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NOMADS IN EASTERN CENTRAL ASIA*

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Early Mongolia

In the first millennium B.C. Mongolia and the adjoining regions of Central Asia, unlike China and other countries with a settled way of life, constituted a distinctively original nomadic world inhabited by aboriginal tribes and clans, who kept sheep, goats and cattle. One of their principal occupations was the breeding of horses, in particular the Przewalski horse – which had been domesticated earlier – a small, stocky animal with unusual endurance, widely used by the Huns, Türks and Mongols. The two-humped Bactrian camel was of great importance in the climatic conditions of the Gobi Desert. South of the Gobi Desert, a small number of donkeys and mules were bred. It is interesting to note that the wild ancestors of these horses, camels and asses were still found at that time in the south-western part of the Mongolian Gobi east of the Altai, in Dzungaria and Kazakhstan. In the period under review – 700–300 B.C. – the territory of Mongolia and other parts of

* See Map 4.

Inner Asia knew a fully developed nomadic way of life, often referred to as Central Asian nomadism.

The people who then lived in the territory of what is now Mongolia, Inner Mongolia, Dzungaria and southern Siberia have left behind them an enormous number of ‘stone-slab’ graves, ‘reindeer stones’ and other material vestiges of their existence.

The stone-slab graves are so described because at ground level they are bordered by a rectangular wall of stone slabs sunk edgewise into the ground. At one corner of a stone-slab grave there is often a stone column, sometimes decorated with the images of animals. The skeletons found in these graves lie on their backs, usually with their heads turned towards the east, and are accompanied by the bones of domestic animals, clay vessels and other articles. Some of the vessels are made of reddish clay with handles; others are of brownish-grey clay and are covered with hatchings like the clay vessels of the following Hsiung-nu period.

The peoples buried in these graves had fully mastered casting techniques. Their graves contain beautiful bronze objects and iron articles (or vestiges of them). The Scythian-type bronze pots, axes, daggers, arrowheads, bronze and iron horse’s bits from the stone-slab graves of Mongolia bear a striking resemblance to similar articles found in the graves of the region beyond the Baikal and in Ordos. Mongolia also boasts many specimens of reindeer stones – stone columns decorated with images of galloping reindeer, sun discs and weapons, which in technique and design have much in common with the ‘animal style’ of the ancient monuments of representational art found in other parts of the steppe belt of Europe and Asia.

In addition, large numbers of cowries from the Indian Ocean, white cylindrical beads made of prophyllite, fragments of Chinese three-legged vessels, and ornaments of nephrite (rings, discs and half-discs) and mother-of-pearl have been found in the stone-slab graves of Mongolia.¹ For the most part, these objects reached Mongolia through trade with China, Central Asia, Khotan and Afghanistan. The country’s cultural links extended through Sogdiana to India and across Kazakhstan as far as the Black Sea and eastern Europe.

The various tribes of the zone, who undoubtedly spoke different languages and were ethnically and culturally different, possessed many articles that were similar in shape. This is especially true of the weapons, horse harness and ornaments. Initially the predominant type of weapon was the bronze-socketed arrowhead with a flat tip (striking area), oval or rhomboid in shape. This was subsequently replaced by the socketed trihedral or pyramidal arrowhead. Horse’s bits showed striking similarities. At first, bits with stirrup-shaped end rings were exclusively used, but were later supplanted by bits with rounded rings. With the

¹ Okladnikov, 1955, p. 261.

introduction of bridles and metal bits it became possible to ride on horseback over long distances, and this led to much closer relations between tribes and significantly strengthened economic and cultural contacts between far-flung provinces of the steppe.

In terms of the general level of development, the culture of stone-slab graves and reindeer stones of Mongolia and other parts of the Eurasian steppe belt of the seventh to third centuries B.C. coincided with the Late Bronze and Early Iron Ages. Already by 400–300 B.C. iron articles were widespread in Mongolia and throughout Inner Asia and heralded the beginning of the next stage in development.

According to the ancient Chinese bone inscriptions, the famous *Shih-chi* (Historical Records) of the scholar Szü-ma Ch'ien, and other sources, the territory of present-day Mongolia, Inner Mongolia and Dzungaria was in times long past inhabited by the Hsien-yün, the Hsiung-nu and other nomadic cattle-breeding tribes. In the first millennium B.C., these territories were successively inhabited by the Hu, the Tung Hu, the Hsi Hu and the Hsiung-nu.² Amongst the above-mentioned peoples, the Hu and the Hsiung-nu occupied the territory of Mongolia. The Tung Hu (which means 'the Eastern Hu' in Chinese) lived in eastern Mongolia and western Manchuria, whereas the Hsi Hu ('the Western Hu') lived in the area to the south-west and west of Mongolia.

The Hsiung-nu Empire

Archaeological evidence from the seventh to the third century B.C. provides a picture of nomadic societies with a patriarchal-clan organization, using slaves obtained through capture or purchase. With the further spread of horse-breeding and the development of bronze culture, the tribal-clan élite grew in strength, while the rank-and-file members of the tribal community were more constricted. The development of property and social differentiations in society led to the disintegration of the clan structure, and with the onset of the Iron Age, quite large nomadic tribal unions came into being.

In the period from the seventh to the third century B.C., more powerful tribal unions arose in Inner Asia – the Hsiung-nu in Ordos and central Mongolia, the Tung Hu in eastern Mongolia and western Manchuria and the Yüeh-chih in Gansu and the lands between Dzungaria and Ordos. To the south, Tangut-Tibetan tribes led a nomadic way of life in the vicinity of Koko Nor (Qinghai). The Central Asian nomadic world was increasingly becoming a military and political power.

² Sima Qian, 1931.

Relations between China and the nomads were at times anything but peaceful. China of the Ch'in dynasty (246–207 B.C.) built the famous Great Wall,³ a military fortification running along the length of its frontier. In 214 B.C. the Ch'in court sent an army of 100,000 men against the Hsiung-nu, captured Ordos from them and then the foothills of the Yin-shan. Towards the close of the third century B.C., as a result of their rising prosperity from cattle-breeding, the development of their iron industry and military skill, the twenty-four I Hsiung-nu tribes increased considerably in strength; and from their tribal union the powerful Hsiung-nu Empire emerged.

