
UNIT 16 NOMADIC EMPIRES

Structure

- 16.1 Introduction
- 16.2 Nomads, Empires, Some Issues
- 16.3 Geographic Settings
- 16.4 Nomadic Migrations
- 16.5 Chronology of the Empires
- 16.6 Understanding the Empires
- 16.7 Summary
- 16.8 Exercises

16.1 INTRODUCTION

In the first Block of this course you studied Early Human Societies. The focus of the Block was on familiarizing you with the processes of evolution and development of early humans from the stage of hunting and gathering to nomadism to transition to agriculture and settled life. In Block 2 and 3 we traced the development of the settled agricultural societies to the birth of Bronze Age Civilization and Formation of States and Empires. This pattern of development did not take place in all ancient societies in a similar fashion. This was confined to select regions in varying chronological periods and was specific to those regions. There were a number of factors at each stage which gave rise to such a pattern of development. The geographic and environmental factors, availability of resources and changes in tools and techniques shaped the nature of transformation in each of these societies. These changes are specific to societies which were leading a settled life also termed as sedentary societies.

However, parallel to this pattern of development a large number of societies were flourishing which were at various stages of development if one uses the term 'development' in the context one uses for growth of sedentary societies. Many of these did not adopt settled agriculture and were following nomadic way of life. They were not confined to small pockets only. They were quite widespread in all regions with large numbers of such societies having substantial population. You should note that we have dealt with Nomadism in Unit 2 also but our focus in that Unit was to discuss it as a state of economic development prior to the transition to agriculture. Here in Unit 16 our discussion will have altogether different perspective. We will study them as such societies which established nomadic Empires with well defined polity, society and economy and their interaction with sedentary civilizations down to the middle ages.

The interaction of nomadic and semi-nomadic societies with sedentary civilizations is a theme which has had frequent debates in history. Here we will be analyzing the nature of the nomadic empires in Central Asia as well as Europe. Though Herodotus as far back as fifth century BC had raised the question as to why we distinguish between Europe and Asia when geographically and historically there is one continent of Eurasia. Other similar

queries could be; how much of present day China, Russia, India, Pakistan, Iran, or even European Hungary, etc. were effectively working parts of Central Asia during what times of their history? Speaking of Europe, what about the Magyars, Bulgars, Turks and others who migrated as recently as in medieval times; or Dorians, Hittites, and many other peoples who populated Greece and the Levant in classical and ancient times? To understand the concepts clearly this unit is divided into five sections. In the first section we will be dealing with the concepts such as 'Nomadism', 'Empire' and 'Nomadic empires'. In the second section we will look at the setting in which this great nomadic imperium unfolds in the historical context. Here we will define the region that we are discussing, and the patterns of migrations as we get them, before we move into the imperium. In the third section we will discuss the chronology of this unfolding drama. In the subsequent sections we will look at some specificities of the nomadic empires, in relation with the outside world with their inner systems.

16.2 NOMADS, EMPIRES, SOME ISSUES

There is a difference between 'nomadism' and 'pastoral nomadism'. The former refers to movement of people who are not directly engaged in herd rearing and herd tending. While the latter is engaged in it. In the Indian context many such communities can be found today who are nomadic but not pastoral. Gaudiya Lohars for instance, who rework the iron and repair the iron implements is one such community which migrates from its base in Rajasthan and wanders from place to place in a rhythmic cycle practicing their profession of making iron implements.

In this section, we will be dealing with communities/people, groups who were pastoral nomadic, and played a major role in the creation of the empires on the Eurasian steppe. Pastoral Nomadism has been variously understood. A.M. Khazanov defines it as a 'food extracting economy where the entire community is dependent on its herds for the supply of food.' Dyson-Hudson suggest that pastoral nomads are those who choose as their basic strategy for providing year round food for their herds the movement of livestock to pasturage rather than bringing fodder to herds. The distance traversed by such movement, its duration, frequency and pattern may vary depending on many a variables. This was not aimless wandering in search of grass and water, as the cliché of the Chinese sources would have it. The ecology of a given group's particular zone determined, to a considerable extent, the composition and size of its herds and the attendant human camping units (usually 8-12 family units). This is a form of economic production that appears to have developed out of sedentary animal husbandry among groups that practiced both agriculture and stockbreeding. Most pastoral nomadic societies of Eurasia continued to practice some form of at least vestigial agriculture. Distinct forms of social and political organization evolved or were brought into being in response to the demands of this type of economic activity and the nature of the interaction of the nomads with their sedentary neighbours.

Given this basic understanding, we need to broaden the concept if we are to understand the scale at which the empires on the steppe were conceived. Nomadism and its mirror image the sedentism are fuzzy areas, where they change given the understanding of the situation and context. We should

understand nomads as a fairly frequent, seasonal movement of people with its economy based in pastoralism. Nomadism should be seen as a vibrant, rational response to the ecological, political and societal context that has economic dimension to it. It is this economic dimension that among other things leads to the massive steppe empires in the 'early' and 'middle' periods of history of the steppe. The history of the steppe is the history of the ebb and flow of its empires.

Before we get into the nuances of the steppe empires there is a need to understand the notion of the empire itself. Empires have been essentially understood as different than the 'kingdoms'. They are often distinguished from Kingdoms for their structural sophistication. Because of their large landmass, empires needed to integrate both the various local cultures within the empire and the various key regions. To do this, they build roads across their territories and created a cultural superstructure to integrate its people. Rulers solidified their legitimacy by building impressive capitals and fielding impressive armies. Another striking similarity was their attitudes towards foreign states. The Roman *Imperator* (Emperor) was considered superior to the foreign *Reges/Rex* (King). Persian rulers considered themselves King of Kings. The Chinese *Huang Di* was considered superior to foreign *Guo Wang*. The ruler of the Mongol Empire took the title Khan of Khans. An empire may be composed either: a) of subject territories under the sway of an individual ruler, with no one of these territories having control over the others, or b) of a metropolitan state together with the territories subordinate to it. The European overseas empires of the modern era were examples of the latter type, the Romanov and Habsburg empires of the former variety. This difference is on account of the nature of control, territoriality and the number of social and political systems it encompasses in the imperial system. As argued by Romila Thapar, empires have been understood as having three essential components. At the core of the empire is the 'metropolitan state', ringed around by the core regions, which are kingdoms in themselves. Then there are the peripheries, fuzzy boundaries that separate the cores or lie in between the cores. The metropolitan state exerts to establish control and ensure a flow of resources to it from the cores and the peripheries. The Mauryan Empire is good examples of this model for the early historic phase. Here the core of the empire was the state of Magadha, which encompassed in it various cores such as the Kalinga, Kaushambi and others to name a few.

