

COMPETING NARRATIVES BETWEEN NOMADIC PEOPLE AND THEIR
SEDENTARY NEIGHBOURS

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Competing Narratives between Nomadic People and their Sedentary Neighbours

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Some Aspects of Xiongnu History in Archaeological Perspective*

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Introduction

Sedentary civilizations enjoyed high culture and script, having a virtual monopoly on historical knowledge. Using the terms of modern discourse one can say that they constructed the past. Ancient chroniclers created descriptions of their prehistoric neighbors, which modern scholars take as veracious and reliable accounts of prehistoric cultures (Schmidt and Mrozowski 2013).

City dwellers usually described these neighbors as barbarians, denying them decency, morality, and cleanliness. Their culture was usually described as imperfect. Many examples can illustrate it: the Celts as described by Julius Caesar and Tacitus, the Scythians in the narratives of Herodotus, the Xiongnu in the writings of Sima Qian, and the Slavs in the essay of Byzantine Emperor Constantine Porphyrogenitus. It would not be an exaggeration to state that the nomads, for example, caught it especially bad from the contemporary commentators. They were truly warlike. They launched blitz attacks and disappeared equally swiftly. Finally, their lifestyle and culture were utterly different, alien, and they truly scared people from sedentary agricultural civilizations. Not surprisingly, the Greeks concocted an image of a Centaur, half human and half horse.

Meanwhile, the reality was far more complicated than that. The Barbarians were not as terrible as the sedentary historians described them. Sedentary people themselves committed many horrible deeds, but since their atrocities were never documented, nobody knows about them. For a long time, archaeology was merely a supplement to history. Usually, historians played the primary role while archaeologists were mostly engaged in finding beautiful artifacts to illustrate historical volumes. However, in the course of time, the value of archaeology changed. Not only was archaeology the principal and only source of information for prehistory; as methodology and instruments developed, archaeologists started

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raising questions which clarified, complemented, and even prompted reconsideration of the conclusions made by historians, who pored over dusty manuscripts in the archives.

This paper will discuss the history of the large polity of the Xiongnu. This was the first nomadic empire in Inner Asia. The Xiongnu were nomads settled in the lands to the north of the Chinese plain. Its history is one of the most interesting pages in the history of the peoples of the Eurasian steppes in late antiquity. The Xiongnu had no script of their own. Therefore, strictly speaking, we should consider their society prehistoric.

The history of the Xiongnu is well known from the narrative sources. There are many books in different languages (Egami 1948; Bernshtam 1951; Gumilev 1960; Davydova 1985; Suhbaatar 1980; Di Cosmo 2002, etc.). Despite keen interest in Xiongnu archaeology and outstanding discoveries (Brosseder, Miller 2011) there are still many controversial issues. This paper aims to show how archaeological data can alter our knowledge of the Xiongnu society obtained from the written sources. Besides, I will start from an important topic which shows that the narrative sources on the Xiongnu themselves must be criticized. In their writings, the Chinese historians compiled and combined texts from various types of sources. In addition to reports, briefs, and transcripts, these materials include pieces of folklore recorded and incorporated as real events.

Historical context

The Xiongnu Empire came into being in 209 B.C. when *chanyu* (the Xiongnu ruler's title) Modu, or Maodun seized power. He killed his father and usurped the throne. In the north, the boundaries of the Xiongnu Empire reached Lake Baikal, while the southern ones rested against the Great Wall of China. In the west, the Empire was contiguous with East Turkestan including Khakasia, Tuva, and Altai, while in the east the boundaries reached the Khingan and the Liao River.

After that, a dramatic confrontation between the Xiongnu and the Western Han began. Even though at the time the population of China was about 60 million people whereas the total population of nomads did not reach 1.5 million people, the Xiongnu managed to withstand, on equal terms, the Qin and Han dynasties. They also forced the Chinese to arrange for large payments of silk, handicraft articles and products of settled agriculture under the pretense of gifts (Barfield 1981; Di Cosmo 2002; Kradin 2002).