The dramatic events that attended the emergence of the nomadic Hsiung-nu state find literary, albeit somewhat legendary, expressions in the sources. At the close of the third century B.C., a certain tribal chief, T'ou-man by name, with the title of *shan-yü* – which meant 'the greatest' or 'the best' – headed the Hsiung-nu tribal union. According to legend, he had two sons from different wives. To secure the throne for his favourite younger son, he handed over his elder son, Mao-tun, as a hostage to the Yüeh-chih. T'ou-man then attacked the Yüeh-chih, hoping that they would kill their hostage, but Mao-tun managed to steal a horse and return home. His father put 10,000 families under his control. Mao-tun forthwith set about training his cavalry in the arts of war and ordered all his horsemen to shoot their arrows only in the wake of his whistling arrow. Failure to comply with the order was punishable by death. When he saw that his warriors were adequately trained, Mao-tun, while hunting, shot his father with an arrow and killed him on the spot.

After 209 B.C., when Mao-tun proclaimed himself *shan-yü*, the Hsiung-nu state rapidly became a powerful nomadic empire. Lung-chêng, 'The Dragon Site', the nomadic tribal encampment and headquarters of the Hsiung-nu *shan-yü*, was located in the south-east spurs of the Khangay mountains, in a region where Karakorum and other political centres of the Turkic and Mongol peoples were later to come into being. The leader of the Hsiung-nu became the keeper of the nephritic seal which was inscribed with the words: 'The state seal of the Hsiung-nu *shan-yü*'. The rise of a Hsiung-nu state system, with a capital for the *shan-yü*, a seal, flag, border guards and the other attributes of sovereignty, marked the beginnings of a distinctive nomadic power.⁴

The Tung Hu, who heard that Mao-tun had killed his father, decided to take advantage of the resulting confusion and demanded that Mao-tun should surrender to them his treasured *argamak* (a fleet-footed horse) and his beloved wife. Mao-tun agreed to both demands. They then demanded an uninhabited strip of the desert, unsuitable for cattle-breeding, but Mao-tun answered: 'Land is the foundation of a state. How can it be surrendered?' He then

³ Bai Shouyi, 1980, p. 116.

⁴ Konovalov, 1976, p. 3.

launched a military campaign against the Tung Hu, who were taken completely unawares and routed. On his return, he attacked the Yüeh-chih, driving them westward, subjugated the Wu-sun of Semirechye and recaptured Ordos.

In 198 B.C., a treaty of 'peace and alliance' was concluded between the Hsiung-nu and China. The Han emperor officially recognized that the Hsiung-nu Empire enjoyed power comparable to that of his own empire, and that its sovereignty extended over all the northern lands beyond the Chinese borders. The ruler of the Hsiung-nu, in turn, recognized the sovereignty of the Chinese emperor over all territory behind the Great Wall.⁵ The treaty further provided that the Han court should give the emperor's daughter in marriage to the *shan-yü* and should send him every year a lavish quantity of gifts – silks, fabrics, handicrafts, rice, gold and money, which was regarded by the Hsiung-nu as a form of tribute. The Hsiung-nu also received tribute from the Wu-huan and subjugated other peoples; they sent their royal daughters to the Wu-sun and held hostages.

Controlling a key section of the Silk Route, the caravan trade link between China and the West, the Hsiung-nu reaped great profits from its international trade. They zealously fought to maintain control of these routes and successfully vied with China for the hegemony of Central Asia.

From the time of Mao-tun, there was regular trade between the Hsiung-nu and the Chinese, the Hsiung-nu exchanging cattle, wool and furs for Chinese goods. Between 129 and 90 B.C., however, the Han emperor Wu-ti changed the policy of his predecessors and launched a number of major military campaigns against the Hsiung-nu, but he was unsuccessful. When the Han court proposed that the Hsiung-nu should become a vassal state, they detained the Chinese ambassador and refused to discuss the matter, decapitating their own master of ceremonies who had allowed the ambassador to enter his yurt.

Between 70 and 60 B.C. there was internecine war between various factions of the Hsiung-nu leadership seeking the throne. When Hu-han-yeh became *shan-yü*, one of his brothers proclaimed himself *shan-yü* and attacked him. Hu-han-yeh was obliged to acknowledge his subordination to China in 53 B.C., but managed to preserve Hsiung-nu statehood with all its symbols of sovereignty. When he finally crushed his rival, Hu-han-yeh was able to act more and more independently and transferred his headquarters to the Ulan Bator region, where it remained after his death. But in A.D. 48, as a result of worsening internal dissension, the Hsiung-nu split into two factions. The elders of the eight southern tribes proclaimed the aristocrat Pi as *shan-yü*, migrated to China, fell under the sway of the Han court and moved to Ordos, north and west Shaanxi.

⁵ Taskin, 1968, pp. 25, 42, 47, 48.

The Northern Hsiung-nu stubbornly defended their independence, but eventually, in A.D. 93, they were attacked by an alliance of the Chinese and Southern Hsiung-nu from the south, by the Ting-ling, red-bearded, blue-eyed giants from the north, and by the Hsien-pi from the east. The last Northern *shan-yü*, descended from Mao-tun, was killed, and Mongolia was taken over by the Hsien-pi. Some of the Hsiung-nu, notably those of the western branch, did not surrender.

The Hu-yen, an ancient Hun tribe, assumed leadership and marched westward. In contrast to the Southern and Northern Huns, they may be described as Western Huns, whose descendants would later reach Afghanistan, India and the Roman Empire.

