

## **Nomadism – the eternal riddle of the Great Steppe**

For thousands of years the invasion of nomads have instilled terror into all the settled people. Residents of China, Central Asia, Iran, Eastern Europe and Middle East have waited in fear for the latest attack from the Great Steppe. All the great steppe empires finally collapsed and died out, leaving scholars the still unsolved riddle of nomadism. So what contribution to the history of humankind have the nomads made? Were they just merciless destroyers or did they promote the cultural, technological and political interaction of different, remote parts of the world, and were they the creators of a unique ecological civilization, adapted to the harsh conditions of Central Eurasia?

Humankind has entered the twenty-first century, yet problems linked with its ancient history continue to concern scholars and the public at large. The study of the phenomenon of nomadism is classed as one of the most interesting and, at times, painful problems. This is particularly relevant for Kazakhstan, as a significant part of its history is indeed the history of nomadic society. And this problem can be deemed painful because already by the twentieth century, nomadic societies had practically disappeared, and their destruction was accompanied by genocide, violent settlement, assimilation and loss on unique ethnic identity. All this has occurred in the history of Kazakhstan. Nevertheless, at least two main questions accompany the history of nomadism: the first concerns its ecological aspects, i.e. the interrelations of nomadic systems with nature and the creation of ideal ecological and economic relationships between people, animals and the wild, based on a nomadic system. The second question relates to the nature of interrelations between nomadic people and settled people. This aspect of history is equally painful for both civilizations.

Generally speaking, the study of nomadism as a particular historical civilization goes far beyond the research of nomadism itself and touches a very broad group of disciplines: ethnography, archaeology, Turkology, comparative linguistics and so on; that is, it actually represents a fragment of the entire history of Central Asia.

Surprising though it is, but for a considerable time there was no special study of nomadism as such; it just found itself roaming between different disciplines. For the Soviet period, such a situation is fully explicable: the study of history was forced to follow the official Marxist-Leninist doctrine and this restricted the study of the nomadic way of life to just dogmatic theory. The study of Kazakh nomadism progressed thanks to the efforts of individual enthusiasts, who could shed light on only narrow aspects, and this also continues as a parallel tradition in the West.

Certain scholars in the West placed the following theses at the basis of their concept of nomads. First of all, a specialization means a stronger dependence. This thesis is deciphered in the following way: the more specialized mobile livestock farmers are, the more they depend on the outside world. Second, nomadism is a special kind of manufacturing economy. The Kazakh steppes were one of the few regions on the planet where nomadic livestock farming could be observed in its

pure form. Third, nomadic livestock farming is not fully adapted to the natural and geographic surroundings; nomads are also forced to adapt to the outside world. Finally, the nomadic economy needed resources from the agricultural and municipal world. In this way, conquering others was a means of subordinating and receiving the required products; a means brought to its logical end.

The most intriguing question in the history of the Great Steppe is the reason why the nomads were pushed to mass resettlements and to destructive marches against agricultural civilizations. Modern historiography counts a number of concepts of theories that try to explain this phenomenon. In their most generalized form they can be reduced to the following theses: various global climate changes (such as drought, or, to the opposite, excessive rainfall); the warring and greedy nature of the nomads (this point of view originates in Chinese historiography); the overpopulation of the steppe; the growth in production forces and the class struggle, the weakened position of the agricultural societies as a consequence of feudal compartmentalization; the need to replenish the extensive livestock farming economy with forays into more stable agricultural societies; the lack of desire on the part of centers of settled economies to trade with nomads; an excessive surplus of livestock produce the personal qualities of the leaders of steppe communities; impulses towards ethnographic integration.

It should be noted that there is an element of truth in each concept, although all of them, to one degree or another, suffer from an exaggeration of their own particular case. Modern paleographic data prove no direct link between global periods of drought or flood with a rise or fall in nomadic empires.

