

# Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Asian History

## Ancient Steppe Nomad Societies

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### Summary and Keywords

Throughout more than two millennia, the extensive droughty areas in East Asia were occupied by pastoral nomads. A long history exists of hybridity between steppe and agricultural areas. The ancient nomads had a specific pastoral economy, a mobile lifestyle, a unique mentality that assumed unpretentiousness and stamina, cults of war, warrior horsemen, and heroized ancestors that were reflected, in turn, in both their verbal oeuvre (heroic epos) and their arts (animal style). They established vast empires that united many peoples. In the descriptions of settled civilizations, the peoples of the steppe are presented as aggressive barbarians. However, the pastoral nomads developed efficient mechanisms of adaptation to nature and circumjacent states. They had a complex internal structure and created different forms of social complexity—from heterarchical confederations to large nomadic empires. The different forms of identity in pastoral societies (gender, age, profession, rank) are presented in this article. Special attention is given to how ethnic identity is formed from small groups. The ethnic history of the ancient nomads of East Asia is described, particularly for such pastoral societies as the Xiongnu, the Wuhuan, the Xianbei, and the Rouran.

Keywords: ethnicity, nomads, steppe, pastoralism, ancient, Xiongnu, Xianbei, Rouran

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### Introduction

The nomads made their life in the arid steppes and semideserts where agriculture was practically impossible. However, they were able to breed grass-grazing animals, which proved to be an effective mode of existence in the native zones considered here. The main foods of nomads were comprised of various kinds of dairy products and, less often, animal meat, spoils of the chase, and products of arable farming and gathering. Ancient nomads also lost livestock to raids from foreign tribes. These forays were a favorite recreation of nomads. Among Xiongnu, the historian Sima Qian witnessed the following at the turn of

## Ancient Steppe Nomad Societies

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the 2nd and 1st centuries, BCE: “It is their custom to herd their flocks in times of peace and make their living by hunting, but in periods of crisis they take up arms and go off on plundering and marauding expeditions. This seems to be their inborn nature.”<sup>1</sup>

By virtue of this mobile way of life, nomads lived unpretentiously, occupying light collapsible dwellings (yurts, tents, and marquees). The household necessities of nomads were few and dishes were commonly made of unbreakable materials (wood and leather). Clothes and footwear were sewn and made, as a rule, of leather, wool, and fur. The *yurt* (a mobile-dwelling type of tent made from wood and wool) was a major architectural invention of the nomads.<sup>2</sup> The nomads had a unique mentality that assumed a specific perception of space and time, rites of hospitality, unpretentiousness and determination, the presence of cults of war for both ancient and medieval nomads, cults of warrior horsemen, and heroized ancestors. Their mentality was reflected in their mythology, epic stories, representative arts (an animatic style), and their cultic attitude toward cattle—a primary source of nomads’ subsistence.

Up to the present day, the question of the origin of nomadism is unambiguous. The nomadic lifestyle originated in Eastern Asia approximately at the turn of the 2nd to the 1st millennia BC.<sup>3</sup>

Eastern Asia includes territories of three modern countries with arid steppe areas: Russia (Southern Siberia and the Transbaikalia), Mongolia, and China (Xinjiang, Inner Mongolia, Northern Shaanxi, Northern Shanxi, and Manchuria). The ecology of other steppe areas of Eurasia differs from that of Eastern Asia. Here were located two different areas—in the north the vast steppe prairies, and in the south, agricultural areas. The south (China) was isolated by impenetrable deserts. The spacious extent of the steppes enabled the establishment of the great nomadic empires. The frontier between the north and south determined the relationship between nomadic and settled populations as well as different forms of social and ethnic identities.

## Gender and Age Identity

The structure of nomadic society was founded on affiliations with specific sexual and age-related standards of behavior. A person’s gender at birth fell into a social construction that determined the social roles of individuals. In each culture, gender stereotypes existed—standards of conduct of males and females, which determined gender identity. Each individual was aware of these standards and followed them. The standards became a part of individual identity and determined conduct (behavior) on a subconscious level. Gender socialization (through regulations adapted in childhood) was an important factor in social and cultural adaptation.<sup>4</sup>

## Ancient Steppe Nomad Societies

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In pastoral nomadic society, labor was divided according to age and gender. The male's responsibilities included grazing the cattle as well as making bows and arrows and other tools. The rest of the time they busied themselves with hunting, archery, and military campaigns. All other labor fell to the women—housework, milking and preparing other products from livestock, and raising the children. When the men were absent, the women had to take on the entire burden.

The ancient nomads of East Asia had similar gender stereotypes. The gender division of labor existed among the ancient Mongolian Wuhuans, as stated in *Hou Han Shu*: “The women are able to embroider on a leather, to do figured embroideries, to weave the woolen cloths; men can make bows, arrows, saddles and bridles, forge arms from metals and iron.”<sup>5</sup> A similar description of nomads was written by the ambassador to Pope Innocent IV on his mission to the Mongolian khans in the 13th century: “The men do no work except archery, though sometimes they take care of the herds. Instead they hunt and work at shooting. All of them from the children to the adults are good archers, and their children, when they are two or three years old, begin to ride. They ride and gallop, and bows are given to the children according to their size and they are taught to shoot; they are very apt and daring besides. Girls and women ride and gallop on horses as skillfully as men. We even saw them carrying quivers and bows, and the women can ride horses for as long as the men; they have shorter stirrups, handle horses very well, and mind all the property. The Tartar women make everything: skin clothes, shoes, leggings, and everything made of leather. They drive carts and repair them, they load camels, and are quick and vigorous in all their tasks. They all wear trousers, and some of them shoot just like men.”<sup>6</sup> The same descriptions concerning the pastoral nations of Africa, the Middle East, and Central and Inner Asia in early modern times can be found.<sup>7</sup> Most likely gender stereotypes among pastoral nomads have not changed for hundreds of years.