The problem with these definitions is that it does not include a quantitative aspect of the imperial system. How much is considered a large enough territory? How sophisticated is sophisticated? And of course, we have "empires" that fit the category of power and territory very well, but fails in structure. This list would include Alexander the Great's Empire, Attila the Hun's empire, and Tamerlane's Empire. Thus perhaps these were not empires but large states; areas temporarily governed by Alexander or Attila the Hun? There are different ways to look at these issues. We can also look at it from the perspective of the world systems theory and what it can tell us in terms of the imperial integration of the steppe and the conflict with the littoral world. Although we should be aware that the world system theory primarily explains the modern capitalist world and its functions, yet it would be interesting to see the application of the same to the steppe empires of the past.

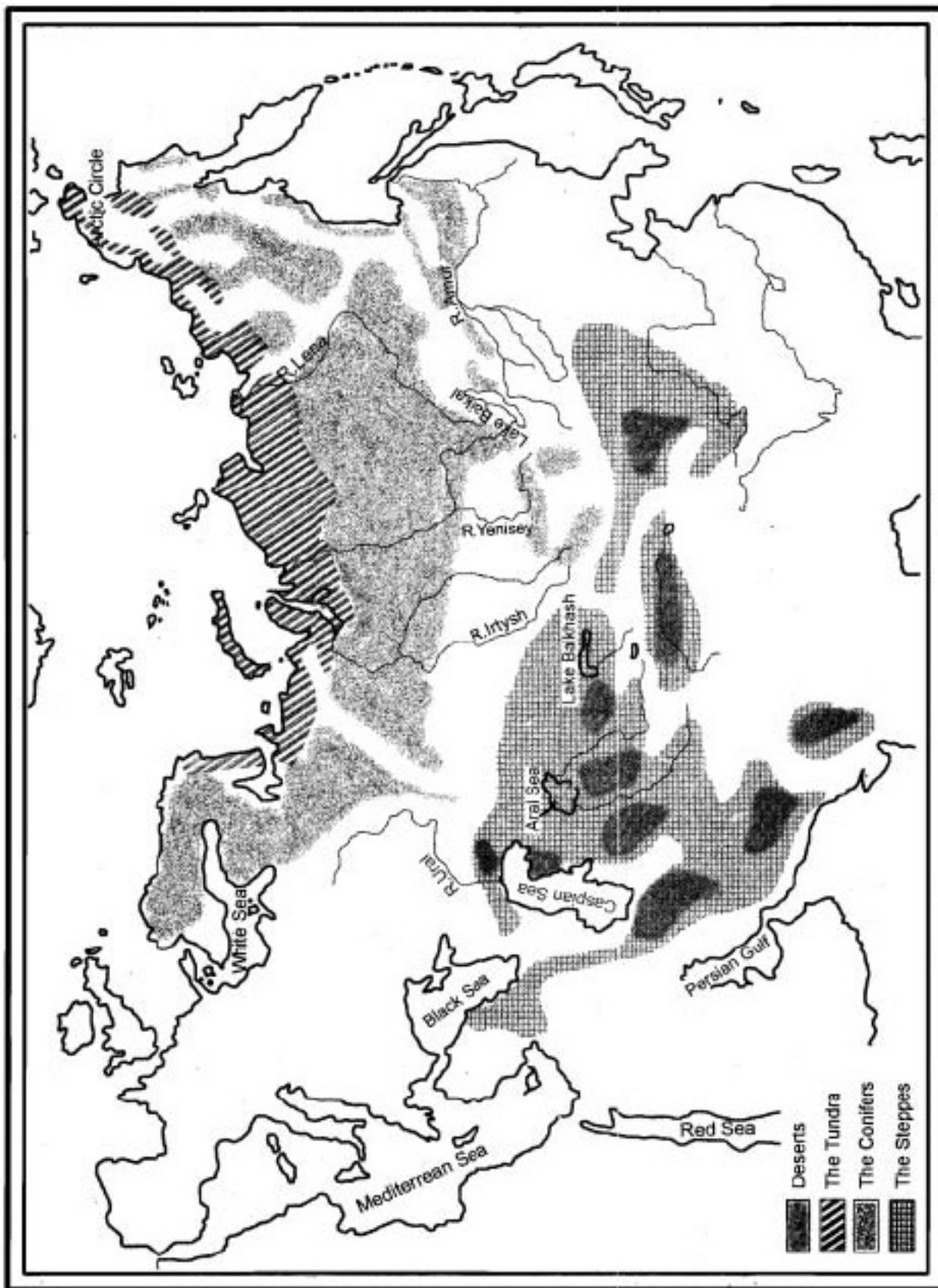
16.3 THE GEOGRAPHIC SETTINGS

The Eurasian continent is the largest landmass on the globe. Within this largest landmass we are concerned with the relationship of two distinct geographical regions, the Littoral states with access to the seas, and wealth accumulated from trade and agriculture and the Inner Continent of Eurasia, which was characterized by the pastoral land use pattern. Here in the littoral states resided the sedentary population, which enjoyed the fruits of agriculture and trade. The inner arc of the crescent of the Eurasian Continent follows the Arctic Ocean coastline of Scandinavia and the Siberia. The littoral states lie on the outer crescent of the Eurasian continent. This outer arc of the crescent stretches from the west to the east and includes in itself the Europe, Asian Minor, Iran, the Indian Peninsula, the mainland countries of South East Asia, China and the Siberian seaboard. These littoral states find its mirror image in what has been characterized as the Heartland. Essentially the geographical features of the Heartland are simple. The Arctic Ocean marks the northern limits of the Heartland. The great massif of the Hindukush and the Himalayan Mountains form the southern limits of the Heartland. Between the Arctic and the Himalayas the rivers that do not merge in the navigable seas drain this enormous area. The topography of the Heartland is essentially simple. At its southern end is the Pamirs. The Heartland consists of four immense plains, the uplands of the central Siberia, the featureless plain of the western Siberia, the lonely and majestic Mongolian plateau and Gobi, at five thousand feet above the mean sea level.