The Hsien-pi state

The Hsien-pi, who took over control of Mongolia after the fall of the Hsiung-nu state, had emerged as a powerful tribal union as early as the first century B.C. The main clan of the Hsien-pi had set up their nomadic camp in south-east Mongolia and lived along the middle course of the Liao-ho river. A large number of Hsien-pi now settled in central Mongolia and over 100,000 Hsiung-nu families, who had settled there earlier, adopted their tribal name. T'an-shih-huai, leader of the Hsien-pi tribal union, in A.D. 155 established the Hsien-pi state, which rapidly became one of the most powerful empires of its day, as powerful as the previous Hsiung-nu Empire. The Han court considered that the Hsien-pi's horses were swifter and their weapons sharper than those of the Hsiung-nu, and the Hsien-pi, too, managed to acquire good-quality iron from the border regions of China. Their political centre, the headquarters of T'an-shih-huai, was in the south-east near the Darkhan mountains but was later moved to the former *shan-yü*'s headquarters in the Khangay mountains.⁶

Between A.D. 155 and 166, T'an-shih-huai conducted a series of major military campaigns that led to the extension of Hsien-pi power over the Great Steppe as far as southern Siberia and from Ussuri to the Caspian Sea. Until the third decade of the third century A.D. the Hsien-pi state was the leading power in Central Asia.

Under their rule Mongolia saw a complex ethnocultural development. From the mixing of the Huns and Hsien-pi a new culture emerged with its own linguistic particularities, which was later to serve as the point of departure for the formation of the early Mongolian ethnic group with its distinctive language and culture.⁷

Subsequently the Hsien-pi state split into several parts. Until the close of the third century, it only effectively controlled central and south-east Mongolia. The Mu-yung, T'o-pa

⁶ Perlee, 1961, p. 21.

⁷ Bira, 1977, pp. 379–80.

and T'u-yü-hun, kindred tribes of the Hsien-pi, seceded to set up separate states in the south. At about the same time another Mongolian-speaking people appeared on the scene in central Mongolia – the Ju-jan, who were destined to play a key role in the history of the period following that of the Hsien-pi.⁸

The economy, social structure and state organization of the Hsiung-nu

The major achievement of the ancestors of the Hsiung-nu was the opening up of the steppes and the Mongolian Gobi. Until then, the Great Steppe and the desert, like the sea, had divided the inhabited wooded steppe into two distinct and separate belts. The inhabitants of each belt – agriculturists, sedentary cattle-breeders and forest hunters – had no way of crossing the Gobi, and the steppe grasslands went to waste unused. The Hsiung-nu bred a large number of horses and draught oxen and introduced as a mobile home the covered wagon on high wheels. They were the first to engage in nomadic cattle-breeding (Fig. 1) and in organized hunts – infinitely more productive than individual hunting – and by the third century B.C. were practising falconry.⁹

Apart from cattle-breeding and hunting, they engaged in agriculture, as can be seen from the grain hullers found in Mongolia and in the regions of the Great Wall. War prisoners and deserters from China and other settled countries were widely used as agricultural labourers.

Their covered wagons on high wheels, in which they lived, were comfortable, providing good protection from wind and frost, and more security, because in the event of danger, the wagon-dwellers could flee with all their possessions to other encampments.

Although the Hsiung-nu Empire was made up of a large number of different peoples, the Hsiung-nu themselves were divided into twenty-four major tribes, each consisting of kinship groups, clans and patriarchal families. The Hu-yen, Hsü-pu and Lan were regarded as the oldest and most prominent, but from the time of Mao-tun, the Hsiung-nu *shan-yü* came from another noble family, the Lüan-ti, that became the most distinguished of them all.

The tribal nobility formed the aristocratic élite, while the rank-and-file members of the tribe were relatively poor. There were quite a number of slaves engaged in agriculture, handicrafts and cattle-breeding,¹⁰ but they were more like domestic servants. It will be

⁸ Ishjamts, 1974, pp. 24–6.

⁹ Gumilev, 1960, p. 96.

¹⁰ De Guignes, 1756–58, Vol. I, Part 2, p. 15.