Despite their firm gender occupational segregation, females played an important role in the societies of pastoral nomads. Repeatedly, Chinese chroniclers emphasized: “When drawing the calculations and plans, the males (men) defer to opinion of females (women) and settle on their own only the military affairs.”<sup>8</sup>

Women were also able to play a role, sometimes even greater than their role within the family unit, in public life. Particularly lofty was the role a widow played after the death of her husband. It is sufficient to recall the influence that Hoelun, the mother of Genghis Khan, had on her sons and, subsequently, the influence of other khans' wives. In addition, weapons found in the graves of women in many ancient nomad cultures demonstrate this point. It is evidence that in ancient times, women nomads engaged in wars and had a high status. This fact is reflected in the splendid Greek legend of the militant Amazons.<sup>9</sup>

## Ancient Steppe Nomad Societies

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Figure 1. Chinese mirror from a female Xiongnu burial.

Source: Museum of Buriatian Scientific Center of the Siberian Branch of the Russian Academy of Sciences, Ulan-Ude.

Gender identity of ancient nomads is also reflected in their mortuary customs. Male burials in many cultures of the Early Iron Age more often contain armament supplies while in comparison, female burials contain adornments. Nevertheless, armament supplies also occur in many female graves. In some cultures, male burials of the early nomads are divided into ranks, and these attributes

are well distinguished. As a rule, female burials are not divided into strict groups. It is evident that males had created stable hierarchies. Females had established coalitions as a result of their ages and reproductive behavior. However, graves of older women were sometimes elaborate, which emphasized their high status. It is also important to note the longer life span of males compared to females, with several peaks apparent in female mortality. The latter were due to unfavorable gestation periods during maximum fertility cycles, numerous childbirths, insufficient hygiene, and other factors.<sup>10</sup>

As opposed to gender, age identity changed in the course of a lifetime. The physiological age of each individual (skeleton, teeth, health, and intellectual strength) changed. The social age characteristics were associated with the behavior of individuals within specific age groups. The individual needed to share the identity of his or her age group and its existing rules. A transition from one age group to another was accompanied by a status change and was commemorated by a symbolic act (e.g., a boy received a colt as a present, a right to bear arms, or a permit for marriage) and the performance of a ritual. In practice, these rituals were designed to maintain the structure of nomadic societies and were accompanied by initiation rites, some of which were purposely cruel.

Age identity is reflected in the Chinese chronicles of the ancient nomads. These chronicles retained descriptions of the Xiongnu way of life. Very early in chap. 110 of *Shi ji (Historical Records)*, the great Chinese historian Sima Qian writes, regarding his northern neighbors: “The little boys start out by learning to ride sheep and shoot birds and rats with a bow and arrow, and when they get a little older they shoot foxes and hares, which are used for food. Thus, all the young men are able to use a bow and act as armed cavalry in times of war.”<sup>11</sup>

In these Chinese chronicles, Wuhuan girls are discussed: “When a woman attains the marriage age, she lets grow hairs, divides them into spikes and puts on the headwear.”<sup>12</sup>

## Ancient Steppe Nomad Societies

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Many ancient Mongolian nomads followed a rule that the fiancé had to work for a designated time in the household of the fiancée's parents before the married couple received cattle, a yurt, and other property.<sup>13</sup>

The presence of the system of age ranks among nomads raises an interesting point. In some ethnohistorical pastoral societies, age ranks and classes have existed (e.g., in East Africa) where boys grazed sheep and goats, youths were warriors, and adult men were engaged in the household, had families, and were senior warriors. The elderly males commanded and were priests. When this fluidic system solidified, it transformed into a trifunctional structure with three classes or castes (priests, warriors, and commoners). Georges Dumézil was of the opinion that the trifunctional system existed in all proto-Indo-European societies.<sup>14</sup> It or its vestiges was widely seen among cattle farmers and nomads of the Scythian world (and probably among the Saka, Wusun, and Yuezhi as well). Archaeologists associate with this trifunctional system some characteristics of the mortuary customs of the cultures of Southern Siberia and Central Asia (the Arzhan, Tagar, Pazyryk, Issyk, and so on).

## Warriors, Priests, and Rank Identity

War was of importance in the life of nomads, and in trifunctional societies, the young men were warriors. It is not known how widely this system prevailed among the pastoralists and nomads of East Asia in the Bronze Age. In the Iron Age, all the adult men took part in military campaigns. In this period, groups who were bodyguards to chiefs were formed, to whom they owed their fealty. They were joined together by their military identity and were brothers in arms. In the course of time, the memories of joint tragic adventures were mythologized and reminiscences of past actions served as important mechanisms for solidarity with and incorporation of new warrior members.

The bodyguards were not only warriors but also performed administrative, diplomatic, and policing services. Numerous bronze belt plaques with animal styling ornamentation reflect this military identity and demonstrate the existence of the cult of war among ancient nomads.

## Ancient Steppe Nomad Societies

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*Click to view larger*

*Figure 2.* The Xiongnu bronze belt buckle with animal styling.

*Source:* Museum of Buriatian Scientific Center of the Siberian Branch of the Russian Academy of Sciences, Ulan-Ude.

A special identity was characteristic of the class of priests and shamans. Religious groups were very secretive and enforced strict rites of initiation. The sacral world was inaccessible to ordinary people and also frightened them. The behaviors of priests and shamans were very different from normal people. They committed anomalous actions, wielded powerful psychological influences,

and were able to fall into trances. In the trifunctional societies of Central Asia and Siberia as well as in filial theocratic cultures, priests assumed important political positions and had a major impact on all other social groups—nobles and warriors.

