

Nomads in History.

A View from the SFB. With Comments by Anatoly M. Khazanov

Definition¹

Our Research Centre has agreed on the following definition of nomadism:

Nomads are groups of people who migrate as groups (not only individuals or parts of groups) over a significant part of the year in order to make a living (mostly through mobile livestock rearing), and who interact with sedentary groups (agriculturalists and urbanites) in manifold ways. Representation and self-representation as “nomads” may outlast the abandonment of mobile livestock rearing as an essential pursuit for generations (“post-nomadism”).

- 1 It is well known that there are practically no “pure” nomads. The vast majority of nomadic groups have used and continue to use strategies of combining various economic activities. Besides rearing livestock, other professions, historically, have included: serving as caravan leaders, soldiers, etc., raiding for plunder and extorting protection money. In addition, steppe dwellers have always sold things they collect on the steppe, such as herbs and other medical ingredients. Hunting was important in many regions; and many nomads (including the Mongols) also practiced some agriculture and engaged in trade, including smuggling (not only in animals and animal products). In modern times, migrant labor or wage labor in general has become more important, and raiding has been supplanted by serving in national armies and police forces, while trading and smuggling continue as important pursuits.
- 2 As a general rule, nomads and sedentary people form part of one and the same regional economic and political system. They often have more in common with their partners in this regional system than with other nomads outside the system. It is therefore impossible to construct universal commonalities of nomadism: there is no “ideal type” of “the nomad”.

AKh comments: In my opinion, the SFB statement that I have been asked to comment on has one serious deficiency: it is too modest and does not make adequate reference to the achievements of the scholars who have worked at this Center. The Center’s uniqueness consisted not only in its multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary approach, but also in the astonishing scope of its research in both temporal and spatial terms. Although interaction between nomadic and sedentary populations was the focal point in this project, the researchers have made a significant contribution to studies of many other related and unrelated issues. The Center has now ceased to function as an institutionalized body, but its members

¹ The indented parts are taken from a summarising statement prepared by the SFB working group “domination” (*Herrschaft*). Anatoly Khazanov commented upon it in his introductory address; his comments are introduced “AKh comments”.

are active, working scholars, and, I am sure, they will maintain its tradition for many years to come.

Now to particular views expressed in the Statement.

I have no problem with the proposed definition of nomadism. All such definitions are tentative and serve particular purposes, and I agree with the statement that there is no ideal type of nomadism. However, I would like to make some remarks about the interrelations between nomads and sedentary people as they are presented in the statement, and I want to express one reservation from the outset. In this context, I will refer only to the nomads of the Eurasian steppes. In other historical-geographic regions, the situation may be quite different. However, I am not sure that nomads of the Eurasian steppes and their sedentary counterparts always formed a single economic and political system. Sometimes they did, especially after conquests of sedentary countries or vice versa, but sometimes they did not.

It is true that trade, exchange, tribute, and other ways of procuring agricultural and craft products were crucial for the nomads, and they were much more interested in various interrelations with the sedentaries than were the more autarkic sedentaries with the nomads. Thus, for centuries and even millennia the nomads were much more interested in trade with China than the Chinese were with the nomads. But, in my opinion, to claim that Xiongnu, or the early medieval Turks were united in the one economic and political system with China is to go too far.

Likewise, I doubt that the nomads of the Eurasian steppes had more in common with their sedentary partners than with other nomads in the region. In the pre-Chinggisid period, the Mongols and Qipchaqs had many more characteristics in common with each other than with China, and Central Asian states and the Russian principalities, respectively.

All nomads of the Eurasian steppes had similar economies, basically the same way of life, and, last but not the least, a shared political culture. This polyethnic political culture was represented by different synchronic and diachronic variants, which reflected temporal, spatial, ethnic, and other differences, as well as foreign influences. Nonetheless, this culture, which emerged no later than in the first half of the first millennium BCE, in the formative period of the pastoral nomadic societies in the Eurasian steppe region, was by no means confined to individual nomadic polities and states. Mechanisms of transmission of this culture in different ethnic milieus are not yet sufficiently researched, but the culture was quite indigenous, and it had many similar characteristics across the whole region.

