothus, Sarmata, Quadus, Alanus, Huni, Vandali, Marcomanni vastant, trahunt, rapiunt. Quot matronae, quot virgines Dei et ingenua nobiliaque corpora his beluis fuere ludibrio! Capti episcopi, interfecti presbyteri et diversorum officia clericorum, subversae ecclesiae, ad altaria Christi stabulati equi, martyrum effossae reliquae…

[54] Maenchen-Helfen 1973, 7.

[55] Jer. *Ep.* 60.15.1.

> For twenty years and more the blood of Romans has every day been shed between Constantinople and the Julian Alps. Scythia, Thrace, Macedonia, Thessaly, Dardania, Dacia, Epirus, Dalmatia, and all the provinces of Pannonia, have been sacked, pillaged and plundered by Goths and Sarmatians, Quadians and Alans, Huns and Vandals and Marcomanni. How many matrons, how many of God's virgins, ladies of gentle birth and high position, have been made the sport of these beasts! Bishops have been taken prisoners, presbyters and other clergymen of different orders murdered. Churches have been overthrown, horses stabled at Christ's altar, the relics of martyrs dug up.[56]

Jerome used the invasions of various barbarian groups from the past decades, with the Hunnic incursion being the most recent, as an opportunity to promote moral reform and penitence: "For a long time now we have felt that God is offended with us, but we do not try to appease Him. It is by reason of our sins that the barbarians are strong, it is our vices that bring defeat to the armies of Rome; and as if this were not enough carnage, civil wars have spilt almost more blood than the enemy's sword."[57] Presenting the Hunnic incursion as divine chastisement and an impending sign of the End of Times would certainly be a strong incentive for Christians to be on their best behaviour in preparation for the Final Judgement.[58] *Letter* 60 is the earliest letter in which Jerome makes it clear that the Roman Empire will face an era of disasters, which were portrayed as apocalyptic in Jerome's account of the sack of Rome of 410 in *Letter* 127 (A.D. 412).[59]

Following Jerome's theological interpretation of events, his account of the Hunnic incursion in *Letter* 60 conveyed an image of vast destruction: "But

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[56] Jer. *Ep.* 60.16, trans. Wright 1933.

[57] Jer. *Ep.* 60.17. See also *Ep.* 60.16: "The Roman world is falling, and yet we hold our heads raised high instead of bowing our necks." Trans. Wright 1933, adapted.

[58] Rebenich 2009, 57-58.

[59] In his *Letters*, Jerome distinguished four phases of barbarian invasions spanning the years 370-96 (*Ep.* 60.16), 397-406 (*Ep.* 107.2, ed. Hilberg 1912, trans. Wright 1933, and 118, ed. Hilberg 1912), 406-409 in Gaul (*Ep.* 123.16, ed. Hilberg 1918) and 408-410 in Italy (*Ep.* 123.16 and 127.12-13, ed. Hilberg 1918, trans. Wright 1933). See Coleiro 1957, 48. On the imminent Second Coming: Jer. *Ep.* 127.12; *In Dan.* 5.8, ed. Glorie 1964; Fabbro 2015, 51-53.

behold! last year the wolves—not of Arabia but from the far north (*non Arabiae, sed septentrionis lupi*)—were let loose upon us from the distant crags of the Caucasus (*ex ultimis Caucasi rupibus*), and in a short time overran whole provinces. How many monasteries did they capture, how many rivers were reddened with men's blood! They besieged Antioch and all the other cities on the Halys, Cydnus, Orontes, and Euphrates. They carried off troops of captives. Arabia, Phoenicia, Palestine and Egypt in their terror felt themselves already enslaved."[60] In this passage, the Huns are not mentioned by name but are identifiable as "the wolves of the far north," who originated from "the distant crags of the Caucasus." This is perhaps an allusion to Herodotus' description of the Neuri (Νευροί), who turned into wolves for a few days every year before returning to their former shape and practiced the same customs as the Scythians but are presented as independent and distinct from them.[61] Philostorgius' *Church History*, published shortly after 425, also states that the Huns are "whom the people of old called the Neuri; they dwelt by the Rhipaean Mountains, from which the Tanais flows down and empties into Lake Maeotis."[62] Philostorgius linked the Huns and Neuroi through their perceived location and mentioned the tendency for new names to replace old ones.[63] In sum, Jerome's description of the Huns as ruthless barbarians would also have been synergistic to his argumentation in *Letter* 60, which had framed the barbarian incursions of the past decades as proof that Christians were being punished by God, as an incentive to reform their behaviour and repent, as Fabiola had done.