The East Asian nomads were shamanists as well and believed in the cult of the sky. Besides the Eternal Blue Sky, they held sacred the goddess of the Earth and fire spirits, and they told fortunes using sheep's shoulder blades. About the Wuhuan, the Chinese chronicles report the following: "They fear the souls of the deceased and spirits, make sacrifices to the Heaven, Earth, Sun, Moon, stars, constellations, mountains, rivers, and deceased chiefs, telling of the fame of their virtues. For the offering sacrifices, black cattle and sheep are used."<sup>15</sup>

Leaders of large polities also were believed to have accomplished religious functions. A belief existed that they possessed the charisma that allowed them to communicate with supernatural forces. The Xiongnu shan'yu (the superchief) possessed a concentration of irrational powers and performed the most significant devotions, thus providing the nomads with patronage of supernatural forces. In the Chinese documents that address a period of prosperity for the Xiongnu empire, the shan'yu is called the "born by Heaven and Earth, raised by sun and moon, great shan'yu of Xiongnu."<sup>16</sup> In some chiefdoms, chiefs were able to share this right with other priests and shamans, while in other chiefdoms, they were able to aspire to having a monopoly on their power.

In ancient pastoral and nomadic societies, different statuses and ranks existed, with many different variants among them. In some societies, rank differences were practically absent (Wuhuan). In others, chiefs stood out from pastoralists (Xianbei). Some societies were characterized by the trifunctional structure and no doubt a theocracy of priests or top-class groups (Yuezhi). In the largest polities (i.e., the Xiongnu nomadic empire and the Rouran Khaganate), a multilevel hierarchy existed and generally consisted of the

## Ancient Steppe Nomad Societies

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ruling clan, other elite clans, chiefs of different ranks, patriarchs, warriors, militia nomads, nonpastoral people (tradesmen, blacksmiths, agriculturists), poor pastoralists, and slaves.

In general, elite groups created the attributes of their identities and invented their status symbols because they were forced to enter into relationships with strangers, and these attributes and symbols pointed without fail to their social positions. Status symbols varied but emphasized vertical relationships. Differences were transferred to everyday clothing and special marks of distinction (e.g., warders) as well as to symbols within which magical properties were concentrated. Leaders became the holders of a great many prestige articles of consumption, adornment, and important goods.

## Group and Kin Identity

Nomads usually roamed in an ail (i.e., a group of five to ten families). They were united by real kinship and common households and property, such as cattle. Chinese historians describe the ancient Wuhuan of the 1st century CE, for example, as typical pastoral nomads: "They are skilful in riding and archery, graze cattle searching the places with [good] water and grass, have no permanent residence and the domelike hovel with exit faced eastwards to the sunrise serves for them as a house. They hunt wild birds and animals, eat meat, drink sour milk and make clothes of coarse wool and fingering."<sup>17</sup>

Communities, lineages, and clans were based on both distinctly real and fictitious kinship, on seasonal labor cooperation (e.g., repairing of wells and sheep shearing), on the necessity of defending fellow tribesmen, and on the performances of common rites. They also bonded around common causes such as well digging, festival organizing (e.g., for weddings and initiations), funerals, rites, and feuds.

All of these kinds of social interactions contributed to the formation of group identity. Identity was also linked through common repeating rituals and ceremonies. Such joint activity was a good means of social integration. In the Bronze and Iron Ages, monumental funeral structures (khirigsuurs, deer stones, slab burials, figure burials, large kurgans, and so on) were erected in the Asian steppes through the use of orchestrated labor. As a result, a social landscape was created that reminded descendants of their common ancestors and strengthened their group identity. These monuments also served as markers of territory and were often used in periodic ritual ceremonies.

## Ancient Steppe Nomad Societies

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Figure 3. Bronze Age elite burial, Altai Mountain.

Source: Picture by Nikolay Kradin.

Usually close social relationships excluded traditional animosity. In the case of conflict within close groups, relatives tried to reconcile the conflicted parties as soon as possible. Everyone had common economic interests and conflict decreased economic efficiency. However, if groups belonged to different clans, then the

probability of conflict increased. Thus, the scale of the feud depended in many respects on the extent of structural kinship similarity within the conflicting groups.

Real kinship was often supplemented or substituted by fictitious genealogies. After a period of time, the fictitious genealogies were perceived as the real ones. Communities, lineages, and clans coalesced into middle-scale segmental units, which scholars often call “tribes.” The use of this definition in present-day anthropology is subject to active criticism.<sup>18</sup> Some scholars consider these units as ethnic groups while others consider them political units of communities or clans without hierarchy. In addition, some scientists divide early tribes into amorphous segmental units of clans and secondary tribes with institutions of chiefs, elders, and public gatherings. A fourth group of scientists calls the last formation a tribe. They believe that this grouping is a result of colonialism.

According to the extravagant conception of David Sneath, nomadic clans and tribes are constructions of colonial anthropologists.<sup>19</sup> Christopher Atwood has examined the original meaning of the Chinese term *buluo*, which is commonly translated as *tribe*. In fact, the exact meaning of the term is a group that is a “militia settlement” or a “local following (of armed men).” No reference is made to kinship as a factor for joining such a group.<sup>20</sup> This conclusion confirms indirectly that one of the most important functions of nomadic communities was to conduct war.

Nevertheless, many scholars believe on reasonable grounds that kinship ties for nomads were of higher importance than for settled people.<sup>21</sup> The exclusion of the term *tribe* from use by anthropologists and historians assumes the development of another term that is acceptable to all, but such a term is absent. One way or another, nomadic polities were divided into several segments, the relationship between which was governed by real and fictitious genealogies. There were several segmental levels up to small communities or single households. The polities were fluid and unstable. They were constantly divided and recreated and reconstructed by peaceful and forcible means.