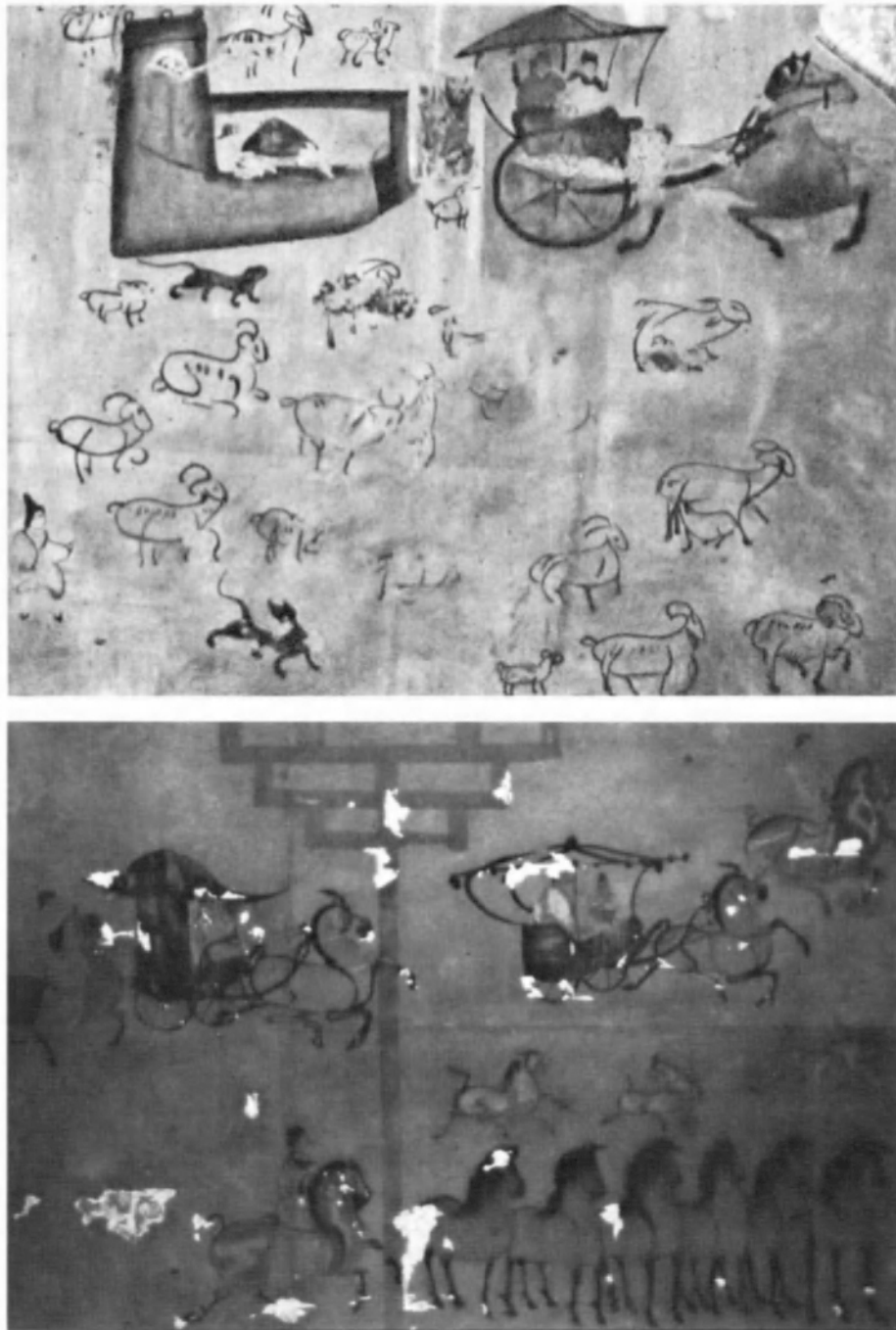


FIG. 1. Nomadic cattle-breeding of the Hsiung-nu. Drawings from cemeteries of Inner Mongolia (China).

seen that Hsiung-nu society was in a state of transition from a tribal to a class system, and the Hsiung-nu Empire represented a particular form of class-based state organization.¹¹

¹¹ Harmatta, 1952, p. 287.

The ruler of the empire was the *shan-yü*. He called himself ‘*ch’eng-li kut’u*’ (Son of Heaven).¹² His power was considerable and hereditary but by no means absolute. In their administration it is even possible to identify several classes of officials or, to be more precise, nobles divided into eastern and western groups, terms which also signify ‘senior’ or ‘junior’. The first class consisted of the Chu-ch’i princes (‘*chu-ch’i*’ meaning ‘wisdom’). The Eastern Chu-ch’i prince was supposed to be the heir apparent, but at times his right to succeed to the throne was disregarded. The second class consisted of the Lu-li princes; the third class, the Great Leaders; the fourth class, the Great Tu-yü; the fifth class, the Great Tang Hu. In addition, the Eastern and Western Chu-ch’i princes and the Lu-li princes were called ‘four horns’ and the ‘great leaders’, Tu-yü and Tang Hu were called ‘six horns’. These high-ranking figures were always members of the *shan-yü*’s clan.

Alongside this aristocracy of blood there grew up an aristocracy of talent – the service nobility (not related to the *shan-yü*’s family). They were known by the name of Ku-tu-hou, and were aides of the highest-ranking nobility, performing all the administrative tasks. Apart from this top-level aristocracy, there was the clan nobility – princes affiliated exclusively with the clans, *sui generis* clan chiefs or elected elders.

Hsiung-nu society possessed its own customary legal system and Chinese authors have noted that ‘their laws were simple and easily executed’. Major crimes, such as the drawing of a sword, were punishable by death and theft was punished by confiscation not only of the thief’s property but also that of his family. Minor crimes were punished by cuts on the face. Trials lasted no more than ten days, and at no one time were there ever more than a few dozen people under arrest. Apart from the customary law a system of public law began to emerge under Mao-tun. Violation of military discipline and evasion of military service both carried the death penalty. These extraordinary laws contributed greatly to strengthening the cohesion of the Hsiung-nu, turning them into the most powerful state in Central Asia.

Hsiung-nu burials and the finds from Noin-Ula

The main sources for the study of the Hsiung-nu are their graves and settlements, the latter to a lesser degree in view of their nomadic way of life. Many of them are to be found in Mongolia, southern Siberia and Ordos. There are four major Hsiung-nu burial sites: two in central Mongolia and two in the south beyond Lake Baikal. The largest, the Khunui-göl, is located in a remote area of the Khangay mountains, in the basin of the River Khunui. It was here, in 1956, that T. Dorzhsuren and other Mongolian archaeologists counted over 300

¹² Ban Gu, Vol. 13, Chapter 97a: 7a.

burials.¹³ In the mountains of Noin-Ula, 122 km north of Ulan Bator, 212 burial grounds have been recorded. At the end of the last century, the Russian archaeologist Y. D. Tal'ko-Grintsevich located 214 graves at Sudzhinsk beyond the Baikal, 10 km east of Kyakhta. He also excavated the Derestui burial ground in the former Selenga District beyond Lake Baikal, with some 260 burials. It seems likely that these four large burial grounds belonged to the four noble clans of the Hsiung-nu, and that Mao-tun and other early *shan-yü* were interred in the Khunui-göl burial ground, which contains some of the most magnificent Hsiung-nu tombs, while Hu-han-yeh and his descendants were buried in Noin-Ula.

Of particular interest are the contents of the burial chamber of a tomb in the Noin-Ula mountains accidentally discovered in 1912 by a Mongol Gold engineer and scientifically excavated in 1924. Like other tombs nearby, Noin-Ula Tomb No. 6 was square, with sides measuring 24.5 m and an embankment 1.62–1.95 m high. On the south side it was also protected by a long bank. The sides of the square and the bank were faced with stone and aligned to the points of the compass. In the inner chamber stood coffins, pointing south, on a floor of planks which showed faint traces of lacquer and paint. Among the objects found was a woollen canopy covering the ceiling of the outer chamber and a heavy felt carpet, with scenes of animals locked in combat, lying under the coffin. A woollen cloth with embroidered plant motifs and figures of different animals was affixed to the ceiling of the outer chamber, covering practically its whole surface. The fortunate discovery of a Chinese lacquer cup with two inscriptions made it possible to date Tomb No. 6 quite closely to the beginning of the first century A.D. It is, in fact, the tomb of Wu-chu-lü, the *shan-yü* of the Hsiung-nu Empire.

To judge from the finds in the Noin-Ula tombs, permanent dwellings of the Hsiung-nu were equipped with plank beds, and their mobile dwellings were furnished with low tables on short legs. The height of these tables indicates that people sat round them on the floor, which was covered with heavy felt. It is interesting to note that such small, low tables were extensively used by Central Asian cattle-breeding peoples.