It would be important to understand the major difference of the land use pattern that demarcates the Heartland from the Littoral states. Four layers of plants crisscross the Heartland. Along the far north stretches the Tundra, its expanses hidden beneath the long winter nights. South of the tundra lies the taiga, the immense stretch of green coniferous forest that starts from the Baltic and to the Pacific. The land is matted with the waste of the conifer waste and makes poor quality timber. The third belt, bright and green, lies further south of the taiga. This is the steppe, the sea of grass, rooted in rich humus soil increased in fertility through the centuries partly by the decay of the grass itself, and also due to the minerals found in the rock bed below. This band of grass stretches from the foot of the Carpathian mountains through the Urals and the Caspian to the Khingan range east of Mongolia. It also extends beyond the Carpathian in the Hungarian plains and beyond the Khingan range in the Manchurian lands. Thus the steppe not only cuts a massive scythe across the Heartland but into the Littoral states at both the ends of Eurasian landmass. The fourth belt is of the tiger strip deserts curving round the Heartland crescent and straddles the central Asia. Some of these deserts are the Kara Kum, the Kyzyl Kum and the Ust-Urt, bleak landscapes with harsh environments. Therefore also more than elsewhere, habitation was and still is often at a margin of subsistence, which is sensitive to minor changes in delicate ecological balances. Even small climactic and ecological changes can have large human consequences — and vice versa.

16.4 NOMADIC MIGRATIONS

Given the meagre rainfall in the area the land use pattern has been pastoralism. However there is one noticeable difference in the pastoralism practiced on the steppe and in other area. The steppe pastoralism was the mounted nomadic



Map: 4 (Not to scale)
Geographic Regions

pastoralism. It was in essence a horse culture. It was migratory in nature, always on the lookout for better pastures and better grasslands for the herds. Marija Gimbutas records radiocarbon evidence of three major westward thrusts of migratory waves by steppe pastoralists in 4300-4200 BC, 3400-3200 BC and 3000-2800 BC. For more recent periods other secondary sources have also pointed out recurrent waves of migration emerging from Central Asia into all directions. However, the predominant direction was westward; perhaps, as Khazanov suggests because that is where the more fertile and richer regions were. Each of these waves was also about 200 years long and they occurred at interval of about 500 years. This has been attributed to recurrent migrations to a 640 year cycle of climactic change in Central Asia. Others dispute the same. Gills and Frank suggest the existence of long cycles of approximately 200 year upswings and 200 year downswings in economic growth and hegemonic expansion, which we have tried to identify since 1700 BC.

Whatever the reasons for the migrations, perhaps by 1900 BC but certainly between 1700 and 1500 BC, Hittites and Kassites moved to Asia Minor; Aryans moved into India and Iran; and the Hurrians and Hyksos went to the Levant and Egypt. These and other migrations out of Central Asia affected not only each of the receiving regions and peoples. The consequences also altered the relations among these outlying peoples and regions themselves, as for instance those between Mesopotamia and Egypt. Another major migratory movement occurred around 1000 BC, from perhaps 1200 to 900 BC. Indo-Europeans moved eastward and perhaps became ancestors of the later Tocharians of the Tarim Basin in Xinjiang. Among others, Phoenicians, Arameans and Dorians moved into the Levant and Greece. They contributed to dramatic developments in Assyria, including Niniveh and Babylon, and later in Persia and Greece.

Around a half millennium before the birth of Christ, the movement of the Massagetae drove the Scythians westward, and they in turn pushed the Cimmerians west- and southward. The latter crossed the Caucasus and arrived in Asia Minor in 680-670 BC. Later, Herodotus recorded their incursions – and their supposedly exceptional savagery – for history. They were followed by the Sarmatians.

Around the beginning of the Christian era, migratory movements emerging from Central Asia contributed to far reaching changes. On China's "Inner Asian Frontier" the Ch'in and Han rulers fought off the Hsiung Nu in Zungaria across the Tien Shan Mountains. To do so, the Chinese tried to enlist the aid of the Yue Chi along the Kansu (Haxi) Corridor and Dunhuang. However, the Hsiung Nu defeated the Yue Chi, who migrated westward. It is still disputed whether the former became the Huns who later invaded Europe. However, the latter did conquer the Saka people and/or the Bactrian successors of Alexander the Great. Their descendants founded the Kushan Empire, which ruled the North of India. Parthians invaded Persia from the North to conquer the Selucids who had taken over there from Alexander.

Around 500 AD, new movements of peoples from Central Asia spread in all directions and had Domino effects. Ephtalites moved into India, Goths and Huns into Europe (Attila attacked Rome in 452). Tang China, Western and Eastern Byzantine Rome, Persia, and the later spread of Islam among others would not have become what they did without the impact of these migrants and invaders from Central Asia. Before 1000 AD, the Turks, who originated

in the Altai near Mongolia, moved into Anatolia, which became Turkish and eventually Turkey. Perhaps the most memorable migratory and invasive movement was that of the Mongols under Genghis Khan and his successors to Tamerlane in the 13th and 14th centuries. The world's largest empire they created was only shortlived. But its consequences were very long lived and far reaching in the development of Ming China, Mogul India, Safavid Persia, the Ottoman Empire, and perhaps even through its effects on subsequent European development and expansion.

We need to understand the two basic features of the Eurasian steppe that have decisively influenced the nomadic empires. These are the primarily separate habitat for the nomads and sedentary population and the relatively higher density of the nomadic populations within the Heartland that sometimes facilitated its unification. Thus the sedentary population was on the rim of the Heartland and in the littoral states, while the nomads had the pastures to themselves. It was this clear-cut division borne out of ecological factors amongst other things that facilitated a different cultural context to both the Heartland and the Littoral States. The subjugation by the heartland of the Littoral States was then a necessity for the nomads to survive.

We must keep this aspect in mind as we turn to the state formation processes now that laid the foundation of the various nomadic empires on the steppe.