## **Ancient Steppe Nomad Societies**

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As a rule, the name of a group and its integration depended on the personal qualities of the group's leaders. The leaders (chiefs) alone united the groups and created a new identity. The creation of common myths of joint origin or the masking of discreteness into common identity as well as political manipulations served as the tools in the formation of ethnicity and political identity. The chiefs of polities were often elected, but from the same clan. The duties of chiefs included the command of military campaigns, the redistribution of the spoils of war, the arrangements of conflicts, and, sometimes, the performance of religious ceremonies. The authority of chiefs was not always great and of a personal nature, and the opponents of chiefs could always leave the bad and unfortunate leader.

# Complexity

One can identify several waves of formation of complex societies in Eurasia in the Bronze and Early Iron Ages. The first wave (until 1600 BC) was during the epoch of chariots, theocratic chiefdoms, and tribal confederations (Sintasha, Petrovka). The second wave (1600–500 BC) refers to the epoch of pastoral societies and a period of simple chiefdoms (Andronovo Fedorovo). The third wave (since 500 BC) was in sync with the formation of nomadism. It was a time of complex chiefdoms and nomadic empires (Arzhan, Xiongnu).<sup>22</sup> Initially, the theory of chiefdoms was among the fundamental achievements of cultural anthropology.<sup>23</sup> From the different points of views regarding chiefdoms, the essential signs summarizing their qualities are the following: settlement hierarchy, social stratification, redistribution, and a sacralized or theocratic ideology. In the 1970s and 1980s, the term chiefdom was used in all archaeology and anthropology studies on complex societies. Since the early 1990s, however, the theory regarding chiefdoms has been subject to criticism.<sup>24</sup>

With the waning of the use of the term chiefdom has come an alternative—heterarchy—which has appeared in anthropology and archaeology studies.<sup>25</sup> Researchers identify two strategies that can be present in different cultures. The first (a hierarchical or network strategy) is based on a power vertical and centralization. Here, there are concentrations of riches by the elite, a dependence on patronage networks, social differentiations in funeral rites, and statuses and hierarchies in ideological systems and architecture. The second strategy (heterarchical or corporative) is based on the distribution of riches and power, moderate accumulation, segmental social organization, economic efforts of the society for the achievement of joint goals, and a universalized cosmology.

The pastoral nomads in the Iron Age had a more complex system of political organization. At the lowest level, families and clans of nomads could be combined into an acephalous heterarchical tribe or hierarchical chiefdom. A group of the heterarchical tribes could be combined into an acephalous polity or weak chiefdom. In turn, the chiefdoms could be structured into a complex chiefdom or heterarchical confederation of chiefdoms. An example of the latter is the confederation of the Khitan “eight polities” in the 1st millennium AD. All of these structures were as unstable as the steppe “tumbleweed” and could change in both numbers of levels and strength of internal ties. Frequently, the heterarchy–hierarchy dichotomy depended on different objective and random factors, including the individual properties of leaders. When a successful charismatic chief existed, for example, the hierarchy of a complex chiefdom could be created. After his death, however, it could be transformed into a heterarchical confederation of chiefdoms.

The rise of nomadism is related to a period of origin of “nomadic empires” or “imperial confederacies” (from the middle of the 1st millennium BC). From the outside, these confederations appeared autocratic and state-like (they were created to withdraw surplus products from outside the steppe), but from the inside they were consultative and tribal. A great many diverse opinions have been proposed about the preconditions for the

## Ancient Steppe Nomad Societies

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origins of nomadic empires. These opinions can be classified as follows: diverse global climatic changes; the warlike and greedy nature of nomads; overpopulation of the steppe; the need to replenish an extensive pastoral economy by means of raids on more stable agricultural societies; an unwillingness on the part of the settled peoples to trade with nomads (the cattle breeders had nowhere to sell their surplus products); personal activities of the steppe societies' rulers; and ethnicity mobilization.<sup>26</sup>

The Xiongnu empire at the outset was divided into three parts: center, left, and right wings. The wings, in turn, were divided into underwings. The supreme power was concentrated in the hands of the shan'yu (the superchief). The twenty-four highest officials who were in charge of large tribal associations and had at the same time military ranks as "chief of a ten thousand" were subordinate to the shan'yu. The elder brother successor to the throne was in charge of the left wing. "Kings" and six most mobile "chiefs of a ten thousand" were considered to be "strong" and were in command of not less than ten thousand riders. The rest of "chiefs of a ten thousand" were, in fact, in command of less than ten thousand cavalrymen.<sup>27</sup>



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Figure 4. The burial of Xiongnu elite in Ilmovaya pad, Buryatia.

Source: Museum of Buriatian Scientific Center of the Siberian Branch of the Russian Academy of Sciences, Ulan-Ude.

The Xianbei confederation was divided by the leader Tanshihuai into three parts: center, left, and right wings. In the *Wei-shu* chronicle, the most detailed description is given: "He divided his lands into three parts: middle, eastern and western. Lands eastward from Youbeiping district to the Liaodong district, (possessions) of Fuyu and [Hui]mo (tribe) formed the eastern part where more

than 20 nomadic polities were located. Mijia, Queji, and Suli were elders (of largest sites). Lands from Youbeiping district in the west to Shanggu district composed the central (middle) part where more than 10 polities were situated, the elders (of largest sites)—Kezui, Queju and Mujung were major chiefs. Lands from Shanggu district westward to Dunhuang and Wusun formed the western part including more than 20 polities. The elders (of largest sites) were Zhijianluo, Rilütuiyan, Yanliyou, and Yanliyou. All elders were subordinate to Tanshihuai."<sup>28</sup>