In the first decades of the Xiongnu polity's existence, the Chinese were forced to acknowledge that the nomads were, indeed, powerful, and conclude a peace treaty between equal states. In 129–58 B.C. emperor Wu waged bloody wars against the Xiongnu, weakening both sides. After that, an excessive number of heirs to the founder of the nomadic empire sparked an internecine war among the Xiongnu in 60–36 B.C. (Kradin 2002: 216–224; 2011: 92–93). The winner in this civil

conflict was Huhanye. Since Huhanye relied on Chinese assistance, he was forced to recognize political vassalage to China and establish peaceful relationships with the South. The peace lasted till the fall of the Western Han. Hybrid frontier relationships were again established between the Eastern Han (25–220 A.D.) and the Xiongnu: either the nomads plundered the lands of their southern neighbors, or extorted gifts from them under threat of forays.

The most information about the Xiongnu is available from Chinese narrative sources, such as Chapter 110 of *Shi ji* [Historical Records] by Sima Qian, Chapters 94A and 94B of *Han shu* [History of the Han Dynasty] by Ban Gu, and Chapter 79 of *Hou Han shu* [History of the Later Han Dynasty] by Fan Ye. Scholars have translated them into different languages (Bichurin 1851/1950; Groot 1921; Watson 1961; 1993; Taskin 1968; 1973; Viatkin 2002 etc.). It is especially important to note the studies by Vsevolod Taskin. As a son of a political immigrant, he spent the first half of his life in Harbin and knew Chinese as his native language. Not only did he translate all fragments of the Chinese chronicles mentioning the Xiongnu into Russian, he also provided detailed comments on them (Taskin 1968; 1973).

The Han people viewed China as the “Central Kingdom,” the hub of the universe, surrounded by the barbarians (Kroll 1996: 77). Unlike the noble Chinese, the nomads had no virtues. They were the forces of Darkness. Chinese astrology allocated them the planet of Mercury, associated with the north, winter, and war (Viatkin 1975: 284 note 132). One of the functionaries warned emperor Wu that the Xiongnu had “the heart of wild birds and beasts (Taskin 1968: 73). In the descriptions of Chinese historians, the Xiongnu are greedy barbarians with “a human face and the heart of a beast” (Viatkin 1992: 277).

From the standpoint of Chinese historians, the nomads embodied all the evils of humans. They had neither a settled lifestyle, nor houses, script, and calendar (and that meant having no history!), nor agriculture and crafts. They ate raw meat and did not respect the elderly. They had another hairdo and wrapped their gowns on the wrong side. The nomads married even their mothers (!) and widows of their brothers. How could one respect such savages!

It is interesting that such an attitude to Eurasian nomads was largely characteristic. The call of Confucius to perceive nomads as “wild beasts” is very similar to Aristotle’s advice to Alexander the Great to regard the barbarians as mere animals (Plutarch, *Life of Alexander*, 1, 6). Ammianus Marcellinus in *The Roman History* (XXXI. 2, 10) describes the Huns as a gang of bandits with no permanent residence, “None of them plow or even touch a plow-handle: for they have no settled abode, but are homeless and lawless, perpetually wandering with their wagons”. However, a careful reading of Marcellinus and other sources shows that the Hun society was, in fact, a three-segment empire. The Huns had a mighty, well-equipped army. They knew how to besiege and storm fortified towns. Their rulers maintained diplomatic relations with neighboring states. The Huns used a cunning policy of intermittent raids and gift extortion similar to what the Xiongnu

used in Asia. The Hun headquarters was a real town (Vernadsky 1943: 138-143; Maenchen-Helfen 1973: 190-199, 270-274).

The birth of the empire myth

In Chapter 110 of *The Records of the Grand Historian* Sima Qian tells an exciting story about Modu's ascent to power (Lidai 1958: 16; Watson 1993: 134-135). Modu was the eldest son and heir to Touman chanyu, who reigned at the end of the 3rd century B.C. Touman decided to place power in the hands of another son, born of a young wife. To that end, he decided to get rid of Modu by a trick. His son had been sent to the Yuezhi as an honorary hostage. However, Touman then insidiously attacked Yuezhi territory. Modu displayed his strong personal qualities. Having deceived the guards, Modu stole a horse and rode home. Touman reluctantly had to appreciate the bravery of his eldest son. He gave Modu a tumen – 10.000 horsemen – to command.