16.5 CHRONOLOGY OF THE EMPIRES

From 9,000 to 5,000 BC the Neolithic Revolution expanded through Southwest Asia and Southern Europe, as well as into India and Northern China, producing settled farming and herding communities and a tremendous increase in population in these areas. By 4,000 BC, however, another sort of revolution in human economy had begun taking place in the vast grassland areas of Central Eurasia, the steppes that stretch from Southern Europe to North China. In what might be termed the "Pastoral Revolution," early farming communities on the East European steppes domesticated the horse and, as their land became drier and less suitable for farming, they came to rely almost exclusively on their herds of cattle, goats and sheep. Over the next 1,500 years these people gradually abandoned sedentarism and developed a way of life involving nomadic migrations with their herds. After about 2400 BC, when the first nomadic invasions of Europe began, until the Mongols of the 13th and 14th centuries AD, the history of Europe and Asia was one of conflict between sedentary farmers and mobile, warlike steppe nomads. Three great peoples played the major role in Eurasian Pastoral Nomadism: Indo-Europeans, Turks, and Mongols. The following periods can be discerned in the alternating dominance of these three groups over the steppelands (dates may overlap, since certain developments affected only part of the vast Eurasian steppe):

The Indo-European Period (4,000BC-300AD)

During this period, Indo-European speaking tribes developed a tough, mobile way of life which allowed them to spread from the coast of the Black Sea (in present-day Ukraine) to what is today the western region of China. During this time, the political centre of gravity flowed from West to East, with the most powerful tribes, such as the Iranian speaking **Scythians**, centred in Eastern Europe. However, some tribes such as the Iranian-speaking **Sakas** and **Alans**

brought pastoral nomadism to non-Indo-European groups in northern Central Asia, notably the ancestors of the Turks, Mongols, and the Tungusic and Manchu-speaking tribes of present-day northwestern China. By late Roman times (4th century AD), the predominate movement of tribes on the steppes would be from Central and Northern Asia to China and westward to Europe and Iran.

The Hsiung-nu (Xiong-nu) Period (250BC-450AD)

Turkic-speaking tribes, some of whom later went westward and became the Huns, who, led by Attila, were the terror of Europe, probably led the first powerful steppe confederation in present-day Mongolia. The Xiong-nu repeatedly invaded Han China, who responded by extending its political influence along the Silk Route far into Central Asia. The eastern Hsiung-nu divided into northern and southern branches, the latter falling under the influence of Chinese culture.

In 155AD the Northern Hsiung-nu were destroyed and replaced by a people of Mongol stock, the **Hsien-pi**. Another Mongol-speaking group, the Ju-Juan whom the Chinese disparagingly called the Juan-Juan, a pun that means “unpleasantly wriggling vermin”, replaced these, in turn in 402AD. While these Mongolian-speaking tribes controlled Mongolia, much of northern China continued to be ruled by the Hsiung-nu and other Turkic-speaking peoples.

The Turkic Kaganate (552-744)

In 552 the Mongol Ju-Juan was destroyed by the Turks, who were thought to be the direct descendants of the Hsiung-nu. The **Avars**, a part of the defeated Mongols, moved westward and invaded Europe in the 7th century. At its height the Turkic Kaganate (**kagan**, or **khan**, is the title of “king” among the Mongol and, later, among the Turkic tribes) covered most of Central Asia and northern China. During the 6th and 7th centuries, the Turks developed an alphabet and inscribed part of their history on stone stelae (the **Orkhon-Yenisei inscriptions**, often mistakenly described as written in “Turkic runes”).

The Uighur Empire (744-840)

Their cousins, the Uighurs, who displaced the Turks in 744 set up their own Empire, centred in present-day Mongolia. The Uighur adopt **Manichaeism** (a religion originating in Persia from a mixture of Iranian Zoroastrianism and Christianity) and developed a vertical script based on an alphabet used in Persia (the old Sogdian script). This new **Uighur alphabet** supplanted the writing of the Orkhon-Yenisei inscriptions. The Uighurs were the allies of the Tang Chinese and absorbed many traits from their sedentary culture. In 840 the still nomadic Kirgiz (ancestors of the modern Kazakh) destroyed the Uighur Empire. Remnants of the Uighur fled their base in Mongolia and entered the present-day Xinjiang.

Steppe kingdoms in North China (840-1278)

As the Tang Dynasty moved toward collapse, a number of steppe peoples rose to dominance in northern China. They included the Mongol **Khitan**, the Tibetan **Tanguts**, and the **Jurchens**, ancestors of the Manchu. Meanwhile, on the steppes and forests of Mongolia, Chingiz (Genghis) Khan united all of the nomadic tribes, a process completed by 1206. The Mongols conquered all of

the kingdoms of northern China. By 1278 Kubilai Khan conquered southern China, as well.

The Mongol World Empire (1206-1368)

Chingiz Khan united the Mongol and neighboring Turkic tribes by 1206. The Uighurs, who submitted peacefully, provided their vertical script as the first Mongol writing system. **Mongol-Tatar** (the Tatar were a Mongol group absorbed by Chingiz Khan's Mongols, but the name was then transferred to the many Turkic peoples who served as Mongol allies) armies conquered all of the steppes, as well as the sedentary civilizations of Russia (1240), Persia and Mesopotamia (1258), and southern China (1278). Mongol domination in Islamic Southwest Asia lasted until 1355, in China until 1368, and in Russia well into the 15th century.

Political decline of the steppe peoples (14th century to present)

As Mongol rule was overthrown, the sedentary peoples (especially the Russians and Chinese) rebuilt their political power and gradually encroached on the peoples of the steppes. Many pockets of Turkic-speaking peoples (and a few Mongol ones) were left behind from Europe to Mongolia as the Russians advanced eastward. Some of these Turkic speakers retained the old Mongol ethnonym Tatar, corrupted by Europeans into the word "Tartar." The spread of Russian and Chinese political influence climaxed in the 18th to 20th centuries, when all of the steppe peoples were incorporated into either the Russian or Chinese Empires. Today, with the collapse of the Soviet Union, new countries have sprung up in Central Asia (**Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Tadjikistan**), and **(Outer) Mongolia** has become truly independent of both Russian and Chinese domination for the first time in centuries.

16.6 UNDERSTANDING THE EMPIRES

The central thesis of Anatoli Khazanov's (1979) *Nomads and the Outside World* is that "nomads could never exist on their own without the outside world and its non-nomadic societies" and that "the important phenomenon of nomadism ... consists in its indissoluble and necessary connection with the outside world" (Khazanov 1979: 3). The same relationship extends to the formation of the state among the nomads—and perhaps among their sedentary neighbors also. Khazanov links state formation among nomads mostly but not always with external expansion at the expense of their sedentary neighbors. He distinguishes between conquest and subjugation of sedentary peoples, from whom the nomads exact tribute, and sedentarization of the nomads themselves on their neighbors' territory. In either case, state formation is an important instrument for the nomads. Sometimes also, a nomad state may be formed to derive tribute from a sedentary one to which it offers protection from other nomads.