The Rouran Khanate was divided into the western and eastern wings. However, it is known from historical records that a dual organization existed prior to the imperial period. The military organization was based on the decimal principle. The *Wei-shu* chronicle states that Shelun, the founder of the Khanate, had introduced a so-called

## Ancient Steppe Nomad Societies

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decimal organization: "For the first time, has established the military laws by which 1000 people formed a detachment (jun), at the head of the detachment, the head was put while 100 people formed a banner (chuang) and a chief was at the head of a banner."<sup>29</sup>

The majority of nomadic empires did not exist for longer than from 100 to 150 years. Researchers have repeatedly cited a set of reasons that may have caused the decline and collapse of nomadic empires. Among them are (1) natural phenomena (drying of the steppe, short-term climatic stresses, and epidemics); (2) foreign policy factors (invasion of enemies, delayed wars, cessation of outer incomes, a crisis of nearby agrarian civilizations); and (3) internal causes (demographic outbursts, the loss of internal unity and separatism, oversizing and weaknesses of the administrative infrastructure, class struggles, internal wars of khans and civil wars, and unskilled political rulers).

Natural phenomena as a causative factor were popular explanations in earlier years but more modern data have now thrown doubt on this theory. Climate data of recent years suggest a lack of a direct relationship between the global cycles of drying and moistening of the steppe and periods of collapse and rise of steppe empires. A thesis regarding the class struggle of nomads proved to be erroneous because such a struggle was not observed. However, the majority of the other causes just given had real impacts on the fortunes of steppe powers. Comparative historical analysis often shows that the collapse of nomadic empires was frequently the product of multiple simultaneous factors. As a rule, misfortunes never come alone. Internal wars could be accompanied by both local ecological catastrophes (Xiongnu) or invasions of enemies (Rouran).

At the same time, causes existed which potentially contributed to the structural instability of nomadic empires: (1) external resources that prompted the economically independent tribes and chiefdoms to unite into a unified imperial confederation; (2) nomadic mobility and armaments that forced the supreme powers to seek consensus between different political groups; (3) the system of power inheritance, according to which each of the representatives of the ruling lineage stemming from main wives had the right to high hierarchical positions, including the right to the throne; and (4) polygamy among the highest elite nomads, which caused an excessive surplus of potential inheritors, intensification of competition between them, and civil wars.<sup>30</sup>

## Ethnicity

Various approaches have been taken to the understanding of ethnic processes. The classic approach (*primordialism*) was the prevailing paradigm over an extended period. It proceeds from the premise that ethnicity is the primordial and permanent characteristic of individuals at birth. Ethnicity is fixed in the cultural norms (language, traditions, origin, and territory) and is reflected in archaeological research. The archaeological cultures are reflections of the ancient nations, and one can trace the genetic relationship between nations as one can trace the biological relationship of children with their

## Ancient Steppe Nomad Societies

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parents. The followers of this approach continuously discuss the question of to whom (Turks or Mongols) the Xiongnu belonged. The other popular question is: did an ethnic relationship exist between the Asian Xiongnu and the European Huns?

The opposite approach (*constructivism*) proceeds from the notion that ethnicity is not given by birth. It is a construct acquired by the individual in the course of socialization. The image of the ethnic group is in the mind of each person, and ethnicity is of a situational nature and can change with differing circumstances. The ethnic identity is permanently reconstructed, reinvented, and contested. At the end of the 2nd century AD, not less than 100,000 yurts of Xiongnu had taken the political identity of Xianbei.<sup>31</sup> This fact provides a strong example of ethnicity in nomadic polities being situational in nature.

Ethnic identity was often related to gender, class, age, or the intersections of all three. Therefore, it is difficult to understand in archaeology what material objects and artefacts can represent ethnic markers and which of these can be symbols of age, gender, social rank, and profession. It is crucial to keep in mind the cultural influence of fashion and prestige.

It is also difficult to rely on the data of physical anthropology and genetics. The prehistoric nations had permanently come into contact with the bearers of other cultures, exchanged matrimonial partners, migrated periodically to other territories, and mixed and assimilated into other cultures. All of these activities could not but have had an impact on human forms and genetic makeups.

Ethnic groups are created in the course of the intellectual influences of cultural, political, and religious leaders and elites on the masses. This influence contributes to the political mobilization and establishment of ethnic and political units. Such was the case in the emergence of ethnic groups in ancient nomadic nations. Rather than depending on tradition, ethnic identity depended on the commitment of people to the chief and his clan under whose name and banner they battled. The notion of ethnic devotion to the nation during that time period seems odd. One may suggest the motivation of loyalty to the chief or family group but not devotion to the nation or country.

The characteristics of ancient nomadic peoples were an overlap of ethnic and political terminology. Thus, ethnic symbols were predominantly political. This observation should be kept in mind when reading the Chinese chronicles. The chronicles often report the change of certain nomadic tribes with others. One has the impression that a nation had disappeared and its territory become occupied by another nation. In fact, only the ruling elite would change; the polity was renamed in other terms and a new ethnic identity was created.

The frontier occupied a highly important place for ethnic consolidation. Owen Lattimore in 1940 had connected active political and ethnic processes in Innermost Asia with the frontier between the steppe and China.<sup>32</sup> Later, Frederik Barth had offered an important theoretical update by showing that the drawing up of boundaries of the frontier accelerated mobilization and resulted in the establishment of ethnic and political

## Ancient Steppe Nomad Societies

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differences.<sup>33</sup> In many respects, the character of pastoral nomadic polities and the features of steppe ethnic processes in East Asia were caused by ecology. The distinct boundaries between the steppe extensive prairies (the northern zone) and the central plains of China (the southern zone) had a long history of hybridity between the two regions.