Modu clearly understood the fragility of his status. He started gathering reliable followers. Sima Qian wrote that Modu began military training. He said that he would behead anyone who refused to shoot right after he had released his arrow. After a while, Modu shot at his favorite horse. Some of his warriors were afraid to shoot. Then Modu ordered them beheaded. Soon he shot at his most beloved wife. Some of his followers refused. They were also beheaded. Next time Modu shot at his father's horse. All the warriors did the same, which meant that they would follow him to the end. After a while, during a hunt, Modu shot at his father. All of his warriors did the same. After killing his father, Modu seized the headquarters, murdered his brother and his mother, and put all his opponents to death.

Having heard about a coup d'état the Donghu, Modu's eastern neighbors, considered it an excellent chance to attack the Xiongnu. To create a pretext for the war, they dispatched an envoy who demanded the chanyu's wonder horse, who could cover 1.000 li in a day. All Modu's counselors advised him to refuse. However, Modu wisely decided not to quarrel with the neighbor over a horse. After that, the Donghu ruler demanded the chanyu's wife. Modu again decided not to enter a conflict with the neighboring polity over a woman. Then the Donghu demanded that he surrender the uninhabited frontier territories. This time Modu flamed up in rage. He declared, "Land is the basis of the nation!" Modu executed all those who advised surrendering the lands, then gathered an army and defeated the Donghu. The spoils of war were enormous; enough to share among all participants of the campaign.

These events appear more like fantasy fiction than truth. This story has too many questions and discrepancies. I will begin by reminding that political plots ripen in secret. Here all preparatory activity involved many people. The cruel murder of the wife could not escape attention. How did Modu explain such a

merciless deed to his father and relatives of his murdered wife? It is even less probable that Modu dared to slaughter his father's favorite horse. For the pastoral nomads to hit somebody's horse means to insult the owner. To kill the chanyu's favorite horse was indeed a mortal insult! In Sima Qian's oeuvre, there are too many 'most beloved' wives. Modu shot one of them and gave another to the Donghu ruler. The third wife, as mentioned in *The Records* by Sima Qian, persuaded Modu to let go of the encircled Chinese army of Emperor Gaozu during the Baideng battle (Lidai 1958: 18; Watson 1993: 138). It is highly improbable that Modu could be sowing such unimaginable terror in his lands. If every leader of a nomadic community beheaded his warriors and followers as quickly as did Modu in Sima Qian's story, he would inevitably end up losing all followers very soon. There are other questions too (Kradin 2002: 47-55).

In general, the entire story of Modu's rise to power very closely reminds us of a fairy tale or a heroic epic. The plot displays a rigid compositional structure, being divided into two parts. The first part deals with Modu's ascent to power. The second part narrates the relationship with the Donghu ruler and war against him which, as often happens in fictional stories, has a happy end. All events in both parts unfold on a chain principle. The suspense gradually builds until it reaches a climax in some action. Named a cumulative effect by Vladimir Propp (1984: 25), this plot construction method was widespread in various forms of folklore.

Another significant similarity between the story of Modu and pieces of folklore lies in the *ternary* principle (ibid). All events in a chain are repeated three times (just like in a Russian fairy tale about Sivka-Burka), but each time the suspense cumulatively grows. First Modu shoots at his horse, then his wife, then his father's horse. Only *the third attempt* to win unanimous support of his warriors was a success. In the second part he surrenders his horse, then his wife, but after the third demand he mounts his horse and leads the campaign against the Donghu. The third similarity with folklore is the presence of a horse and a wife in the story. These are the traditional folkloric elements. The enemies threaten to take them from the protagonist. The fourth similarity is the act of patricide. This is also a typical folkloric plot. Besides, the name of Touman, the father chanyu, as a real historical figure also raises doubts. Over a century ago Hirth and Shiratori, independently of each other, noted the consonance of the name Touman with the word *tuman*, meaning 10.000 (Hirth 1900; Shiratori 1902).