Thomas Barfield goes one step further. In his analysis of *The Perilous Frontier: Nomadic Empires and China*, Barfield criticizes the

"common assumption that the creation of a nomadic state was the result of internal development. Yet historically known nomadic states were organized on a level of complexity far beyond the needs of simple nomadic pastoralism.... The development of the state among nomadic

pastoralists, therefore, was not a response to internal needs; rather it developed when they were forced to deal with more highly organized sedentary state societies on a continual basis. Drawing on cases from southwestern Asia, Irons [1979] came to the same conclusion and reduced it to a hypothesis: "Among pastoral nomadic societies hierarchical political institutions are generated only by external relations with state societies and never develop purely as a result of internal dynamics of such societies" (Barfield 1989:6-7)."

Barfield devotes much of his book to confirming this hypothesis for Eastern Central Asia. He extends it by showing that

"Powerful nomadic empires rose and fell in tandem with native dynasties in China. The Han and Hsiung-nu empires appeared within a decade of one another, while the empire of the Turks emerged just as China reunified under the Sui/Tang dynasties (ibid. p. 9) The unification of China under the Ch'in/Han dynasties and the steppe under the Hsiung-nu after centuries of anarchy occurred within a single generation. Three hundred years later, dissolution of central power in both China and the steppe also took place within a generation. It was no accident that the steppe and China tended to be mirror images of one another. Ultimately the state organization of the steppe needed stable China to exploit. The Turkish empires and the T'ang dynasty provide an unusual opportunity to test this hypothesis" ibid. p. 131)."

Nomadism, as we have noted, is a system that must interact with other economies. Pastoral production is capable of creating great individual wealth, but it cannot generate the great quantity and variety of foodstuffs that sedentary society does. Hence, it cannot support as large a population. Although sedentary and nomad alike faced the uncertainties of nature and man, nomadism was by far the more precarious system. A disturbance caused by epizootics, pastoral overproduction or raids could have far-reaching consequences in the steppe, bringing about the migration of tribes in search of new pasturage or the assaults of half-starved raiding parties on agrarian communities. In short, it resulted in war and conquest. Nomadism was merciless to those who could not maintain the minimum herd necessary for survival (usually 60-100 head of sheep, horses, cattle, goats and camels with sheep and horses predominant). Those who could not find relatives willing or able to help them rebuild or even to hire them as herders were often forced to sedentarize. Such nomads became willing members of predatory bands that raided nomad and sedentary alike. Desperate men formed the nucleus of the such rebellious groups that future conquerors gathered. The nomad with his highly developed equestrian skills was a redoubtable and feared warrior. These skills were exploited by both nomadic and sedentary societies. Some nomadic groups or individuals took service with surrounding sedentary states as allies (often marital alliances were part of this relationship), mercenaries or slave-soldiers (the gulams and mamluks of the Muslim world). Whatever the term or relationship, each of the sedentary states ringing the Eurasian steppes, had such units.

Conflict with sedentary society came largely over access to the goods of agrarian and urban production. Nomads traded or raided for these goods, adopting whichever strategy suited their capabilities of the moment. In essence, the militarily stronger of the two parties determined what form this exchange would

take. Powerful empires, like China, whose posture towards the nomads was usually defensive, often used the prospect of trade as a means of control. Such contact and conflict could provide the impetus for nomadic state building. Successful raiding was also a means by which the nomadic chieftain was able to strengthen his position, providing booty to be distributed to his followers and enhancing his charisma as warlord and diplomat.

The formation of nomadic states is still not fully understood, largely because we have few documents coming from within the nomadic world that describe the goals of the state-builders. Given their tribal organization, continual training for war and the executive talents needed to move herds and people some distance, the state was latent in most Eurasian nomadic polities. It could be brought to the fore by internal pressures, stemming, perhaps, from fights over pasturage or access to goods. Even here, however, it is possible that the causes originated outside nomadic society. In these struggles, nomad was pitted against nomad, the victor either driving off the vanquished (who might, then, suddenly burst into a neighboring sedentary state incapable of fending them off) or incorporating the former foe into the triumphant tribal union. It is through this process of superstratification that a conquest state might be born. This was by no means a predetermined outcome. Moreover, sedentary states, responding to nomadic pressures or adopting an aggressive posture towards the steppe, might also serve as the catalyst. Or, nomads, seeking to exploit a sedentary society, were compelled by the military and diplomatic requirements of these activities to organize themselves into a state. In any event, current anthropological thinking places the greatest emphasis on outside catalysts deriving from relations with sedentary state societies in the process of the formation of the states in the nomadic world. Centralized authority, however, could just as quickly disappear when the catalyst that had brought it into being was removed. Barfield views nomadic state-formation on the Chinese frontier as essentially deriving from the desire to exploit a strong Chinese economy. He has attempted to correlate nomadic state-formation, which he views as cyclical, with periods of strong, not weak, rule in China. Thus, according to this view, united prosperous China was a necessary precondition for the development of a united nomadic state whose central ruling authority would be able to survive only by exploiting the agrarian giant to the south. The nomads, moreover, with the exception of the Cinggisid Mongols, did not seek to conquer China, which would disrupt the flow of goods in which they were vitally interested, but to extort from it, what they could. Conquest came, according to him, from the Manchurian Mongolic and Manchu-Tungusic peoples, pursuing mixed nomadic and forest economies, who moved into the power vacuum when Chinese dynasties collapsed and established border statelets that eventually came to control much of Northern China. Barfield's conceptualization of this process has many interesting as well as disputed points to which we shall return in the course of this work.

Omeljan Pritsak has suggested another model of nomadic state-formation. He gives a primary role to the impact of international trade and "professional empire builders rooted in urban civilizations." Tribal chieftains, stimulated by contact with the cities and having developed a taste for the products of urban manufacture that passed in caravans across lands controlled by them, created a "pax" which both guaranteed the safety of the merchants and their goods and provided them with a share of the profits.