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[60] Jer. *Ep.* 60.16.5*: ecce tibi anno praeterito ex ultimis Caucasi rupibus inmissi in nos non Arabiae, sed septentrionis lupi tantas brevi provincias percucurrerunt. Quot monasteria capta, quantae fluviorum aquae humano cruore mutatae sunt! Obsessa Antiochia et urbes reliquae, quas Halys, Cydnus, Orontes Eufratesque praeterfluunt. Tracti greges captivorum; Arabia, Phoenix, Palaestina, Aegyptus timore captivae.* Trans. Wright 1933, adapted.

[61] Hdt. 4.100, 102, 105.

[62] Philostorgius 9.17, trans. Amidon 2007.

[63] Philostorgius 9.17: "Theodosius was a native of Spain, which is now called Hiberia, the River Hiberus, which runs through it, having evicted its previous name." Trans. Amidon 2007.

Interestingly, despite Jerome's focus on the purpose of the Gates of Alexander as keeping savage barbarian groups separate from the inhabitants of the *oikoumene*, he did not mention exactly how the Huns were able to pass this legendary barrier in *Letters* 60 and 77. As mentioned above, although there were likely no significant fortifications at the time of the Hunnic crossing through the Dariali Gorge, the Gates of the Caucasus had long been portrayed as impermeable barriers to those beyond the *oikoumene*. In *Letter* 60 (16), Jerome wrote that the Huns "were let loose upon us" (*inmissi in nos*). This tendency for Greco-Latin ancient sources to take away agency from the barbarian group crossing the Gates of the Caucasus will be further discussed in the next section but it is sufficient here to say that the Huns are modified by a passive participle in *Letter* 60 (*inmissi*), and thus receive the action of the verb, rather than perform it. Perhaps Jerome meant to imply that the Huns had been able to raid Asia because divine intervention had opened the Gates for them. This interpretation would follow Jerome's theological interpretation of the barbarian invasions as divine punishment to promote reform.

This ferociousness and savagery of the Huns displayed in *Letters* 60 and 77 also drew attention away from what was at least a contributing factor to Fabiola's return to Rome. As Kelly remarked, the Huns were not the only culprits for Fabiola's return to Rome. Jerome wrote that Fabiola was disenchanted by internal disagreements amongst the religious communities, which preoccupied the community even more than the barbarian incursions: "We too were compelled to prepare ships, and to wait on the seashore as a precaution against the enemy's arrival; to fear the barbarians more than shipwreck, however fierce the winds might be; for we had to think not so much of our own lives as of the chastity of our virgins. At that time also there was a certain dissension amongst us (*apud nos dissensio*n), and our domestic quarrels (*domestica bella*) seemed more important than any fighting with barbarians."[64] Despite the inclusion of this subtle

[64] Jer. *Ep.* 77.8: *Tunc et nos conpulsi sumus parare naves, esse in litore, adventum hostium praecavere et saevientibus ventis magis barbaros metuere quam naufragium, non tam propriae saluti quam virginum castimoniae providentes. Erat in illo tempore quaedam*

reference to internal discord, this was certainly not what Jerome wanted his monastic community in Bethlehem to be remembered for.

This section argued that Jerome rhetorically employed the Greco-Roman understanding of the Gates of Alexander as impenetrable for groups beyond the confines of the *oikoumene* to frame his ethnographic digression on the Huns and to emphasize their savagery. The Huns were a barbarian group that first appeared in the sight of Romans in the last quarter of the 4th century A.D. Consequently, there was no authoritative historical or ethnographic account about this group. Referring to the Gates of Alexander and their function allowed Jerome to argue that the barbarian groups that Herodotus mentioned had been contained in a closed environment and had remained unmixed with the barbarian groups in the *oikoumene*. The Gates of Alexander thus provide the link in Jerome's argumentation that allowed him to leverage Herodotus' authoritative account and the *Histories*' established pedigree as a recognized, universal portrayal of the Scythians, whose ferocity would justify why Fabiola had left Palestine pre-emptively. In *Letter* 60, Jerome understood the Hunnic incursion of 395-398 as divine punishment. The perception of the Gates of Alexander as impermeable barriers keeping fearsome and threatening barbarian groups locked away from the *oikoumene* emphasized the urgency of penitence before the Second Coming of Christ, when all men would be judged.