Most likely Sima Qian recorded from someone an epic tale about Modu. The Chinese historian was born more than half a century after the events described in the story. He started writing his *Records* only in 104 B.C. when a whole century had passed. The nomads knew no script. For them the primary source of historical memory were epics. When Modu came to power in the steppe, in China the Han dynasty replaced the Qin. It is highly unlikely that at that time the Chinese even followed the events far away in the north, beyond the desert. It is entirely possible that Sima Qian (or perhaps his informer) could have heard a story from some Xiongnu narrator. In *Records*, the elements of real historical events intermingle

with the elements of a poetic, epic tale. It is tough to distinguish between truth and fantasy here. The same situation is found in other nomadic empires, for example, in the Turk khaganates (Golden 2018).

It is improper to make conclusions about concrete historical events from studies of folklore. In fairy tales and epic tales, there may be characters whose prototypes belong to different historical epochs (Propp 1984). This conclusion is partially plausible about the story of Modu where real facts and folkloric layers intertwine. It is entirely correct that he had seized power by dethroning the legitimate ruler (possibly his father). From the second part of the story it is clear that after the coup d'état he defeated and subjugated the Donghu. All other events associated with horses, wives, and archery are folkloric supplements. Therefore, one can be sure that the period before 209 B.C. was Xiongnu prehistory. The real, eventful history started only after this date when the Chinese historians began paying attention to their northern neighbors.

Subsistence

Sima Qian wrote that the Xiongnu ate only butcher's meat (Lidai 1958: 3; Watson 1993: 129). Meanwhile, it is well known that dairy products were the staple food of the nomads. Most nomads ate meat only during holidays, in autumn during the slaughtering of cattle, in cases when cattle died, or when guests visited their camps. Any visit of a faraway stranger, especially a Chinese, was an extraordinary event. Hospitality traditions strictly prescribed to treat a visitor from a foreign land with mutton. It is, therefore, not surprising that the Chinese had the impression that the nomads exclusively fed on the meat from their animals.

The extent of farming development in the Xiongnu polity is one of the most disputable questions. Already in Soviet times, a dispute arose about who was involved in agriculture: the Xiongnu themselves or captives and immigrants from China (Davydova 1978). Modern methods of data acquisition and analysis indicate that the agricultural products are found not only at sites with permanent dwellings but also at encampments (Wright et al. 2009). At the same time, the picture of economic life proved to be more complex.

Contemporary isotope investigations of human bones show that people at some sites mainly used dairy and meat products. In another place, the diet was mixed and included foods of plant origin as well as game animals (Nelson et al. 2009; Machicek 2011). Some sites displayed no signs of agriculture whatsoever despite carefully performed field investigations (Houle, Broderick 2011). It is possible that the prevalence of caries among the Xiongnu indirectly suggests the importance of agricultural products in the nutritional system of individual groups of Xiongnu (Erdene 2011), and the considerable content of phosphorus in human bones appoints to the considerable role of fishing (Brosseder, Marsadolov 2010; Brosseder et al. 2011).

Local archaeological studies also open up new prospects. Mapping of the archaeological sites near the Khanuin-Gol River valley (East Höbsugul area), beginning with the Bronze Age, showed that the majority of sites are grouped within two discrete zones: the “summer” sites are in the immediate vicinity of the river while the “winter” ones are within the elevated zones of the foothills, more distant from the river. The distance between them is about 5 km. The paradox lies in the fact that this scheme coincides entirely with the current routes of migrations (Houle 2009; Houle, Broderick 2011) and correlates with traditional types of nomadism in this territory (Simukov 2007: 272-273, 501, 718, etc.). That said, the environmental conditions of the Xiongnu period correspond approximately with the modern ones. According to calculations of the faunal remains collected at the sites in the Khanuin-Gol River valley, they contain 54 percent small ruminant bones, 25 percent horse bones and 16 percent cattle bones (Houle, Broderick 2011: 145). This data corresponds approximately to the traditional composition of the herds of nomads in the Eurasian steppes (Kradin 2002: 71). The number of wild animal bones is tiny. In a couple of cases, marmot bones (*Marmota sp.*) were found.