Despite or perhaps because of their appeal, the attitude of the nomads towards the rich cities of their sedentary neighbors was ambiguous. The urban centres with their mercantile populations and desired goods certainly beckoned. But, danger lurked in this temptation. In the Kul Tegin inscription, the Turk Bilge Qagan warns of the lure of China's "gold, silver and silk." "The words of the people (bodun) of Tabgac (China) are sweet, their treasure soft. Deceiving with sweet words and soft treasure, they make a distant people come close." Once lured in, the doom of this people is planned. China, the inscription cautions, "does not allow freedom to good, wise men, good, brave men." The Hsin tang-shu reports that when this same Bilge Qagan was tempted by the thought of building cities and temples, his famous counselor, TONUQUQ dissuaded him from doing so by pointing out that it was their nomadic way of life that made them militarily superior to the armies of the T'ang. "If we adopt a sedentary urban life style," he notes, "we will be captured after only one defeat." The city, then, beckoned but also threatened with a loss of power and ultimately cultural genocide.

Nomads continually tested the military defenses of their neighbors. Momentary weakness or decline could result in their conquest of a sedentary state. This, however, could have far-reaching and often unwanted repercussions in nomadic society. The first of these was usually the sedentarization of the ruling clan, now a royal dynasty, and elements of the nomadic elite. As they adopted the trappings and culture of their newly conquered subjects, they became alienated from those of their fellow tribesmen who remained in the steppe. The rank and file nomads did not share in these benefits. The transformation of their chieftains into heaven-ordained rulers held little appeal for them. The take-over of a sedentary state, after the initial distribution of booty, gained them little. Indeed, insult was added to injury when the government then sought to tax them and control their movements. Nor were there necessarily opportunities for them in the new structure. The nomads, not having developed much in the way of government, were not, by and large, trained to be functionaries in agrarian-based, bureaucratic states, the basic institutions of which were left untouched by the nomadic conquerors. Such positions were, invariably staffed by those who had done so before, or by others, acquired elsewhere who were similarly trained. It was the nomadic elite and skilled sedentary groups that had joined them that gained from state-formation.

Statehood tended to further social and economic differentiation on all levels. Nomadic egalitarianism, an ideal not a reality in any event, was now even more distant. Chieftains became heavenly-conceived qagans who ruled because heaven so decreed and because they possessed the mantle of heavenly good fortune. The qagan might later become sultan and padisah, but the gulf that developed between the nomad, over whom the government now sought greater control, grew ever wider. The conquest of the sedentary states of the Near and Middle East or China led, for the most part, to the sedentarization and acculturation, to varying degrees, of their nomadic overlords and their immediate supporters. The tribesmen were often left not richer, but poorer and with less freedom. This could and did lead to revolts.

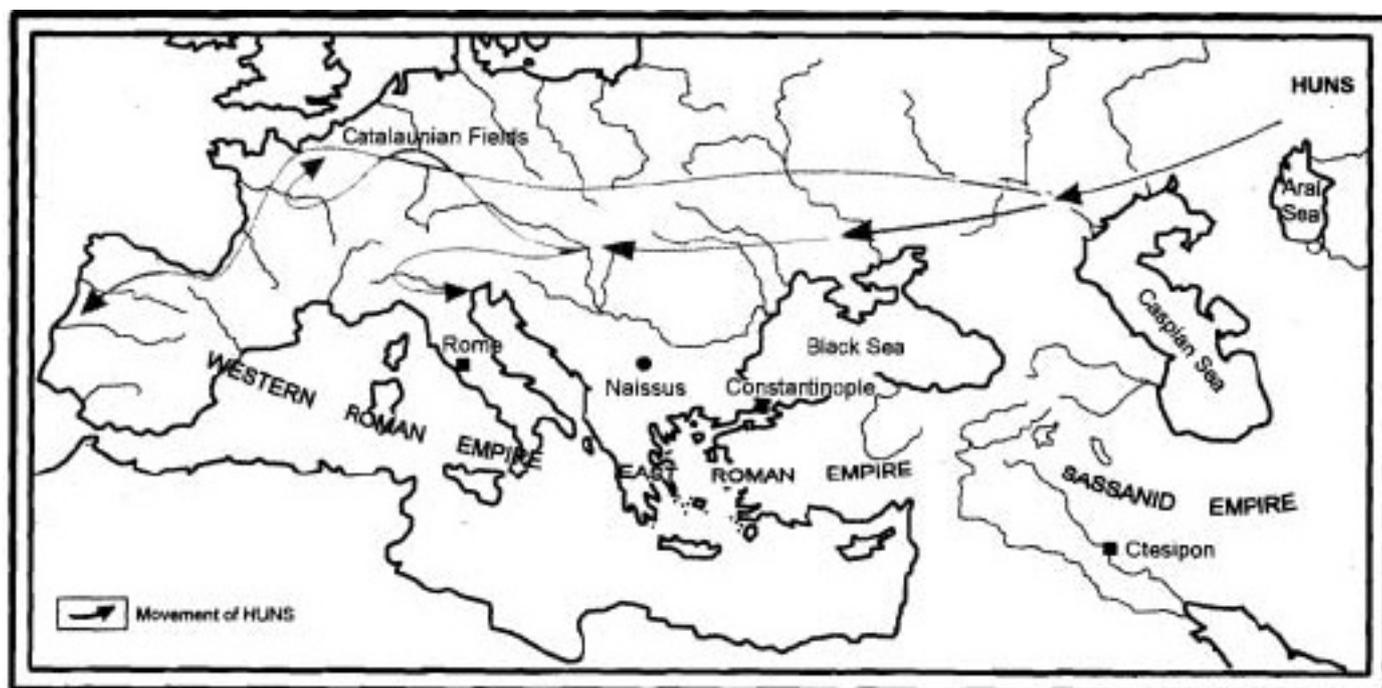
It is interesting to note that the nomadic charismatic ruling clans, the great imperial lines of which were extraordinarily long-lived (Hsiung-nu, Cinggisid, Ottoman), even when transformed into territorial rulers of largely sedentary

societies, on the whole failed to resolve the question of orderly succession. The state was viewed as the common property of the ruling clan that exercised a “collective sovereignty” over the realm. Any member of the charismatic clan could claim leadership to the whole or at least part (an appendage) of the polity. This invariably led to bloody throne-struggles in which the mettle of the would-be ruler was not only tested but also demonstrated on the battlefield.