The frontier incited the nomads to ethnic and political mobilization. The nomads were in need of agriculture and handicraft products. These products were in the south, behind the Great Wall. The leaders of nomads tried to unite the tribes and chiefdoms into an imperial confederation. Toward this end, they used the charisma of their leaders and their monopolies of external prestigious goods. If favorable economic conditions, charismatic leadership, and the occurrence of good circumstances happened simultaneously, nomadic empires appeared. In addition to having a strong and aggressive personality, a pretender needed to have an acute awareness of policy and war. He needed to be an outstanding person so that he could bring under control the pastoralist tribes and chiefdoms previously dependent on his predecessor, and to force them to submit absolutely during times of war. He also needed to show generosity and magnanimity when dividing spoils and distributing gifts. If he failed to perform in this manner, the nomad superethnic polity or empire would be doomed to collapse and fall into oblivion.

### Ethnic History

The transition process from pastoral social structures to nomadism in East Asia dragged on through the long period from the Bronze Age to the Iron Age. Unfortunately, no exact names of steppe nations of this period exist, but information is available about archaeological cultures, although it is not known which nations had these cultural traditions. In Southern Siberia, these cultures were first Karasuk and, later, Tagar and Pazyryc. In the Mongolian steppes, these cultures included the Khirigsuur (west) and the Sbab burial (east). In the Ordos, the Ordos Bronze culture existed (Taohongbala—Maoqinggou) while in Inner Mongolia, the Xijiadian culture and, later, the Jinggouzi culture appeared. These cultures were approximately synchronous to the archaeological periods on the Central Plain of China from the Shang dynasty till the Warring States period.<sup>34</sup>

The formation and expansion of nomadism coincided with the last preimperial stages of the China Empire: Spring and Autumn (770–476 BC) and the Warring States (475–221 BC). By the time the Central Plain united, different nations lived to the north of China. To the northwest lived representatives of European ethnicity and Turco-speaking nations. In the Greek chronicles, the Eastern Scythians were reported, such as the Sacae, the Tochari, and the Massagetae.<sup>35</sup> The Chinese chronicles report the appearance of the Iranian Yuezhi. They are frequently identified with the Greek Massagetae and Tochari and are compared to the Pazyryk archaeological culture. The Yuezhi were a powerful confederation with many troops. They had traded with the Central Plain states, controlled the trading routes to Central Asia, and conquered the other Iranian nation, the Wusun in the west, and the Xiongnu in the east. Only when the shan'yu of Xiongnu Modu (Maodun, 209–174 BC) had defeated them did their hegemony stop. At the time of Modu's son, Laoshang (174–160 BC), they were wholly defeated and moved to Transoxiana. There, they experienced gradual Hellenization and played an important role in the establishment of the Kushan empire.

Another nomadic nation, the Wusun, was subordinate to the Xiongnu over a protracted period of time. Their basic history was related to Central Asia and the invasion of the Han empire to the west. The history of this region also reveals such nomadic nations as the Dingling and Hephthalites or Ephthalites.

The central position in the ancient history of the nomads of East Asia was occupied by the Xiongnu. The Chinese chronicles report of the nomads Hu (胡) in the pre-Han period, which is a collective name for the northern pastoral peoples. Names of individual small polities (tribes or chiefdoms) are also provided. Later, in the last part of the 3rd century BC, they were known as the Xiongnu.

The Donghu (or Tung Hu, the Eastern Hu) migrated to the northeast of the Central Plain. It is recognized that the Donghu language was proto-Mongolic. The Donghu was an archaeological culture of slab burials of the 2nd–1st millennia BC. The sites of this culture

## Ancient Steppe Nomad Societies

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are located in East Mongolia and East Baikal.<sup>36</sup> The Donghu had great polity and was nearly equal in power to that of the Xiongnu. The Donghu were defeated by the shan'yu (superchief) of Xiongnu Modu at the turn of the 3rd and 2nd centuries BC. Thereafter, the nomadic empire of Xiongnu was established.

The Xiongnu empire was arranged according to the decimal system and was divided into the center as well as left and right wings. It was the largest nomadic polity in Eastern Asia for more than 200 years. The question of the ethnic identity of the Xiongnu is extremely problematic, with many different opinions about it: Were they Turkic, Mongolic, or a multiple of identities? Did they have an isolated language?<sup>37</sup> In AD 48, the empire was divided into the north and south confederations. The south confederation accepted the Chinese protectorate. In AD 91, the north confederation of Xiongnu was defeated. After that, more than 100,000 tents of Xiongnu had accepted the identity of the Xianbei, and this became the beginning of the hegemony of the ancient Mongols. South Xiongnu was gradually assimilated by the Chinese. A part of the Xiongnu had departed to Central Asia, and it is clear that the most aggressive of them went further on to Europe and became known as the Huns. However, not all scholars share this point of view.<sup>38</sup>

The ancient Mongolian nomads, the Xianbei and the Wuhuan, were the descendants of the Donghu. They paid tribute to the Xiongnu empire. A part of the Wuhuan resettled to the near border districts of the Han dynasty. They became the buffer between China and Xiongnu and were the vassals of the Han. After that, they gradually dissolved among other nations. Xianbei lived initially on the upper Amur River (the Argun). Then they gradually occupied the whole territory of Inner Mongolia and, after the defeat of the Northern Xiongnu, all of the Mongolian steppes, from Amur to Central Asia. They included the majority of the Xiongnu units (tribes) in their makeup.

The prosperity of the Xianbei waned during the time of the leadership of the chief Tanshihuai (156–180). The greater part of the ethnically Xianbei tribes was concentrated in the central and eastern areas of the steppe empire. This can be confirmed by the fact that the regions of Eastern Mongolia and Eastern Baikal (of the “left wing”) were areas of traditional residence of the Xianbei. It is precisely there that archaeological sites of their culture have been found. Upon the death of Tanshihuai, the confederation was divided into several parts. In the late the 2nd century AD, more than fifty ethnic tribes coming from Donghu were situated on the territory of the steppes.