CLAUDIAN'S (IM)PERMEABLE CASPIAN GATES

Claudian's invective *Against Rufinus* presents another way in which a late antique author harnessed the association of the Gates of the Caucasus as impermeable: for slander. In his invective against the praetorian prefect of the East, Rufinus, Claudian employed the perceived impermeability of the Caspian Gates, Claudian's toponym of choice for the Gates of the Caucasus, to accuse Rufinus of guiding the Huns through this passage. *Against Rufinus* aimed to humiliate Rufinus, the praetorian prefect of the East, who had repeatedly thwarted Stilicho's attempts to get involved in Eastern politics. Claudian was the Western court's poet from 395 until

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apud nos dissensio et barbarorum pugnam domestica bella superabant. Trans. Wright 1933. Cf. *Ep.* 64.8. See Kelly 1975, 210-211.

404, when he probably died. His role was as Stilicho's spokesperson, tasked with gaining the senatorial aristocracy's support for Stilicho's policies. Claudian delivered the first book of *Against Rufinus* in early 396, shortly after the death of Rufinus, and the second book in late summer 397, both at Milan.[65]

Claudian employed the perception of the Caspian Gates as impermeable to external foes to prompt his audience to inquire how the Huns, who resided north of the Caucasus, had been able to pillage the Roman Empire. Who had led them in? Who better to blame than Rufinus, Stilicho's foe?

> … uentis ueluti si frena resoluat / Aeolus, abrupto gentes sic obice fudit / laxauitque uiam bellis et, ne qua maneret / inmunis regio, cladem divisit in orbem / disposuitque nefas. alii per terga ferocis / Danubii solidata ruunt expertaque remos / frangunt stagna rotis; alii per Caspia claustra / Armeniasque nives inopino tramite ducti / invadunt Orientis opes.
>
> As if Aeolus loosed the chains from the winds, so he removed the barrier and poured forth peoples and opened the path for war. He spread destruction across the globe, distributing evil so no region would remain free of violence. Some people rushed across the fierce Danube's frozen surface, and their chariot wheels smashed waters more used to oars. Others [the Huns] having been led through the Caspian Gates, and Armenia's snows, across an unexpected pass, invaded the East's riches.[66]

An individual could always be slandered by accusing them of aiding a group that a Roman audience could identify as alien.[67] Both contemporary and later sources are almost unanimous in blaming Rufinus for the Hunnic incursion, but give no further details.[68] Claudian may well have been the culprit for this accusation of treason, as he accuses Rufinus of leading the

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[65] Cameron 1970, 76-79.

[66] Claud. *In Ruf.* 2.22-30, trans. Bernstein 2023, adapted.

[67] Garambois-Vasquez 2002, 223-225; Long 1996, 225-226.

[68] Claud. *In Ruf.* 1.308-309, 1.319-322, 2.9, 2.501. Oros. 7.37.1: *barbaras gentes ille inmisit* (no specific mention of the Huns); Socrates *Hist. eccl.* 6.1.6; Zos. 5.4, ed. Paschoud 1986, trans. Ridley 1982; Sozom. *Hist. eccl.* 8.1.2; *Chronicle of Ps.-Joshua the Stylite* 243; *Euphemia and the Goth* 4 ed. Burkitt 1913, trans. Grammatikopoulos 2023; John Ant. fr. 190, ed. and trans. Mariev 2008, alludes to the incompetence and cowardice of an Eastern commander, which the *Chronicle* names Addai, who did not oppose the Huns.

Huns through the Gates of the Caucasus into Asia, in *Against Rufinus.* There was likely no substance to this accusation; Claudian took advantage of contemporary barbarian incursions to slander Rufinus.[69] Claudian also accused Rufinus of inciting other barbarian groups besides the Huns to raid the Roman Empire by crossing the frozen Danube, but remained vague about how this was done. In Book 2 of *Against Rufinus*, Claudian implied that Rufinus was responsible for the raiding skirmishes of the Goths under Alaric, by setting them in motion: "Now Rufinus stirred up many peoples: he roused the Getae and the Danube, received the Scythians in alliance, and left the remaining territory prey to enemy arms."[70]

Unlike Jerome, Claudian did not explicitly allude to the impermeability of the Caspian Gates, he implied that the Huns could not have made their way through without help from an agent located within the *oikoumene*. This explanation takes away the Huns' agency and places it in the hands of their guide, Rufinus, who had led them through the Gates by an unexpected path. By the 4th century, the trope of external groups from the Eurasian Steppe being led through the Gates, rather than passing through by their own devices, was already well attested. For instance, Tacitus and Josephus wrote that the Iberians led the Sarmatians through the Caspian Gates into Armenia and Cassius Dio recounted that an Alan incursion into Albania and Media was instigated by Pharasmanes.[71] The formulation of these passages, including that of Claudian, deprives of all agency the barbarian groups crossing into the *oikoumene*. This not only demon-