Let us now examine the context in which these empires emerged. We need to look at the process of state formation in the context of the nomadic states; moreover we also need to take into account the intrinsic nature of the nomadic empires, the forces that held these vast entities together as well as the reasons for their breakup. We will take two cases in point to illustrate the process, the Huns and their failed bid for an empire and the Mongol imperium. Both the events were to shake the sedentary world to its core.

The Huns and the Empire

As one story goes, a mounted herdsman within the Heartland followed a heifer (cow) crossed over through the shallow waters of the Strait of Kerch between the Black Sea and the Sea of Azov. The mounted herdsman was surprised to come across a settled landmass and returned to tell the tale. These settlements were of the Ostrogoths and the nomads were the Huns. By this time the Huns had consolidated their hold on the forward grazing base of Hungary and had established their centre between the Theiss and the Danube. The Huns gradually expanded their rule, largely through vassal kings over the vast area of northern Europe stretching from the Rhine to the Baltic and the Russian forests. A raid across Caucasus was mounted in search for food. The Roman world, coping with the chain of migrations that the Huns had set up, did not see the horse archer for a while. All that was to change in a few tumultuous years.

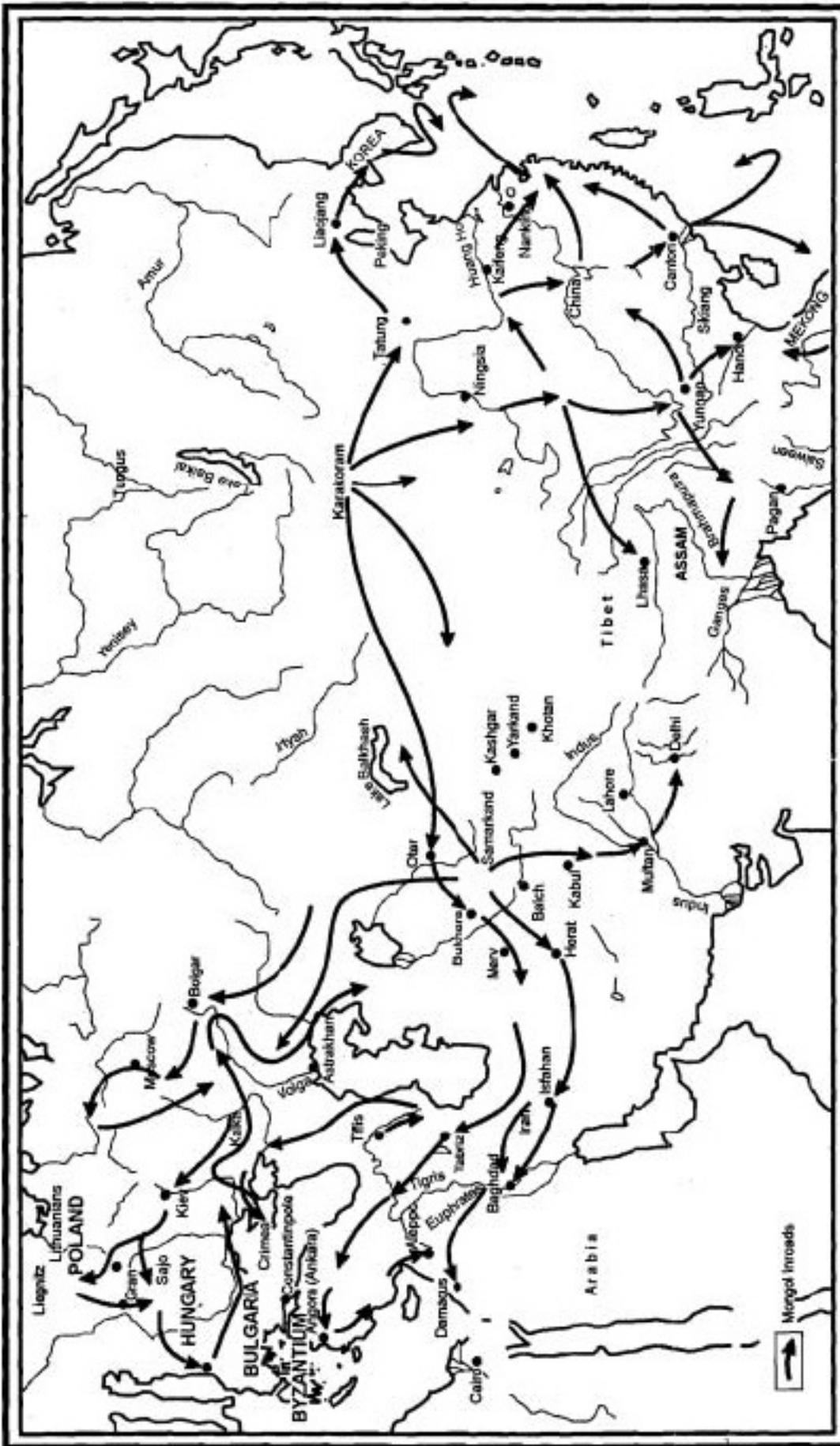


Map: 5 (Not to Scale)
Movement of HUNS

The early lines of the Hunnish royalty are shrouded in mystery. However the picture becomes clear around 420AD. Oktar was succeeded by his brother Rua; Rua by his two nephews who ruled for a time being jointly. One was Bleda, and other one who subsequently murdered his brother to come to the throne. His name was Attila, the Hun. With the forward grazing base of Hungary firmly under control, Attila launched full scale raiding expeditions in the eastern Roman empire. In three quick successive raids the back of the Eastern Empire was broken and Attila himself was at the gates of the city of Constantinople. Attila withdrew from the battle field and back to the bases. The East Roman Empire called for a truce and offered tribute. Accepting the tribute and extracting a promise of regular payments of tribute, Attila made his decision and turned his attention to the Western Roman Empire. He led a march of loot and burn in the Western Empire to the Gaul. Here, between Troyes and Chalons the two supreme powers of the Heartland and the Littoral State came to grips with each other on the Catalaunian (of Spain) fields. It was a stalemate, as the nomads did not have the advantage of the mobility that was essential for the cavalry. The Huns retreated back to their forward grazing bases, leaving behind them a bleeding Western Empire in Europe. From the Huns the mantle of the foremost steppe power in the Heartland was being passed on to the Turks.

