THE EARLIEST AVAR-AGE STIRRUPS,
OR THE “STIRRUP CONTROVERSY” REVISITED

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It is now over forty years since the beginning of the “stirrup controversy.” In his major work published in 1962, Lynn White dedicated an entire chapter to the “stirrup, [the] mounted shock combat, feudalism, and chivalry.” White painted a picture of dramatic social change in Western Europe triggered by the introduction of the stirrup in the late eighth century, which to a large extent was credited for critical developments in warfare: “The Man on Horseback, as we have known him during the past millennium, was made possible by the stirrup, which joined man and steed into a fighting organism.” White defined mounted shock combat as the tactic by which horsemen charged with couched lances kept under the arm. As a consequence, mounted shock combat required a considerable amount of training, which began at a very early age. As the catalyst that made both mounted shock combat and feudalism possible, the stirrup first appeared in Persia, then was carried to other countries in the Near and Middle East, as well as to Byzantium, by Muslim conquerors. From Byzantium, the stirrup then reached the Franks in Western Europe no earlier than 700. Although he knew that the earliest Byzantine indication of the stirrup was that of the *Strategikon*, White chose to date that military treatise unusually late. He may have done so in reaction to the idea that the Byzantine army had adopted the stirrup from the Avars. According to him, “the widespread belief that the Avars of the late sixth century had stirrups” was based only on the authority of József Hampel, the author of the first synthesis of Avar archaeology: “The belief fathered by Hampel in sixth-century Avar stirrups seems

1 White 1962, 1–38.
2 White 1962, 38. For an excellent summary of White’s arguments pertaining to the military, social, and political developments of the Carolingian age, see DeVries 1998, 95–103. For a recent re-examination of White’s thesis, see Roland 2003.
3 White 1962, 25–28. He thought that appropriate for that purpose was not the barbed spear (the *ango*) or the battle axe (*francisca*), but a longer, winged spear or lance with a cross piece that would prevent the weapon from completely sticking into the enemy’s body.
4 White 1962, 20 and 144 with n. 1. See also *Strategikon* 1.2 and 2.9, in Dennis 1984, 13 and 30.
to be dead among Hungarian scholars, and the tendency is to push the
arrival of the stirrup in the Danubian basin later and later into the sev-
enth century.”  

While dismissing as too early the dating of a burial with
stirrups found in the Middle Rhine region, at Budenheim near Mainz,
White argued for an adoption of the stirrup within the Merovingian
milieu no earlier than the early eighth century.6

Skepticism about White’s technological determinism was not slow
in coming, and his ideas were opposed on a number of fronts. While
not denying the role of technology, Marxist scholars saw the stirrup as
nothing more than a dependant variable, the advancement or constraint
of which depended upon the forces implicit in class relations. For
example, Peter Sawyer agreed that “the stirrup made it possible to
fight on horseback more efficiently,” as the device helped the stability
of the rider and gave the mounted warrior the advantage of “a fast
moving, elevated platform from which to throw things.” But Sawyer
also argued that White had not proved that the introduction of the
stirrup could have led to such radical social changes as the rise of
feudalism.7 To attack White’s argument at its root, Sawyer focused on
his chronology. He noticed that White had discarded or dismissed the
archaeological evidence of a much earlier use of the stirrup. He also
noted that the absence of stirrups from burial assemblages may indicate
not their absence at the time, but the fact that they were not deposited
in graves. This may have happened for a variety of reasons, such as
religious reservations about any kind of grave goods in the aftermath
of the conversion to Christianity. Nevertheless, Sawyer concluded that
“the steppe nomads were unfamiliar with stirrups before the seventh
century.”8

Unlike Sawyer, Donald Bullough took at face value White’s re-dating
of Budenheim and other burial assemblages and categorically rejected

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5 White 1962, 22. See also Hampel 1905. That the Byzantine army adopted the stirrup
from the Avars is common knowledge among Byzantinists, e.g., Dagron 1987, 210.
6 White 1962, 24. He dated to the same period the pair of stirrups from another
burial found in the late nineteenth century in Wilflingen near Biberach (Oexle 1992,
176 and pl. 85.172.1–2). White’s dating of the Wilflingen burial to the eighth century
goes back to Reinecke 1899, 43–44, who relied on the similarity between the round stir-
rups found there and those from Avar-age burials in Hungary, which József Hampel had
dated to the eighth century. The Budenheim burial is now dated to the late sixth or early
seventh century on the basis of the associated glass beaker. See Oexle 1992, 203 and pl.
123.267.2; Freedon 1987, 524.
7 Hilton and Sawyer 1963, 93 and 92: “It is, however, as misleading to insist that all
finds of stirrups must be late as it is to insist that they all must be early.”
8 Hilton and Sawyer 1963, 92.