It is noted that nationality in the form of nomadic empires and other political formations developed among the nomads only in those regions where they had regular and intensive political and economic contacts with more organized agricultural and especially urban societies. This thesis is illustrated by the following dichotomy: Scythians and ancient states; Huns and the Roman Empire; Turks and China; Turks and Ancient Rus; Turks and Khorezm; Arabs, Turks and Byzantium, etc.

The nature of steppe empires was two-sided: from the outside they were reminiscent of the classical despotism of the East whose purpose was to procure additional wares from beyond the steppe, but from within the nomadic empires remained based on tribal links, without a stable tax system and a classical feudal hierarchy, implying the exploitation of the livestock farmers. The authority of the lords of the steppe was based on common law, the ability to organize military campaigns and to redistribute income from trade contributions and forays into neighboring countries. In general, this is a rough outline of the system most applicable to the Pre-Mongolian Era.

It is considered that in their relations with settled territories the nomads used several strategies: there was the strategy of forays and plundering (Cian-bi, Turks and Mongols in relation to China; the Crimean Khanate in relation to Ukraine, Poland and the Moscow state and others); the subjection of the agricultural society and the taking of tributes from it (Scythians and Skoloti, Khazars and Slavs, the Golden Horde and Rus), and also the controlling of the trade routes; the

conquering of a settled state, the infiltration of the nomads, the creation of a new dynasty, a new ruling class and a new state with the subsequent assimilation of the nomads (the Manchurians in China, the Mongols in China, the Khorezm in Iran and the Kazakhs in Bukhara, etc.); the tactics of alternating forays with pillaging and the gathering of tributes, used both prior to and after conquest – by all the major nomadic formations, from Hun in China to the Turks and Mongols in the late Middle Ages).

From an archaeological point of view one can only assume that nomadism emerged in the late Paleolithic Age. Nomadism was an instinctive reaction by ancient people, familiar with working the land rearing livestock, to changes in climate conditions. This relates fully to Central Asia. A number of academics believe that, based on written sources on the Middle East, we can speak of an intensive development of nomadism at the end of 1000BCE. The universal historical significance of nomadism is characterized by features that are both positive and negative. The historical significance of nomadism involves the advent and development of forms of exploitation and, as a consequence, of social differentiation. However, the relationship between exploitation and dependence did not lead to antagonism.

Some scholars believe that to reveal what nomadic culture really is requires analysis of the ancient art of the nomadic people of Central Asia. The wandering people of the steppe region of Central Asia turned partially to working the land from the seventh to the ninth centuries BCE. A feature of the art of this period is the depiction of human faces as vivid mimics. The best known art of the nomadic people comes from the early Scythian-Sarmat period. At this time, the most distinguishable art form involved the use of noble metals, such as silver and bronze, on which images were made, predominantly of animals and humans. Then comes the Turko-Mongol period, which is characterized by manuscripts and pictures at burial sites. Characteristic features of the art of the nomadic people can be highlighted over a considerable expanse, from Turkestan to Korea. It is based on Sierian-Scythian “animal” style, where the depiction of nature is only a supplemental element, with the image of the person or animals, in dynamic poses, tending to predominate. This art of the nomads came to have an important influence on Chinese art.

Some scholars believe that the history of the great expanses of Inner Asia (Central Asia, Siberia, Mongolia, China, Tibet and the Middle East), the Caucasus and Eastern Europe should be read in a unified context over the entire historical period, from the moment the nomadic people entered the stage of world history. The single culturological type of Central Eurasia was based on a similar type of economy and the social-hierarchical structure that came from it. Despite the abundance of theories and concepts, modern “nomadistics” still has many questions which remain unanswered.

The central issue in the study of the nomads, as before, is the relationship between the wandering and settled civilizations: were they antagonists or did they supplement one another in the historical process of human development?

*Used material:*

*Chokan and Murat Laumulin, "The Kazakhs. Children of the steppes"*