Mongol Empires

Let us consider one more example before we discuss the finer points of the Nomads and the Empires. The second example is of course the vast empire that the Mongols built in the 13th century. One may see the Mongol Empire as a gigantic political force, bringing almost the entire continent of Asia under the control of one Great Khan. The Empire created a huge economical boom and a great exchange of culture and knowledge throughout the entire world. As a result of the Mongols, the Silk Road was reopened and the route from Europe to Asia was no longer thought to be impassable. A great deal of knowledge reached Europe, including art, science, and gunpowder; which greatly contributed in bringing Western Europe out of the dark ages. Likewise, in Asia, we saw an exchange of ideas between Persia and China. China was once again united under a single ruler. Russia was separated from the rest of Europe, but was no longer a disunited feudalistic society. The Mongols ended the short-lived Kwarezmian Empire, and brought the fall of the Abbasid Caliph and dealt a great blow to Islamic culture. Although the Mongols did indeed bring a huge list of deaths and destruction, the economical boom that followed is obviously something not to be overlooked. One of the only ones that clearly did not benefit from Mongol conquest was Poland and Hungary, and that was because the Mongols withdrew and did not set up a revitalizing government. One major factor that comes through the analyses of the nomadic world and the empires it built is the inherent weakness of the nomad economy. This economy demanded a constant flow of resources from the sedentary world. The failure to garner that flow of resource meant a tremendous setback to the economy. It was this inherent weakness combined with the cavalry that led to the massive thrusts in all the direction of the littoral states and became the foundations of the nomad polity. The empires that the nomads built were therefore shortlived. They however made a lasting impact on the littoral states that ringed the heartland.



Map: 6 (Not to Scale)
Mongol Inroads (13 - 15 centuries)

16.7 SUMMARY

The Nomadic Empires as you must have noticed had a wide spread area of influence. The empires had society, polity and economy which had distinct characteristics.

The steppe and the littoral states represent two different eco systems. The land use pattern of the steppe demarcates a clear boundary between the sedentary and the nomadic cultures.

The heartland represents the core of the societies that affected the littoral states and influenced the events on the littoral states.

The nomadic empires were essentially weak in terms of economy. This is so because the nomadic economy is inherently weak in terms of its economic strength. The nomad economy requires an infusion of resources from time to time to sustain the political structure that it strives to construct.

16.8 EXERCISES

- 1) Distinguish between Nomadism as a stage of development in evolution of civilizations and as an alternate social formation.
- 2) Discuss the geographic features of the regions from where the nomadic migrations started.
- 3) Give a brief account of the pattern of migration from the Steppes.
- 4) Analyse with examples the process through which some nomadic groups could establish empires.

GLOSSARY

Acropolis	: The central place of the habitation
Allikaq	: Improved or promoted (to a higher status)
Ayllu	: Social unit
Cantilever	: A device to carry load by obviating the necessity of intermediary pillars
Cochineal	: Dried bodies of female of insect reared on cactus in Mexico used for making a scarlet dye
Epizootic	: A disease affecting animals
Galley	: Low flat single decked vessel using sails and Oars
Hatha	: Sometimes translated as lineages
Hieroglyph	: Figure of an object standing for a word, syllable, or sound, as used in some ancient scripts
Lime Mortar	: A cementing mortar made of slaked lime
Littoral States	: States lying along the shore
Massif	: Mountain heights forming a compact group
Mit'a principle	: labour service by rotation,
Periodontal disease	: A disease involving the tissues surrounding the teeth
Rhomboidal pyramid	: Having the shape of rhomboidal - a quadrilateral of which only opposite sides and angles are equal
Stelae	: Upright slabs or pillars usually with inscriptions and sculpture
Stucco masks	: Cut marks made in plaster
Tocharians	: Central Asian people of a Scythian tribe who used Tocharian language now extinct
Umasuyu	: The water side
Urqusuyu	: Mountain half
Vault	: A type of roof that uses the technique of arch and is in the shape of roof of a wagon
Veld	: Open country neither cultivated nor true forest

SUGGESTED READINGS FOR THIS BLOCK

- Fredrik Barth: *Nomads of South Persia: The Basseri Tribe of the Khamseh Confederacy*. Oslo. 1964.
- T. Barfield: *The Perilous Frontier: Nomadic Empires and China-221 BC-AD 1757*, Blackwell. 1989.
- Classen, H and P. Skalnik., *The Early State*. The Hague. 1978.
- D.T.Naine, (Ed.): *The UNESCO General History of Africa*, Vol-IV,(1984).
- David W. Phillipson: *African Archeology*, (1985).
- Dyson-Hudson, Neville., *The Study of Nomads*. JAAS. Vol no. vii, No. 1-2:2-29.
- G.Mokhtar, (Ed.): *The UNESCO General History of Africa*, Vol-II,(1984).
- J. Desmond Clark, (Ed): *The Cambridge History of Africa*, vol-1,(1982)
- J.D.Fage & Roland Oliver, (Ed.): *The Cambridge History of Africa*, vol-3, (1982).
- J.D.Fage: *A History of Africa*. (1978)
- J.V.Murra: *The Economic Organization of the Inca State* (1980).
- John Henderson: *The World of Ancient Maya* (1981).
- John V Murra, 'An Aymara kingdom in 1567', *Ethnohistory*, 15/2 (1968).
- John V Murra, 'Cloth and its functions in the Inca state', *American Anthropologist*, 644/4(1962).
- John H. Rowe & Dorothy Menzel: *Peruvian Archeology* (1967).
- A.M. Khazanov: *Nomads and the Outside World*. Cambridge University Press. 1984.
- L.Thompson: *A History of South Africa*, (1999)
- Lattimore Owen, *The Inner Asian Frontiers of China*. Boston. 1967.
- Leslie Bethell (Ed.): *Cambridge History of Latin America*, Vol-1,1984.
- Lynn Meskell: *Archeologies of Social Life*,(1999).
- Michael D.Coe: *The Maya* (1980).
- Nigel Davies: *The Aztecs*. (1968)
- Robert Ross: *A Concise History of South Africa*, (1999).
- M.Wilson & L.Thompson (Ed), *The Oxford History of South Africa*, Vol-1
- Warwick Bray: *Everyday Life of the Aztecs*. (1968).