To prove my point I would refer to such political traditions, shared by many nomadic polities, as the notion of the divine mandate to rule bestowed upon a 'chosen clan' or even of the divine origin of that clan; and *translatio imperii* – the possibility of transferring this mandate and, consequently, of the legitimate supreme power, from one polity to another; the notion of charisma (the Iranian *farnah*, the Turkic *qut*); the heavenly ordained good fortune and the aura connected with that fortune; the notion of collective or joint sovereignty, according to which a state and its populace belong not to an individual ruler, but to all the members of a ruling clan, or extended family, as their corporate property, and a corresponding appanage (*ulus*) system; specific succession patterns based on variations of the collateral or scaled rotating system and seniority within the ruling clan; diets or convocations composed of members of the ruling clan, nobles, and worthies, (such as the Mongol

quiriltais); a patrimonial mode of governance that implied a redistribution of various kinds of wealth and goods among vassals, followers, and even commoners; a partial overlapping of administrative systems with the military organization; a quite developed system of imperial or royal, noble and administrative titles; color symbolism, used as a means of making social distinctions; elaborate status and rank traditions and practices associated with crowning, dressing, belting, robing, decoration, and headdress; special investiture and funeral ceremonies; *refugia* – sacred territories and cult centers; and several other concepts, institutions, and customs.

I have dealt with characteristic features of this culture in previous publications. Now I just want to point out that, although it existed in full measure only in nomadic states, knowledge, models, symbols, and even some traditions of higher forms of political organization continued to exist in latent or semi-latent forms even in those nomadic polities that can hardly be characterized as states. This should not be surprising if one takes into account that by the medieval period, most if not all the nomads of the Eurasian steppes were already well acquainted with the idea and practices of statehood.

Despite numerous modifications, this political culture also demonstrated remarkable stability. This should also not be surprising either, since the main characteristics of the socio-political and economic organization of the nomads were quite similar. The political culture of the nomads underwent substantial changes only after the cultural space in the Eurasian steppes was fragmented by the dissemination of various world religions, especially after most of the nomads converted to Islam, while the Mongols in the east converted to Buddhism. Nevertheless, some of its traits were noticeable even much later.

- 3 In many places, we have seen regions used for agriculture (even without irrigation) where the annual rainfall lies below what is normally seen as a necessary precondition for the successful cultivation of cereals; similarly, we have often seen rather well-watered regions used for mobile livestock rearing. Moreover, many different types and species of animals are herded by different groups of nomads, adapted to very different ecological settings and serving very different needs on the market (sheep raised for meat, for milk, for wool, for hides). Thus, there is no “ecological determinism”.

AKh comments: In this statement, the authors call on us to avoid “ecological determinism”. I am in sympathy with their position, but with some reservations. It is worth keeping in mind that pastoral nomadism originally emerged as an alternative to cultivation only in those regions where the latter was impossible, or economically less profitable; and this remained essentially the case for the next 3.000 years. It is true that victorious nomads sometimes turned the sown into pasture, but it is much more difficult to do the reverse and put dry pasturelands under the plow. Nowadays, pastoralists are sometimes forced, or pressured, to sedentarize in marginal areas, where the rainfall is low and unpredictable, but the outcome of this development is not encouraging.

- 4 Commonalities tend to emerge in the discourse on nomads. Since the overwhelming majority of the sources were produced in sedentary contexts and often in languages that

were not the vernacular of the regional nomads, nomads are not well served in the texts. In some cases, even reference to their very existence is hard to come by. This has been one of the major concerns of the SFB: to ascertain how to find the nomads, in history and in archeology. In archeology, it is immediately clear: as a general rule, nomads do not erect permanent buildings, and what they do build is mostly made of perishable materials. In the study of historical written sources, we had to cope with unclear terminology in the texts: in many languages, there is no term that unequivocally denotes nomads, which, of course reflects the opaqueness of the situation on the ground. One of the major tasks in the study of nomads therefore is to make them visible. The SFB has devoted quite a lot of work to this task.

AKh comments: I agree with the above statement that one of the major tasks in the study of nomads is to make them visible. The scholars involved in the SFB have done remarkable and laudable work in this regard. I would just like to caution that archaeological materials are also far from always unambiguous, especially when we are dealing with prehistoric pastoralists, or semi-nomads.