Apart from the Xianbei and the Wuhuan, the Murong, Tuoba, Tuyuhun, Yuwen, Yuchi, Kumoxi (Tatabi), Ruran, Shiwei, and Khitan are also known to have been present. The Tuyuhun later migrated westward to Qinghai Lake and established a confederation there. After the collapse of the Han dynasty, the time became ripe for the period of the Sixteen Kingdoms (AD 304–439) in China. In this period, many small kingdoms were established but they were quickly destroyed. Many kingdoms were founded by nomads who had migrated to the territories of northern China and were gradually assimilated by the settled populations.



## Ancient Steppe Nomad Societies

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The Xiongnu established the Qian Zhao (Former Zhao), Northern Han (304–329), the Northern Liang (397–439), and the Xia (407–431). Jie ethnicity (from the Yuezhi) was established by the Later Zhao (319–351). The Xianbei ethnicity was founded by many kingdoms, as follows: Duan (by 250–325/338), Dai (310–376), formerly Yan (337–370), Later Yan (384–409), Western Qin (385–431), Western Yan (384–394), Northern Liang (397–414), and the Southern Yan (398–410). The Dingling ethnicity was founded in the kingdom of Wei (388–392).

The greatest state was established by Tuoba (T'o-pa, Tabgach). The name Tuoba means "arranging in tresses." The Tuoba were one of the largest segments of the Xianbei. They inhabited the steppes and the mountain slopes of Khinggan. In the early 4th century, they founded a confederation and then migrated south of the Gobi and created the Northern Wei dynasty (386–535). It was a large state that occupied a considerable part of northern China. The state was established along the lines of the Chinese model. The ruling dynasty was estranged from the nomadic mode of life but remembered its origins.

Another large polity was established in the steppe in 402. These were also the Mongolian-speaking people, the Rouran. The first information about these people dates back to the beginning of the 4th century. The Rouran Khaganate occupied a vast territory from the Ili River to the boundaries of Koguryo. In 552, the Rouran, at the peak of their might, suffered defeat from the Turks. Over a period of three years, four khans followed one another but could do nothing. After that, the remainder of the population migrated to the Pannonia where they were known as the Avar at the beginning of the Middle Ages.

## Discussion of the Literature

The world of nomads has simultaneously frightened and intrigued their settled neighbors. The nomads were a constant threat for settled civilizations and this enemy needed to be well understood. This stance predetermined the East's focus on the nomads, as on the barbarians and the robbers. Such descriptions are contained in practically all historical tractates beginning with the "fathers" of history—Herodotus in Europe and Sima Qian in Eastern Asia. However, historians have not moved beyond descriptions of the political history, manners, and appearances of nomads. The social science theory of the eminent Arabian thinker of the 14th and 15th centuries, Ibn Khaldoun (1332–1436), was a single exception. He included the nomads in his scheme of history as a special variant of state formation with the group identity of pastoralists (*asabiya*).<sup>39</sup>

Only from the end of the 18th century did European scholars begin to investigate the Asian pastoral nomads, and the first historical and ethnological studies were written.<sup>40</sup> The main focus in these studies was the political history of these unknown peoples. An important development was the translations of primary sources from Eastern languages. Other aspects of pastoral societies received little attention.

## Ancient Steppe Nomad Societies

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Many scientists have written about nomads as clannish tribal societies. The origin of states and empires was associated with the efficiencies of nomad leaders. The most important contribution to the research on this topic was by Wilhelm Radloff. He showed that the power of chiefs and khans was retained until different groups of nomads were interested in acquiring it.<sup>41</sup> In this period, the *conquest* theory of state origin was very popular. The key place in this theory was occupied by the nomads, and just their conquests resulted in the founding of first states.<sup>42</sup>

In the 20th century, many books were written about the ancient nomads of Asia. Main sources for these studies were narratives, and classical volumes on the political history of Asian nomads were published based on the chronicles of settled peoples.<sup>43</sup> In recent decades, these publications have been supplemented by new collective studies based on archaeological descriptions.<sup>44</sup> Debates on social and political identity in the 20th century were important, especially for Marxist scholars. According to the Marxist scheme regarding modes of production, the nomads exhibited five formations (stages of history) in the scheme. Thus, the steppe empires of the Xiongnu, Turks, and Mongols were considered as slaveholding, early feudal, and mature feudal states, respectively. The introduction of the Marxist scheme of five formations in the history of nomadism had no justification. Subsequently, the less ideological scheme—the division into early and late nomads—was accepted. The so-called early nomads (till the middle of the 1st millennium AD) were considered to be prestate, early class, or early feudal societies. The formation of mature statehood in the form of nomadic feudalism occurred in the Middle Ages, which was the time of the late nomads.<sup>45</sup> Beginning in the mid-1960s, new basic viewpoints concerning the social organization and evolution of nomads emerged and exist in the present, as follows: (1) preclass nomadic societies; (2) early states; (3) nomadic feudalism; and (4) nomadic modes of production.<sup>46</sup> One of the important achievements in this field was the theory of the early state. A series of works on the early state adapt this theory to nomadic societies.<sup>47</sup>

In the past several decades, a basic discussion has developed around the question of which factors had been of considerable importance in the course of the formation of nomadic supertribal institutions. Two different points of view have been proposed. The adherents of the theory of external dependence believe that nomadism depended on the environment and neighboring agricultural-urban societies. This opinion goes back to the works of Owen Lattimore.<sup>48</sup> The adherents of this approach think that extensive pastoral economics, low population density, and an absence of a settled way of life created the need for the products of agriculture and handicrafts, which was fulfilled by attacking settled neighbors or by exchanging the needed products through trade. Therefore, the nomads had a need for a supertribal organization in order to communicate with higher-organized settled societies.<sup>49</sup> The followers of the theory of nomadic autonomy believe that nomads could independently establish a rudimentary state and that their society had been divided into classes of aristocracy and common people. Because of the special