Examinations of the seasonal camps can provide some new perspectives in the study of the social structure. As a rule, they display only fragmented ceramics but, if the problem is adequately set, can be a source of significant information. There exists a technique based on the assumption that inequality is reflected in the sizes, shapes, and decoration of the kitchenware. The higher rank households more often than others arrange prestigious ceremonies related to feasts and redistribution. Houle and Broderick found out that the ceramics from two of the fourteen sites differ markedly in size and ornamentation from the total sample. The sites also revealed wastes of metallurgic production, which suggests a home character of metallurgy. In this case, both sites stand opposite one another; one site is closer to the river while the other is in the foothills. There are reasonable grounds to assume that the same households migrated along the same routes. Since there were no other artifacts here which could be related to prestigious objects, the authors assume that there are reasons to speak about insignificant social differences in the society under study (Houle, Broderick 2011: 148-150).

The wings and the center

In chapter 110 of *The Records* Sima Qian provided a detailed description of the administrative system of the Xiongnu empire (Lidai 1958: 17; Watson 1993: 136-137). The polity under Modu comprised three parts: the center, the left, and the right wings. The wings, in turn, were subdivided into underwings. Twenty four highest officials had a military rank of “chief of ten thousand” and were subordinate to the *chanyu*. At the lowest level of the administrative hierarchy were the local tribal chieftains and elders. Officially, they were subordinate to the

twenty-four deputies from the center. The total number of these tribal groups within the Xiongnu imperial confederation is unknown.

A systematic study of the cartographic information for the archaeological sites opens up new prospects. Through an examination of spatial relations, one can better understand the distribution of political power. Based on the concentration of objects from the Xiongnu period, Holotova-Szinek identifies ten areas. However, only three of them display the maximum concentration of archaeological sites. The first area includes the Selenge Aimag and the territory of Buryatia. The second key area is in the Tuv Aimag. The third zone is in the Arkhangai Aimag (Holotova-Szinek 2011a; 2011b). In her opinion, this circumstance characterizes the Xiongnu polity as an "imperial confederacy," where places of regional political power concentration occur intermittently with empty spaces. Holotova-Szinek tries to understand why the Chinese sources do not reflect such political organization and why the areas identified by her were not mentioned in the Chinese historical texts (2011b: 436). However, a complete picture requires a more detailed sample for the contiguous regions. Most likely, it will broaden our understanding of the spatial distribution of power.

Bryan Miller (2011) attempted to reconstruct the system of relations between the center and peripheral areas in the Xiongnu Empire based on archaeological data. In the east, the Xiongnu bordered on the Donghu, whose descendants were called the Wuhuan and the Xianbei in the times of the Xiongnu Empire. Miller believes that there is some evidence of trade and other relationships as well as some shared features of funeral ceremonies. Nevertheless, the majority of cultural traits of the local nomads differ from those in the center, which suggests an insufficient political integration. The territory to the south of the Mongolian steppes, near the Great Wall, demonstrates an occurrence of significant components of the Xiongnu cultural tradition characteristic of the early Xiongnu. In the times of the Empire, despite the wars, the boundary was porous on both sides. This is confirmed by numerous written sources from different periods about the trade relations between the nomads and settled residents, smuggling, deserters, and so on. In the northwestern peripheral regions of the Xiongnu Empire, Xiongnu burials in the mixed burial grounds and graves having signs of different traditions were found. This fact suggests a fluid, penetrable boundary between the center and the periphery, as well as a developed economic and political integration.

An empire without towns

In the Chinese chronicles, the Xiongnu are generally described as cattle herders randomly moving in search of food within the unbounded spaces of the cold northern desert, "They move about in search of water and pasture and have no walled cities or fixed dwellings, nor do they engage in any kind of agriculture" (Lidai 1958: 3; Watson 1993: 129). In this a characteristic, scornful attitude to the

wild and non-virtuous barbarians is discernible. However, if the texts of the chronicles concerning the Xiongnu are perused one can find some references to the construction of walled settlements with agriculture by people under the Xiongnu power (Lidai 1958: 191, 204, 208; Taskin 1968: 91; 1973: 22, 24, 30, 103).