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[69] Liebeschuetz (1990, 91-92) wrote that Rufinus may have been responsible for settling Huns in Thrace, which may explain the accusation of treason, if this did occur around the same time as the Hunnic incursion of 395-398. See Priscus fr. 60. These barbarian incursions had nothing to do with Rufinus' assassination, who was already unpopular and whose death would have benefited Eutropius. Cf. Maenchen-Helfen 1973, 51-52.

[70] Claud. *In Ruf.* 1.308-310: *iamque Getas Histrumque movet Scythiamque receptat / auxilio traditque suas hostilibus armis / reliquias.* Trans. Bernstein 2023, adapted. The Gothic raiding is also mentioned in 2.36-53. Claudian employed the ethnonym Getae to refer to the Goths throughout his works.

[71] This Alan invasion is dated to *c.* A.D. 135. See Braund 1991.

strates the pervasiveness of tropes about the impermeability of the Caspian Gates, but also the shared conceptions about the inferiority and irrationality of barbarians, who are perpetually unable to venture of their own volition into the *oikoumene,* the Greco-Roman world.[72] These barbarian groups are either the subject of passive finite verbs or are modified by passive participles (i.e. both the equivalent of the object of an active verb), or the object of active verbs:

Claudian, *In Rufinum*, 2.28-30: "Others [the Huns], having been led through the Caspian Gates and Armenia's snows across an unexpected pass, invaded the East's riches." (… *alii per Caspia claustra* / *Armeniasque nives inopino tramite ducti* / *invadunt Orientis opes*).[73]

Tacitus, *Annals*, 6.33: "But the Iberians, in territorial control, hastily poured out their Sarmatians against the Armenians by the Caspian route." (*Sed Hiberi locorum potentes Caspia via Sarmatam in Armenios raptim effundunt*).[74]

Josephus, *Antiquities*, 18.4.4: "… they [the kings of the Iberians and the Albanians] did bring in the Alani against Artabanus by allowing them free transit through their own territory after throwing open the Caspian Gates." (…Ἀλανοὺς δὲ δίοδον αὐτοῖς διδόντες διὰ τῆς αὐτῶν καὶ τὰς θύρας τὰς Κασπίας ἀνοίξαντες ἐπάγουσι τῷ Ἀρταβάνῳ).[75]

Josephus, *Jewish War*, 7.7.4: "The Alani—a race of Scythians, as we have somewhere previously remarked, inhabiting the banks of the river Tanais [Don] and the lake Maeotis [Sea of Azov]—contemplating at this period a predatory incursion into Media and beyond, entered into negotiations with

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[72] For an overview of the Greco-Roman understandings of the barbarian in Late Antiquity, see Gillett 2009; Heather 2010.

[73] Trans. Bernstein 2023, adapted.

[74] Ed. Heubner 1994, trans. Woodman 2004. On this passage, see Woodman 2017, 232-233.

[75] The translation and Latin edition of this passage are taken from Feldman 1965, which proposed several changes informed by scholarship published since the publication of Niese's (1890) edition of *AJ*. Bosworth (1977, 223-225) suggested that Josephus' account of this event is accurate, and that the Caspian Gates refer to one of the passes through the Alborz Mountains, near ancient Rhagae, modern-day Ray, which Alexander the Great took on his way to India. Bosworth proposed that the Alans had taken a long detour by circling around the Caspian Sea to attack the unsuspecting Medes from the east, from Hyrcania.