The Noin-Ula tombs contained a large variety of Hsiung-nu vessels of wood, metal and clay. The most remarkable metal vessel was a bronze oil-lamp mounted on three legs with a conical stem for a wick in the centre. There were fragments of a big bronze kettle for cooking meat, and a smaller kettle, notable for its handles in the shape of animal heads. Among other finds were minute pyrite crystals, pierced with holes and used as dress ornaments, beads of malachite and glass of different colours and amber beads of various shapes and sizes. Of particular interest was an amber bead in the shape of a lion's head. Apart from the beads contained in Hsiung-nu graves of ordinary type, mainly of women, bronze

¹³ Dorzhsuren, 1958, p. 6.

mirrors and various dress ornaments that belonged to the various *shan-yü* have come to light.

Their main form of transport was the saddle-horse. Horse bridles, bits and saddles resembled those of the Altai in Scythian times. Saddles generally consisted of two leather cushions padded with wool, but a few had a wooden frame with pommels at the front and back, and stirrups. The stirrured saddle represented a major step forward.

In spite of the fact that iron and smelting techniques were known to the Hsiung-nu and that they could produce various kinds of iron objects, they did not strike fire from a flint, but obtained it by rubbing two sticks together or, more exactly, by boring one into the other. The Noin-Ula graves, thanks to the fine state of preservation of the wood found there, provide a full range of articles used for fire-making.

The most remarkable piece of bone jewellery work was a carved cylinder representing a winged and horned mythical wolf. Especially notable were the embroidered felt carpets of local manufacture found in the Noin-Ula tombs. The seams of the middle section of the carpets were embroidered in a distinctive spiral pattern, and their borders were covered with a design in which scenes of fighting animals alternated with tree patterns.

The Hsiung-nu were in direct and close contact not only with China but with neighbouring peoples to the east and west, who were culturally very much like them. A remarkable bronze crown in the shape of a wolf's head from Noin-Ula may be compared to the figures of wolf heads in the art of the Altaic Scythians. Other Hsiung-nu articles in Mongolia and Ordos display striking similarities with southern Siberian works of art. Animals are portrayed with protruding haunches – a style very characteristic of the art found here.

Of particular interest are the scenes of combat between a yak and a horned 'lion' and a griffin attacking a deer, on the felt carpets of Noin-Ula (Fig. 2, 3–4). The yak is highly stylized with an abnormally large head hanging low and a protruding tongue. Scenes of beasts of prey attacking artiodactyla have been characteristic of the art of the peoples of Western Asia since early times – a motif that entered Asia Minor from Mesopotamia and spread through the Sakas to southern Siberia and then to the Hsiung-nu.

Motifs borrowed from the plant kingdom are exceedingly rare in the art of Eurasian nomadic tribes, such as the Hsiung-nu. All the more interesting, therefore, are the conventional representations of trees on the Noin-Ula carpets in the spaces between the animal combat scenes. Here we have a replica of the 'sacred tree', a typical feature of Assyrian art. Hsiung-nu felt carpets were decorated with borders of squares, crosses, 'battle-axes' and other figures. The most widespread motif on the seams of the felt carpets consisted of rhomboids or spirals arranged in two varieties. It is interesting to note that this Hsiung-nu motif later found widespread application in the art of the Mongolian and Turkic peoples



FIG. 2. Hsiung-nu felt carpet from Noin-Ula (Mongolia).



FIG. 3. Hsiung-nu felt carpet from Noin-Ula (Mongolia).

and can still be seen today on the felt carpets and the protective covers of the Buryats, Kyrgyz and Kazakhs.

While there is no real trace of the influence of Chinese art on objects found in the graves of common people, traces are to be found in those of the nobility. The mythological animal embroidered on the silk fabrics found in Noin-Ula is essentially Chinese in character. Its body resembles an eagle with upraised tail, of which the tuft is abnormally large. The animal's paws are like the tiger paws in the art of the Altaic and southern Siberian tribes

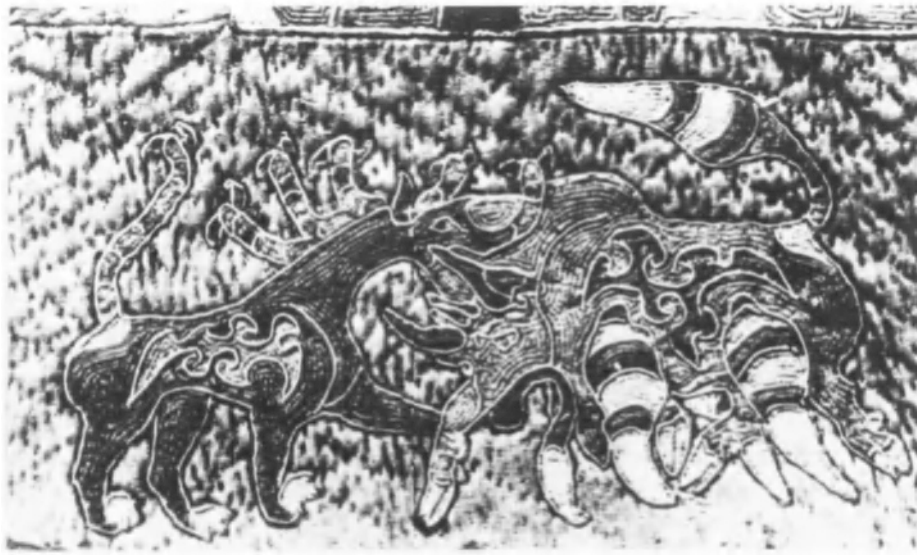


FIG. 4. Hsiung-nu felt carpet from Noin-Ula (Mongolia).

of Scythian date. The front of the chest is represented by a succession of superimposed scales, and the wings are in the Persian style of the Achaemenids. Thus we have here an example of the influences of Hsiung-nu, Altaic, Scythian and Persian art on fabrics of Chinese character.