## Ancient Steppe Nomad Societies

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concern for genealogical relationships among nomads, such a state could be called consanguineal.<sup>50</sup>

Since the early 1990s, along with postmodernism and postcolonial criticism, new research themes (examination of gender, other identities, and, especially, ethnicity) have appeared, which have also penetrated into nomadology. As a result, a new discussion that touches on the question of universalism in the clannish organization of nomads, the concept of the tribe and chiefdoms, and features of political and ethnic identity has emerged.<sup>51</sup> The beginning of the 21st century was marked by a revolution in the investigation of ancient Asian nomads; first, because of a fundamental change in global politics. The Iron Curtain fell and the processes of globalization began. China, Mongolia, and Russia became open countries. They were fast integrated into the context of world communications, and scientific ties and contacts with researchers from other countries were formed. Thus, the intense study of archaeological steppe antiquities had begun. The second reason for the revolution in nomadic studies was a change in the content of archaeological science. In the 19th and 20th centuries, archaeology was considered a part of history or anthropology, but as a result of a large-scale scientific revolution, archaeology rapidly turned into a natural science in the last decades of the 20th century. New methods of dating, new chemical and physical techniques for analyzing artifacts and the bones of animals, new ecofacts, new pathology methods to examine human remains, genetic data, geographic information system (GIS) data, and so on, allowed researchers to achieve entirely new results which were previously inaccessible using earlier classical methodologies.<sup>52</sup>

Archaeology is now providing new information that allows us to correct historical data. For example, according to historical records it was known that the Xiongnu organized magnificent funeral ceremonies for their chieftains. Modern methods of carbon dating show that all élite (terrace) tombs belonged to a short time period—the end of the 1st century BCE and the beginning of the 1st century AD—the time of crisis for the Xiongnu Empire. An interesting question arises: where are the tombs of the first great rulers of the Xiongnu hidden? Another important discovery relates to the life sustenance of ancient nomads. It was previously believed that nomads did not engage in fishing. However, modern methods of research of skeletons of ancient people demonstrate that pastoral nomads consumed a great deal of fish. In addition, genetic studies provide us with data about the migration of ancient people from the territory of Europe to Mongolia and from China to Europe. With the use of every new research method, archaeologists are opening new pages into the past which differ from accounts of ancient historians.<sup>53</sup> The question of gender roles among ancient nomads and various forms of identity in pastoral societies has been posed. Some researchers identify two pathways in pastoral and nomadic societies (hierarchy or network strategy, and heterarchy or corporative strategy).<sup>54</sup> From world system analysis, one role of nomads in human history shows them to be translators of information between settled civilizations over long periods of time. Nomads contributed to the development of trade, the expansion of religions and geographic

## Ancient Steppe Nomad Societies

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knowledge, the development of information networks, and technological exchanges between different civilizations.<sup>55</sup>

### Primary Sources

The primary sources on the history of the ancient nomads of Innermost Asia are contained in the Chinese chronicles. In addition, a great deal of important information has been provided through the results of archeological excavations in the territories of China, Mongolia, Russia, and the countries of Central Asia.

Information on the Xiongnu can be found in the eminent volume by the grand Chinese historian, Sima Qian, called *Shi ji* [Historical Records], chap. 110. This chapter and other information from *Shi ji* have been translated into various languages.<sup>56</sup> In addition, information on the Xiongnu exists in more recent chronicles: *Han shu* [History of the Han Dynasty] by Ban Gu, and chap. 79 of *Hou Han shu* [History of the Later Han Dynasty] by Fan Ye. These chapters also have been translated.<sup>57</sup> Materials about archaeological excavations in the territories of Mongolia, Russia, and China have been published.<sup>58</sup>

Some information on nomads of Eastern Asia is contained in ancient European sources (e.g., in *The Histories* by Herodotus and *Geographica* by Strabo).

The main sources of information on the Wuhuan and Xianbei are from the Chinese chronicles *Hou Han shu* [History of the Later Han Dynasty], by Fan Ye, chap. 90, and *San guo zhi* [Records of Three Kingdoms] and *Wei shu* [History of Wei Dynasty], chap. 30 by Chen Shou. These data have been translated into Russian, German, and French.<sup>59</sup> Archaeological sites of the Xianbei were long unknown. Only relatively recently have archaeological cemeteries of the Xianbei been found in China and in Eastern Baikal.<sup>60</sup>

The period of the Sixteen Kingdoms in the history of China is of fundamental importance in the history of the Eastern Asia nomads. During this period, many small dynasties were founded, including those established by nomads of different ethnic groups. A great deal of information concerning these kingdoms exists in the Chinese chronicles. Four volumes of chronicles were studied in detail and translated into Russian by Vsevolod Taskin.<sup>61</sup> The history of the Northern Wei dynasty, which was established by the Tuoba (T'o-pa) nomads, is described in the chronicle *Wei shu* [History of [Tuoba] Wei Dynasty].<sup>62</sup>

The source for Rouran history is chap. 103 of the chronicle *Wei shu* [History of (Tuoba) Wei Dynasty]. Some information is also contained in *Bei shi* [History of the Northern Dynasties], *Song shu* [History of Song Dynasty], and in a number of other chronicles. Data about the Rouran were translated into various European languages.<sup>63</sup> Up to the present day, the archaeology of the Rouran remains unknown. It is one of the crucial unsolved problems of Eastern Asian archaeology.

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## Ancient Steppe Nomad Societies

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## Ancient Steppe Nomad Societies

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