The archaeological data confirm this fact. At present, more than twenty fortresses and settlements from the Xiongnu period are known (Hayashi 1984; Danilov 2011, etc.). The functional status of many Xiongnu fortresses still awaits clarification. In particular, they could not have performed a critical defensive function. Their dimensions were not significant, and they were incapable of restraining vast armies. Also, the Xiongnu themselves were skeptical about the possibility of passive defense under a siege (Lidai 1958: 204). The nomads put primary emphasis on the mobility of tribal troops and households. They saw it as one of the fundamental reasons for their military invincibility.

One can single out several different forms of the Xiongnu sites. Archeologists examined the Dureny and Boroo settlements, where the dwellers engaged in agriculture (Davydova, Minyaev 2003; Ramseyer, Pousaz, Törbat 2009). Another known fortress is Bayan-Under with one large dwelling inside. It is interpreted as the residence of a military commander (Danilov 2011). There is a whole number of fortresses (Guadov, Undurdov, Tereljii, etc.) for which it is as yet impossible to determine a function. The most studied one is the Guadov site where richly decorated gates, roofed wooden walls and a building on a platform with a tiled roof were unearthed (Ergzen 2017). There is also one real town, a fortified, walled center of agriculture and artisanal crafts (the Ivolga fortress).

Ivolga is located south of the city of Ulan-Ude. The settlement represents an irregular rectangle with sides of approximately 200 x 300 m. On three sides, it was protected by fortifications (four walls and ditches between them), while on the fourth side the settlement bordered the old bed of the Selenga River.

On the territory of the site, 54 dwellings equipped with *kang* heating systems were examined. Numerous and diverse artifacts found there showed that the townsfolk were engaged in agriculture, animal husbandry, crafts, and fishing. Cattle, small ruminants, pigs, and dogs prevailed among the domestic animals. Many items among the findings were manufactured using Chinese technologies. Some of them display hieroglyphs. The study of a burial ground from the same period (216 burials) showed that the Ivolga population included a sizeable Chinese component (Davydova 1985; 1995; 1996). The total number of town dwellers ranged from 2,500–3,000 to several thousand persons. It was practically a real town. Unfortunately, so far it is the first town of the Xiongnu Empire known to archaeologists (Kradin 2005).

Chronology

The chronology of the Xiongnu sites is a crucial question for understanding the boundary between the prehistory and history of the Xiongnu. During the early stages of Xiongnu archaeology, researchers did not pay particular attention to this problem. The interpretations of early investigations were generally related to this or that event of political history. A period of data accumulation was necessary. Now this stage is over, and it is time to proceed with the integration of information. The monograph and the subsequent works by Pan Ling (Pan Ling 2007; 2011) provide the most thorough research on the problem of Xiongnu chronology. Pan Ling clearly posits a division into *Sudzha* and *Dyrestui* chronological stages and that the attempt made by S.S. Minyaev (1998: 74–75) to attribute the Ivolga fortress to the time after 123 B.C. is erroneous. Going through the different categories of archaeological materials, Pan Ling writes that the Daodunzi burial ground is the oldest cemetery of Xiongnu culture on Chinese territory. It is synchronous with the Ivolga fortress and the cemetery from Transbaikalia. All of these sites are attributed to approximately 2nd-1st centuries B.C. and the author assigned them to the epoch of the Western (Early) Han. Other sites in Transbaikalia are considered to be simultaneous with the Ivolga site, but they could have existed before the Eastern (Late) Han. The Budonzhou burial ground (China) belongs to the synchronous sites.

It should be noted that all excavated terrace (i.e., elite) burial mounds in Mongolia and Transbaikalia (Noyon Uul, Gol Mod, Durlig Nars, Tsaram, and Ilmovaya Pad) and also many explored burial grounds of ordinary people belong to this time period. During this period, funeral ceremonies became standardized. Simultaneously, social differentiation in the funeral ceremony is recorded. The last stage in Xiongnu culture, coinciding with the years of the Eastern Han dynasty rule in China, is connected by Pan Ling to such sites on Chinese territory as Xigoupan and Lijiataozhi. She associates them with the Southern Xiongnu and notes a tremendous Chinese influence (Pan Ling 2011).

