The lasso can be found in historical sources and pictorial representations stretching from the Black Sea and the Urals to Transoxania and China, dating back to the first millennium B.C. Nevertheless, it is surprising that perhaps the most well-known reference to the lasso in battle comes from the description of a Hun warrior by the fourth century Roman historian Ammianus Marcellinus who, in 392 AD, he wrote his report on their steppe tactics based on the accounts he had gathered from contemporary Goth fighters. There are, however, no studies that examine the place and value of the lasso in the Eastern Roman armies and the role of central Asian elements in its assimilation into the Roman panoply.

My aim in this chapter is to trace the origin of this weapon in the Eastern Mediterranean basin and to evaluate the historical evidence on the use of the lasso by Imperial soldiers or soldiers in the service of the Byzantine Emperor. I will use a variety of sources ranging from the Strategika – military manuals – of the sixth and tenth centuries, histories and chronicles from the Late Roman period up to the beginning of the thirteenth century, epic poems from the Byzantine, Iranian and Turkish folklore tradition, manuscript miniatures, and mosaic and fresco representations. My strategy will be twofold: firstly, I will examine the history of the use of the lasso in the eastern Mediterranean civilizations and, secondly, I will highlight the evidence of its use in primary sources up to the thirteenth century. Specific attention will be paid to the transition of this weapon from nomadic cultures to the Roman Empire through the ‘Germanization’ of the army of the Dominate period. Evidence for its use will be drawn from Greek primary sources (mainly histories, chronicles, and Strategika). The last part of the chapter will focus on the sources for the battles fought between Byzantine armies and nations that applied steppe battle-tactics, such as the Turks, the Bulgars, the Patzinaks and the Cumans, in an attempt to prove that the last effective mention of the lasso in the Byzantine army was by the author of the early tenth century Taktika.

It would be very tempting to attribute the introduction of the lasso in the eastern Mediterranean basin to the Hunnic or Avar influence coming from the steppes of Central Asia, but the lasso was known in the area of the eastern
Mediterranean and the Black Sea already. Referring to the Sagartians, a nomadic people of Iranian origin living next to the Medes in north-eastern Iran, Herodotus described their main battle weapons and tactics as follows:

It is their custom to carry no armour of bronze or iron, save daggers only, and to use ropes of twisted leather. In these they trust when they go to battle; and this is their manner of fighting when they are at close quarters with their enemy, they throw their ropes, these having a noose at the end and whatever they catch, be it horse or man, the thrower drags it to himself, and the enemy thus entangled in the prisoning coils is slain.

Herodotus asserts that the Sagartians fought only with braided leather lassoes and daggers. Judging by ethnography and location, their daggers would, most likely, have been of an akinakes type – a curved sabre, single or double-edged – used since, at least, the seventh century B.C. They fought from horseback by snaring enemy men or horses and dragging them close, presumably dispatching them with the dagger.

The other reference on the use of the lasso comes from Pausanias who, in his Description of Greece, referred to the ensnaring tactics of the Sarmatians: “They throw a lasso [σειράς (dative, plural) from σειρά: cord or line with a noose, lasso] round any enemy they meet, and then turning round their horses upset the enemy caught in the lasso.” The Sarmatians were an Iranian-speaking people who had replaced the Scythians, to whom they were ethnically related, by the second century B.C. along the northern shores of the Black Sea and into Moesia. Thus, they came into direct contact with the Roman Empire and

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1 Herodotus describes the Sagartians as a Persian tribe in 1.125 but elsewhere treats them as a separate people. He was the last of the Ancient Greek authors to mention the Sagartians, probably because other Greek writers did not distinguish them from other Iranian-speakers. For further reference: Eilers, ‘Asagarta’, Vol. II, Fasc. 7, p. 701; Melyukova, “The Scythians and the Sarmatians”, pp. 97-117.

2 Herodotus, Histories, VII.85.


4 Pausanias, Description of Greece, 1.21.5.