In many cases we still cannot distinguish with certainty between seasonal camps, which were left by independent groups of mobile pastoralists, and those that belonged to groups who practiced a settlement-based transhumance, in which only a part of the population carried out more or less specialized pastoral occupations. There is a risk that archaeological data on specialized segments of society (e. g. settlement-based transhumance and/or seasonally migrating shepherds) may be mistaken for a society at large.

Many years ago, during my field-work amongst the groups that practiced transhumance in Central Asia and the Caucasus, I noticed that the material culture of their shepherds, when they were away from permanent settlements, had many distinctive features with regard to their dwellings, dress, and utensils. As long ago as that, the idea crossed my mind that, if future archaeologists studied these shepherds' seasonal camps as well as permanent settlements, without having any ethnographic or historical information about them, they may well come to the conclusion that they were dealing with different cultural-economic groups.

- 5 Nomadism is often linked to tribal organization, at least in representations of nomads in non-nomadic societies. This, however, is much too general. Heeding the strong regional differences, the SFB has chosen a "regionalist" approach to the problem of the social organization and (eventual) stratification of nomads. Whereas studies about post-Mongol situations in Anatolia, Iran and Western Central Asia, for example, confirm that tribal organization is often not a relevant concept in these contexts, the situation is completely different in the Syrian *bādiya* and generally in the Arab world, in Berber North Africa and other regions. Since there is no "ideal type" of "the nomad", there is no "ideal type" of the social organization of nomads, either.

AKh comments: I will not dwell on the notion and nature of "tribe" in nomadic societies. This has been a matter of debate for many years and the discussion is still inconclusive. Nevertheless, in my opinion, nomadic societies in Eurasia were based on the idioms of kin-

ship and descent, whether real or fictitious. These idioms were shared not only by aristocrats but also by commoners, and they demonstrated a remarkable vitality. Thus, many Mongol and Turkic groups were deliberately broken up, torn apart, and divided by the Chinggisid conquests. However, in the post-Chinggisid period, new nomadic groupings in Central Asia reconceptualized their social relations and structures using the same idioms of kinship and descent, and many old tribal ethnonyms surfaced as clan names.

- 6 Nomad aristocrats therefore are not to be found everywhere where there is nomadism, but assumptions about supposed equality and flat hierarchies are often equally fallacious. Domination and lordship occur not only in the interaction between nomads and sedentary polities, but also in relations between nomads, and within individual nomadic groups as well.

AKh comments: Now, a few remarks about aristocracies in nomadic societies. Although the nomads of the Eurasian steppes were more stratified than the nomads of any other region, their political life oscillated between state and stateless forms. Archaeological data indicate that significant social stratification had existed already in the earliest nomadic societies in the steppe. However, one should take into account that, to a large extent, power in many nomadic polities was diffused; their aristocracies mainly performed military and managerial-regulatory functions. By and large, these “managers” were less expensive than aristocratic “managers” in corresponding sedentary societies. Ordinary nomads might respect their authority, high status, and even hereditary rank, but they were less inclined to pay for it, especially when significant regular payments were required. Inherent deficiencies of the pastoral nomadic economy made the production of regular and fairly large surpluses by the commoners very problematic. It is not accidental that nomadic societies never experienced anything comparable to the peasant rebellions in medieval Europe or in China.

For all these reasons, as a rule, nomadic aristocracies were not able to create an autonomous power base within their own societies, which would provide them with sufficient freedom of action. In other words, the internal requirements of social integration in nomadic societies were not strong enough to bring about irreversible structural change.

To some extent, social stratification in nomadic polities increased, when their aristocracies succeeded in subjugating other nomadic groups. However, such situations were seldom stable and lasting. Only the anticipation of benefits from joint exploitation of sedentary societies might for a while reconcile subjugated nomadic groups to their dependence on other groups.

Of course, in nomadic states and empires, the position of aristocracies were quite different. Jürgen Paul in his keynote address and some participants in their papers have already dwelt on this subject and I do not have time to discuss it further.

- 7 The SFB has devoted much attention to the problems of rule, domination and lordship, but less to states and empire-building. The SFB therefore has no general answer to the question of whether nomad states (and empires) originate in interaction with sedentary states (and empires). This assumption was one of the starting points of the SFB and has

so far not been revised, but no research has been specifically devoted to this question. It would seem that here again, generalizations seem difficult, and that much depends on the understanding of the term “state”.