However, as the use of the radiocarbon method has progressed, questions have arisen which, at the present stage, are challenging to answer intelligibly. The study of the datings of the so-called terraced burial grounds shows that all of them belong to a small chronological period – not earlier than the 1st century B.C. and not later than the 1st century A.D. Meanwhile, it has been impossible to establish even a single date attributed to the time when the Xiongnu Empire was in the making. At the same time, some graves which have been interpreted as Xiongnu ones belong to a much later period (Brosseder 2009; Brosseder, Marsadolov 2010; Brosseder et al. 2011; Brosseder, Miller 2011).

Therefore, it turns out that all elite Xiongnu burials belonged to the period when the polity was in crisis or even to the times after its division into the Northern and Southern confederations in 48 A.D. The burial places of the *chanyus*

and other representatives of the elite remain unknown. They must have been very well hidden from human eyes. We can say the same about the graves of Chinggis-khan and other Mongolian khans.

Conclusion: Xiongnu and Huns

Last two decades have yielded a lot of new data about the nomadic Xiongnu empire. One can say for sure that the Chinese historical works significantly distort the real picture. Nowadays we know that the Xiongnu polity was loose and amorphous.

Contemporary Western science actively criticizes *orientalism*, a distorted view of Asian cultures that the Westerners had formed. Edward Said coined this term in his eponymously-named book. It is also true for the compilers of the ancient and medieval Chinese annals. They described nomads as barbarians with no economy of their own, living on the robbery of peaceful farmers. The archaeological data allow seeing the steppe world through different eyes.

Unfortunately, the sources that the archaeological excavations unearth are extremely fragmented, making it impossible to reconstruct all aspects of culture. We know practically nothing about the elite burials of the first *chanyus*. The origin of the Xiongnu is still a highly debatable issue. Only scarce information exists about the Xiongnu sites in Northern China. The function of the Xiongnu fortresses in Mongolia so far remains a mystery. It is even harder to separate the Xiongnu from the imperial times before 48 A.D. and a still later period when they split into the Northern and Southern confederations.

The problem of relationships between the Asian Xiongnu and the European Huns still thrills scholarly minds. Over recent years, this issue has again become a matter of lively discussion (Vovin 2000; de la Vaissiere 2005). Unfortunately, despite many published papers on this topic, there are still no generalizing investigations, which would be devoted to a comparison of the archaeological sites and artifacts of the Xiongnu and Huns. Generally, the argumentation comprises fine diagrams of the iron cauldron types from the East to the West. The works by N.A. Bokovenko and I.P. Zsetskaia consider this issue with maximum consistency. On a map, the cauldrons stretch into several lines directed from the East to the West. In these authors' opinion, it is the evidence of nomadic migration (Bokovenko, Zsetskaia 1993; Zsetskaia, Bokovenko 1994). This idea also found its followers among Hungarian researchers (Erdy 1995; 2009).

However, the question of what moved, whether people or artifacts, has been the everlasting headache of Eurasian archaeology (Frachetti 2011). It is hard to disagree with the opinion that the widespread distribution of similarly-shaped (but not identical!) cauldrons in the steppe cultures can be interpreted differently. A rhetorical question "Why then should the rider-nomad warriors of the Xiongnu need such a particularly long period of time?" (Brosseder 2011: 415) is not

confirmed by historical and ethnographic parallels. All known East-West migrations were fast.

Nonetheless, among archaeologists, there are many supporters of the Xiongnu migration to the West. In recent years, S. Botalov (2009) constructed a broad picture of the migration of the Xiongnu to the Urals, and then Europe. In Kazakhstan, A.N. Podushkin discovered the Arysskaya culture with a distinct stage of Xiongnu influence (2009). Russian archaeologists are actively studying the Hun sites in the Caucasus (Gmyrya 1993; 1995).

At the same time, there is not a single specific archaeological work that would show a real similarity between the archaeological sites of the Xiongnu and those of the Huns. If it were so simple, it would have been done long ago. Scrutiny of the distribution of ornate belt plates through the territory of Eurasia indicates that they have more or less certain local links and that their widespread occurrence since the Common Era can be explained by the establishment of the Silk Road. The distribution of other artefacts demonstrates similar inferences (Brosseder 2011; 2018).

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