Hsiung-nu customs, religion and culture

The influence of the Hsiung-nu and also of Middle and Western Asia on China was especially great in the military field. As early as 307 B.C., Wu Ling Wang, a prince of the Chou dynasty, introduced the use of the dress of the nomadic Hu into China and began to instruct his subjects in the art of shooting with bow-and-arrow. The Emperor Ch'in Shih-huang-ti introduced large cavalry detachments into the Chinese army and thereby ensured the success of his operations against the Hsiung-nu at Mên Ch'ien Yang. His cavalymen were heavily armed and armoured, like those of the Assyrian army which had introduced cavalry as an arm of their military organization, and already used chain mail, plate armour and protective armour for horses.¹⁴

When Mao-tun reorganized the Hsiung-nu army, he replaced its heavily armed horsemen by light cavalry, armed with long composite bows, creating a military force with much greater manoeuvrability. He reorganized his army, subjected it to strict discipline, and introduced major improvements in military strategy and tactics. These developments

¹⁴ Laufer, 1914, p. 217; Kiselev, 1951, p. 321.

in military science and weaponry were of great importance both for China and other countries. The composite bow and the stirrped saddle were widely adopted throughout the Eurasian steppe, Parthia and Syria; and the descendants of the Hsiung-nu with their traditional bows later became one of the most dangerous adversaries of the Roman legionaries in Pannonia.¹⁵

The emergence of its powerful empire had a great influence on the Hsiung-nu's material and spiritual life. Although it could not radically change their nomadic ways, it led to the establishment of an entirely new central headquarters for their *shan-yü* in the Khangay mountains where, in addition to his residence, they erected a sanctuary and other buildings. Settlements appeared in the steppe – fortified places for agricultural and craft communities like Gua-dov (367 × 360 m), Baruun dereegiin kherem (345 × 335 m) in Mongolia and the settlement at Ivolginsk (348 × 200 m) beyond Lake Baikal. In the Talas valley under the rule of Chih-chih a fortress showing distinct Roman influence was built, and more than 100 foot-soldiers were garrisoned there. It has been suggested that they may have been Roman legionaries from the defeated army of Crassus who had surrendered to the Parthians after the battle of Carrhae in 53 B.C. and been sent to serve on their eastern frontier at Merv, from where they became mercenaries of the Hsiung-nu. Nevertheless, the *shan-yü* of the Hsiung-nu did not alter their way of life. They continued to receive ambassadors in their yurts which were now more presentable than in earlier days. The overwhelming majority of the Hsiung-nu, especially the rank-and-file, also continued to live in yurts. The image of a yurt of that period, a covered wagon on high wheels drawn by oxen, found on one of the south Siberian stone sculptures, and the miniature images of a harness yoke found among the south Siberian and north Chinese bronze articles, need not cause any surprise.¹⁶ In these yurts of the Hsiung-nu, as later in those of the Mongols and Türks, the left side of the entrance was for men and the right side for women.

Hunting and archery played a major role in their daily life and existence; and a reference in the *Shih-chi* shows that they actively encouraged their children to learn hunting from an early age: 'As soon as a boy is able to ride a ram, he shoots birds and small game with a bow, and when he gets to be a little older, he shoots foxes and hares.'¹⁷ The Hsiung-nu women were not only remarkable horse-riders but had bows and arrows, and assisted their husbands in defending children and old people from enemy attack. On the wall of the Talas fortress they fought valiantly beside their husbands and the Romans against the Chinese troops, and they were the last to leave their posts. The participation of women in defence

¹⁵ Uray-Köhalmi, 1974, p. 148.

¹⁶ Bira et al., 1984, p. 48.

¹⁷ Bichurin, 1950, Vol. I, p. 40.

and the training of children to handle the bow-and-arrow were evidently dictated by the necessities of life. Only in this way could the nomadic Hsiung-nu, a numerically small group, defend their independence and way of life.

The Hsiung-nu practised exogamy, but their *shan-yü* could only take wives from a limited number of noble clans. They practised polygamy and levirate marriage was customary, that is, on the death of a father or elder brother, a wife was transferred to a surviving son or younger brother, provided that she was not that man's mother. The *shan-yü*'s court also complied with this practice.

The *Shih-chi* says that on the death of a Hsiung-nu emperor his close relatives and concubines were buried with him, but archaeological excavations do not bear this out. If such a custom had ever been practised by the Hsiung-nu, the actual burial of people had long been replaced by symbolic actions. After the death of her husband, a Hsiung-nu woman would place a lock of her hair in her husband's grave as a sign of mourning, symbolizing her journey to the next world to accompany him.

The Hsiung-nu initially believed in animism, totemism and in life beyond the grave. From the time of Mao-tun, Shamanism became the state religion. The chief shaman was chosen from the sorcerers and served the *shan-yü*, his clan and relatives. The head-dress of a shaman was found in one of the graves of Noin-Ula and was very reminiscent of the Mongol darkhans' head-dress, the only difference being in the frontal representation of the totem spirits. On the Hsiung-nu head-dress there is a bird, which may represent the face of the anthropomorphic spirit of an ancestor.

The Hsiung-nu worshipped the sun, the moon and other heavenly bodies and made sacrificial offerings to the heavens, the earth, spirits and their ancestors. The *shan-yü* described himself as 'born of heaven and earth, brought forth by the sun and moon'. The *Shih-chi* says: 'At daybreak the *shan-yü* sets out from camp to worship the rising sun, at nightfall to worship the moon.'¹⁸ The Hsiung-nu nobles gathered at the *shan-yü*'s headquarters in the fifth lunar month and made sacrificial offerings to their ancestors, the heavens, the earth and the spirits. Three times a year they congregated at the shrine of the moon where, on the day of the 'dog' of the first, fifth and ninth months, they offered sacrifices to the heavenly spirit.

It is not known whether the Hsiung-nu had images of their ancestors or spirits. Of great interest, in that regard, was the discovery, in the Noin-Ula tomb, of a translucent stone 5 mm thick, with a schematic incised representation of a human figure. Three holes bored into the figure indicate that it was attached to something. It may have been some kind of

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 50.