AKh comments: In the final analysis, the emergence and characteristic features of nomadic states were connected with asymmetrical relations between the nomads and sedentary societies and with specific forms of exploitation of the latter. I and many other scholars have held this view for many years, and I do not see any reason to reconsider it. This is true not only of the nomads of the Eurasian steppes, but also of those in the Near and the Middle East, and Africa. It seems that the SFB scholars also share this opinion, though in a rather cautious form. I would be most grateful if somebody would tell me of any exceptions to this rule. So far, I know of none.

- 8 The military qualities of pre-modern nomads are not to be found equally in every nomadic group. This depends to a certain degree on the kind of animals kept (horse- and camel-breeders having a military advantage over sheep-and-goat herders).

AKh comments: My last comment is about the military qualities of premodern nomads, especially those on the Eurasian steppe, who were the strongest of all nomads. I am particularly interested in this subject, since my current research is devoted to nomads in world military history. In my opinion, the nomads had four main military advantages.

The first was connected with their undeveloped division of labor and wide social participation. Contrary to their sedentary counterparts, most nomads had sufficient social standing and material resources to be pastoralists in peacetime and warriors in times of war. The second advantage of the nomads was the absence of narrow and permanent military specialization. The third was connected to their way of life: in their societies, military training took place almost spontaneously, within the framework of the existing social organization. Moreover, it did not cost the society at large anything. The fourth advantage of the nomads of the Eurasian steppes consisted in the availability of a large number of warhorses. During military campaigns horses provided speed, mobility, and range.

- 9 Generalizations about nomads are possible only to a certain, rather limited extent and seem to concern the representations of nomads in sedentary writings more than the nomads “on the ground”.

AKh comments: As regards the representation of nomads in sedentary writings, I am in full agreement with the above statement. Histories written by the defeated may be as biased and misleading as histories written by the victors. The scholars involved in the SFB have made remarkable progress in analyzing written sources to make real nomads visible. And our gratitude is due to them for this endeavor.

Aristocratic Elites in the Xiongnu Empire as Seen from Historical and Archeological Evidence*

Nicola Di Cosmo

Preliminary Remarks

The concept of “elite” is omnipresent in the study of ancient nomadic societies and history. It is used in a generic sense to indicate members of elevated social and political rank, and is at times conflated with other terms, such as aristocracy, nobility, or ruling class. The plasticity of this concept is useful when speaking of elites because we need not clarify what level of social stratification, or composition, a given polity attained, or how an elite status was ascribed, attained, or transmitted. It is sufficient to know that there was some social differentiation and that a certain group of people had access to greater wealth and power than others, whereas in the case of terms such as aristocracy and nobility, which carry notions of hereditary status, ranked structure, and power relations with respect to a putative organizing center, a far more precise definition is required.

Ancient nomadic societies have been particularly difficult to corral into schematic representations of social and political relations. The notion of a “nomadic feudalism” proposed almost a century ago by Vladimirtsov lost much of its appeal with the crisis of the term “feudalism” itself. Other schemes, based on the assumption that ancient pastoral societies develop socially and politically only under the influence of external impulses, have been ineffective at defining phenomena such as elite formation or social differentiation. Moreover, an excessive (nearly exclusive) attention to dynamics of conquest or “trade or raid” has prevented any analysis of the emergence of elites within their societies as a necessary condition for certain types of interactions with other societies. This orientation, which has assigned to any pastoral society a subaltern role with respect to those agrarian societies by which they were supposedly influenced, has therefore tended to ignore internal dynamics of political development and formation. Such approaches are increasingly at odds with the archaeological evidence on Eurasian nomads.

The recent advances in archeological research in Mongolia, Tuva, the Altai region, Transbaikalia, and other parts of Siberia and Kazakhstan show the nontenability of any theory that would divide the Eurasian world into opposing camps: a non-self-sufficient “nomadic” camp and a rich agrarian one, the first being permanently poised to assault the second. It is quite clear that the long-term dynamics of social development included inter-nomadic warfare, the transmission of knowledge (including political ideas, religious beliefs, and technology)

* I would like to thank Ursula Brosseder for valuable comments on an earlier version of this paper. I am of course responsible for any mistakes.