the king of the Hyrcanians, who was master of the pass which king Alexander had closed with iron gates. With this person there [the king of the Hyrcanians] having provided an entrance to them [the Alani], masses of them fell upon the Medes who suspected nothing, and plundered a populous country, filled with all manner of live-stock, none venturing to oppose them." (Τὸ δὲ τῶν Ἀλανῶν ἔθνος ὅτι μέν εἰσι Σκύθαι περὶ τὸν Τάναϊν καὶ τὴν Μαιῶτιν λίμνην κατοικοῦντες, πρότερόν που δεδηλώκαμεν κατὰ τούτους δὲ τοὺς χρόνους διανοηθέντες εἰς τὴν Μηδίαν καὶ προσωτέρω ταύτης ἔτι καθ᾽ ἁρπαγὴν ἐμβαλεῖν τῷ βασιλεῖ τῶν Ὑρκανῶν διαλέγονται τῆς παρόδου γὰρ οὗτος δεσπότης ἐστίν, ἣν ὁ βασιλεὺς Ἀλέξανδρος πύλαις σιδηραῖς κλειστὴν ἐποίησε. κἀκείνου τὴν εἴσοδον αὐτοῖς παρασχόντος ἀθρόοι καὶ μηδὲν προϋποπτεύσασι τοῖς Μήδοις ἐπιπεσόντες χώραν πολυάνθρωπον καὶ παντοίων ἀνάμεστον βοσκημάτων διήρπαζον μηδενὸς αὐτοῖς τολμῶντος ἀνθίστασθαι.).[76]

Cassius Dio, *Epitome*, 69.15.1: "A second war was begun by the Alani (they are Massagetae) at the instigation of Pharasmanes." (…ἕτερος δὲ ἐξ Ἀλανῶν (εἰσὶ δὲ Μασσαγέται) ἐκινήθη ὑπὸ Φαρασμάνου…).[77]

The passage of the Huns through the Gates of the Caucasus was an ideal opportunity for Claudian to harness the associations of the Gates as impermeable to those beyond the *oikoumene*, at least without the help of an agent from the *oikoumene*. Barbarian incursions were common in Late Antiquity and did not require support from traitors within the Roman Empire to succeed. Yet mentioning that the Huns had passed through the Caspian Gates would have raised questions about how they had managed to do so, given their established literary pedigree as uncrossable barriers for external foes, and the importance of having a guide from the *oikoumene* to lead these external groups through. Claudian exploited this, rhetorically, to slander Rufinus by accusing him of being a traitor.

[76] Trans. Thackeray 1928, adapted.

[77] Ed. Boissevain 1901, trans. Cary and Foster 1925. In this excerpt, the agency of the Alans is subverted by Pharasmanes (king of the Iberians), who functions as the genitive of agent of the passive clause.

CONCLUSION

Literary tropes about the Gates of the Caucasus, particularly about their impermeability and their role in locking savage barbarian groups away from the *oikoumene*, established through centuries of literature, were given a new life in Late Antiquity. Both Jerome and Claudian carefully crafted a rhetorical landscape surrounding the Gates of the Caucasus and linked it to contemporary events to further their agendas. This paper showed why and how Jerome and Claudian employed centuries-old tropes about the Gates of the Caucasus and harnessed these tropes in new ways to further their argumentations, in the context of the Hunnic incursion in the Near East, from A.D. 395-398.

Jerome, confronted with a novel barbarian group, "not much known from ancient records,"[78] recycled Herodotus' account of Scythian conquests to emphasize the Huns' ferocity, which forced Fabiola to flee and return to Rome. Jerome justified this by leveraging the perception of the Gates of Alexander, his preferred toponym, as keeping the Huns isolated beyond these Gates since the times of Alexander to explain his association between past and present barbarian groups. The fearsome character of the Huns was further supported by Jerome's choice of toponym for the Gates, which emphasized that these Huns were one of the barbarian groups that the greatest conqueror of Antiquity, Alexander the Great, had deemed essential to keep out of the *oikoumene*.

This portrayal of the Huns as particularly savage barbarians was also conducive to Jerome's theological understanding of contemporary calamities as divine punishment sent to chastise mankind. Jerome used this perception to highlight the gravity of the Hunnic incursion, which he presented to his audience as divine punishment and an invitation for repentance. Furthermore, given the literary association of the Gates of the Caucasus as impermeable to barbarian groups beyond the *oikoumene*, Jerome may have wanted his audience to ask themselves how the Huns had crossed into Asia. For Jerome, God had sent the Huns as instruments of divine punishment, to promote reform and

[78] Amm. Marc. 31.2.1, trans. Rolfe 1939, adapted.

penitence, like Fabiola had done by devoting herself to God, to repent for two sinful marriages.

The Hunnic invasion through the Gates of the Caucasus was also a perfect opportunity for Claudian to rhetorically exploit to slander Stilicho's political opponent in the East, Rufinus. In his invective *Against Rufinus*, Claudian harnessed the perceived inability of external groups to pass the Caspian Gates to accuse Rufinus of treason. According to the literary imagination about the Caspian Gates, those beyond its limits could only be led in by an agent from the *oikoumene*. For Claudian, the traitor who had led the Huns through the Caspian Gates and into the Near East was Rufinus.

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