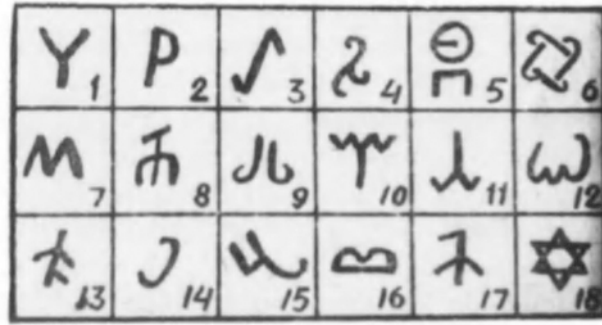


FIG. 5. Runic characters of Hsiung-nu–Hsien-pi script (Mongolia and Inner Mongolia).

anthropomorphic amulet. The Hsiung-nu prince who ruled over the region of Koko Nor and Gansu worshipped a huge ‘golden idol’.

In reckoning time the Hsiung-nu used a duodecimal animal cycle in which the days of the ‘dog’ and the ‘snake’ were regarded as auspicious for worship. This duodecimal cycle, which reached the Hsiung-nu from India or Babylon via Sogdiana, remained in force for as long as the Hsiung-nu existed. Their basic system of calculation, however, was decimal, and they used this in their military organization. They customarily launched a military expedition at the time of the full moon, but its outcome hinged on the prophecies of the shamans, sorcerers and soothsayers. Like the Mongols, they used a ram’s shoulder-bone to predict the future, placing the bone in a fire, and reading the future from the lines which appeared on it.

The Chinese sources say that the Hsiung-nu did not have an ideographic form of writing as the Chinese did, but in the second century B.C. a renegade Chinese dignitary by the name of Yue ‘taught the *shan-yü* how to write official letters to the Chinese court on a wooden tablet 31 cm long, and to use a seal and large-sized folder’. But the same sources indicate that when the Hsiung-nu noted down something or transmitted a message, they made cuts on a piece of wood (*k’o-mu*) and they also mention a ‘Hu script’. The fact is that over twenty carved characters were discovered among the objects at Noin-Ula and other Hun burial sites in Mongolia and the region beyond Lake Baikal (Figs. 5 and 6). Most of these characters are either identical or very similar to letters of the Orkhon-Yenisey script of the Türks of the Early Middle Ages that occurs now and again in the Eurasian steppes. From this some specialists hold that the Hsiung-nu had a script similar to ancient Eurasian runiform, and that this alphabet itself later served as the basis for ancient Turkic writing.

Myths, legends and other forms of oral literature occupied an important place in Hsiung-nu spiritual life. Tradition has it that in front of the headquarters of the *shan-yü* there was an artificial pool, the dwelling place of a dragon who had fallen from heaven and become

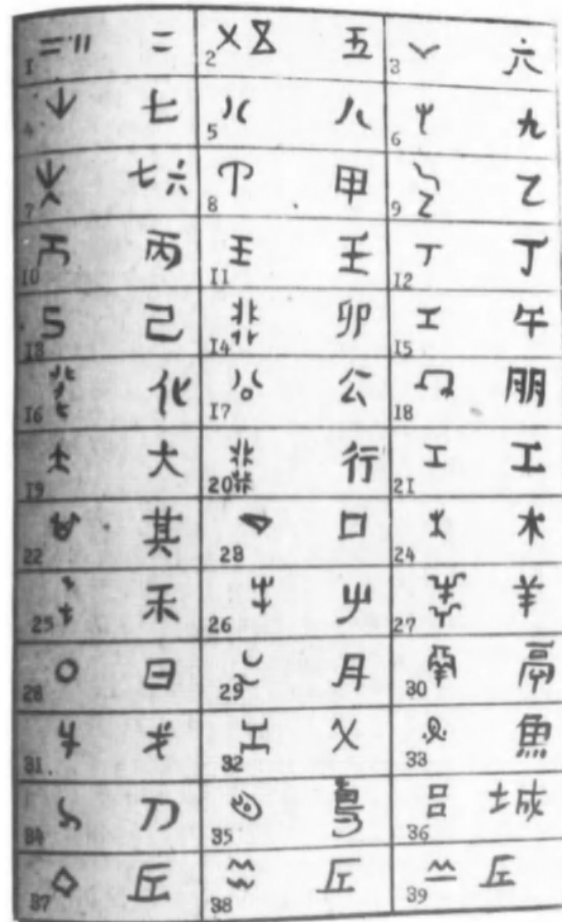


FIG. 6. Runic characters of Hsiung-nu-Hsien-pi script (Mongolia and Inner Mongolia).

an object of worship. It was not only the Chinese who worshipped the dragon. While the sources portray the Hsiung-nu as a redoubtable nation of fierce warriors, they were actually fun-loving people. They would gather before the headquarters of the *shan-yü* and the temple of their ancestors to organize amusements like horse-jumping and camel races and other festivities. They would sing slow songs, a custom that later became widespread among the Mongolians. The sounds of flutes and drums and the strains of a few types of string instruments were heard throughout the steppes. As early as the beginning of the second century B.C. Hsiung-nu music and dances were favoured by the Han emperor. The *k'ung-hou* and the fife, which had come at an earlier time to Inner Asia from Sogdiana, were adopted by the Chinese from the Hsiung-nu.

Many Chinese silks and embroidered fabrics as well as cloth of Western origin were found in the Noin-Ula tombs. There was one woollen wall carpet of Western manufacture and two of Yüeh-chih or Wu-sun origin, a series of embroideries provisionally described as 'Graeco-Bactrian', two portraits displaying similar workmanship and, finally, a tapestry

from Parthia or Asia Minor. There were also some remarkable fragments of wall hangings, decorated with patterns representing horsemen, a child warrior flinging a spear or a trident at an eagle, lion griffins and garlands of flowers that have been described in detail by K. V. Trever.¹⁹ The two horsemen depicted on the largest fragment are of Europoid type, with moustaches and tufts of hair over their foreheads reminiscent of Gandhāran sculpture. Their dress and head-dress are typically Iranian. The horses are notable for their coats of different colours, their cropped manes, their elegant long-necked heads and their long slender legs. They were probably the famous thoroughbred Parthian war-horses or the remarkable ‘thousand-li’ horses of the Hsiung-nu. Along the lower edge of the fragment, between two broad bands, is an embroidered garland of palm leaves interspersed with acacia flowers, their tendrils entwined – a border that is Greek or Graeco-Indian in design.²⁰ Of the two portraits found on the fragments, one has preserved the face of a man whose features are not Mongolian, but bear a much closer resemblance to the Turanian type found in Central Asia and Persia. Trever compared this portrait to the heads found on the bas-reliefs of Gandhāran art and concluded that it represented one of the peoples of Central Asia whose culture was in contact with the Hellenized culture of Central Asia, such as that of the Graeco-Bactrians. It is clear that these works are representative of a great artistic culture and consummate craftsmanship.

This nomadic civilization of the Hsiung-nu exerted an influence even on the more advanced cultures of China.²¹ We might mention in this context the Hsiung-nu treatment of the tiger, one of the prototypes of the Chinese *tao-tê*, of winged wolves, goats and horses and, finally, of the bizarre ‘aquiline griffon’, a fabulous animal with the body of a winged lion and the head of a phoenix.

Hsien-pi culture

Hsien-pi culture was also suggestive of Hsiung-nu culture in many ways; but so far it has not been adequately studied. Between the first and third centuries A.D. it attained a similar level to the culture of the Hsiung-nu. According to historical sources, the Hsien-pi also recorded events by incising wooden tablets. In their practice of Shamanism, they initially worshipped a wooden idol. However, later on, the casting of idols from iron and other metals (Fig. 7) became widespread among the Hsien-pi, as among many other nomadic peoples of Central Asia. In later centuries, other branches of the Hsien-pi tribe, the Mu-yung, T’o-pa and T’u-yü-hun in Inner Mongolia and northern China, created a more advanced

¹⁹ Trever, 1940, pp. 141–3, Plates 39, 40, 41, 42, 43–44.

²⁰ Rostovtzeff, 1929, p. 87.

²¹ Serodzhav, 1977, pp. 4, 22, 106, 109–11.

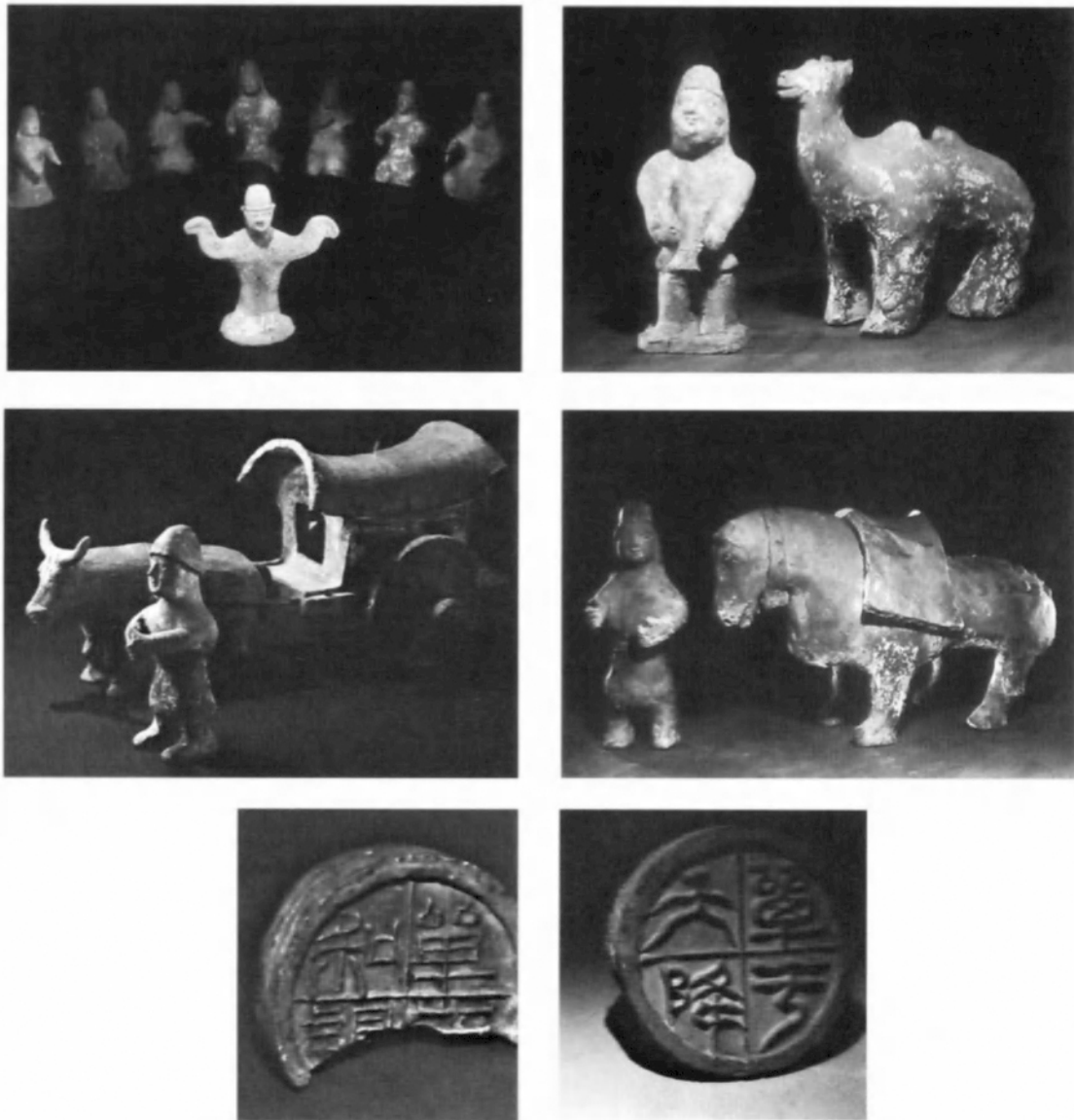


FIG. 7. Hsien-pi terracotta from Inner Mongolia.

form of culture, inheriting many elements from the Hsiung-nu and also borrowing a great deal from the neighbouring countries of Central Asia, China, East, Turkestan and southern Siberia. In turn, the Hsien-pi also exerted an influence on them.

The original and distinctive culture of the Hsiung-nu and of the Hsien-pi together constituted the first important stage in the formation of the nomadic civilization of Central Asia, playing an important role between East and West and linking China and Central Asia, while, at the same time, remaining distinctive – a very significant contribution to world culture.