



# Theme IV

## Iron Age

### Time line

Earliest Textual Reference of Iron: 3-2 Millennium BCE

Earliest Archaeological Reference of Iron: 1<sup>st</sup> Millennium BCE

Continuous Production of Iron: 12<sup>th</sup>-9<sup>th</sup> century BCE

Iron in Daily Use: 8<sup>th</sup> century BCE

### Iron Age Civilizations

The Hittites

The Mittanis

The Assyrians

The Hallstatt Culture

### Scythians

Ateas 429-339 BCE

### Xiongnu

Touman 220-209 BCE

Maodun 209-174 BCE

### Huns

Rua/Rugila 432-434 CE

Attila c. 434-453 CE

### Wusuns

Nandoumi d. 173 BCE

Liejaomi c. 173-104 BCE

Early Turkish Empire

Bumin 551-552 CE

Taghpar 572-581 CE

Nivar 581-587 CE

Second Turkish Empire (Eastern Turkish Empire)

Ilterish 682-691 CE

### Mongols

Chinggis Khan 1206-1227 CE



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**Photograph:** Attila and his Hordes overrun Italy and the Arts (detail)

**Credit:** Eugene Delacroix (1798-1863)

**Source:** [https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/1/14/Eugene\\_Ferdinand\\_Victor\\_Delacroix\\_Attila\\_fragment.jpg](https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/1/14/Eugene_Ferdinand_Victor_Delacroix_Attila_fragment.jpg)

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## UNIT 10 USES OF IRON AND ITS IMPLICATIONS\*

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### Structure

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- 10.2 Introduction
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- 10.4 Emergence of Iron
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### 10.1 OBJECTIVES

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In this Unit, we will discuss the beginning of the technology of iron **smelting** and the change associated with the introduction of iron as the metal of choice by early c. fifteenth century BCE.

After reading this Unit, you will be able to:

- Explain the emergence of iron;
- Understand the process of iron smelting;
- Locate the beginnings in the use of iron in various parts of the world;
- Estimate the impact of iron in the process of social formation; and
- Appreciate the uses of iron in the initial and later stages of its usage.

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### 10.2 INTRODUCTION

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Emergence of the Iron Age is concomitant with the decline of Bronze age cultures, changes in warfare, coming of nomadic groups, transformation in trade relations, etc. Most distinguished impact of iron was the transformation in methods of warfare, in terms of armoury, weapons, chariots, etc. Gradually, iron was introduced in agricultural tools by c. eighth-seventh century BCE which resulted in significant social and economic changes. With the use of hoe, ploughshare, etc. made of iron technological innovations in the agricultural sector could take place. This led to better production and socio-

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economic changes. Unlike bronze, which was an elite metal, as it was difficult to procure copper as well as tin, iron as an **ore** was available in plenty in every region. Thus it had a deeper impact on the society than could be seen earlier with the use of bronze.

The shift from bronze to iron, as a metal of choice, was considered to have brought in remarkable changes in the society, especially in terms of technological changes. L.H. Morgan, quoted in J.D. Muhly (1985), holds that the development of iron technology was as important as animal domestication in human history. Iron was cheap as well as hard thus it could be used in military as armours and weapons and later was used for agricultural tools as well. Usage of iron can be traced from the second millennium BCE when its potential was not fully recognized to seventh century BCE when it became the dominant metal. In a short span of time iron became important not just in terms of technological changes associated with it but also for bringing many other changes.

The spread in the use of iron is seen in terms of its abundance, ease of extraction (a chemical process by which oxygen is removed and metal can be extracted from the ore) and relative hardness of the metal. V. Gordon Childe, quoted in Ian Morris (1989) held that cheap iron democratized agriculture, industry and warfare. Unlike bronze, which was difficult to access, especially for the non-elite sections of the population, iron because of its availability was accessible and therefore could bring in major early historical transformations.

Early evidence of iron can be seen in the form of daggers, amulets and other by-products found in large numbers from second millennium BCE. This period also coincides with decline of the Bronze age and end of the palatial systems. Scholars such as P. Villard, (1996), mention the link between collapse of the Bronze age power structures and emergence of iron as a metal of choice. He mentions that one of the factor for such political development was the new technologies such as iron smelting which played some role in bringing about change specially in terms of military capabilities. Scholars such as Mario Liverani (1996), talk about increase in the spread of settlements during the Iron Age as compared to the Bronze Age and links it to the popularity of iron. She mentions new state models wherein nomads and semi-nomads provide an alternate political model in some regions such as the eastern Mediterranean which was connected to use of the iron technologies and its accessibility. According to McNeill, quoted in J.D. Muhly (1985), role of iron could be understood in the context of a utilitarian metal which was used to produce armoury, weapons, etc. and was linked to waves of invasions and migration in the Middle East around 1200-1000 BCE. As local deposits of iron ore were commonly found in every region, once the knowledge of smelting was known it was possible to use the metal on a scale not possible with bronze. Copper and tin both were scarce ores, which makes bronze, which is an alloy, a luxury metal. In a way, the knowledge of iron smelting and strength of iron could bring in changes, which could impact a large section of the society as it could be used in military and producing other utilitarian objects.

At the same time, technological changes alone cannot explain transformation in a society. Rather the society should be conducive to such change, thus socio-political-cultural as well as human agency plays an important role in bringing about change. Therefore, when we mention the role of iron in bringing about change we must keep in mind the role played by other factors such as environment, society, economy, etc. which played an equally significant role.

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### 10.3 TECHNOLOGY OF IRON SMELTING

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Smelting of iron is a very complex process. Although the method of working with metal has been practiced as early as sixth millennium BCE in many parts of the world, but the

technical superiority required was higher in iron working. The standard method is to melt iron (melting point of iron is 1540° Celsius whereas for copper its 1083° Celsius). Following that, iron ore has to be purified which requires flow of oxygen in the furnace. Alongside, reduction conditions have to be maintained which involves removal of oxygen from the oxide ore. This process requires addition of fuel at regular intervals and as a result carbon monoxide dominates carbon dioxide.

In the bloomery process, practiced during the earlier times, it was difficult to attain the melting point of iron as the early metal workers could not reach as well as maintain the required temperature. Thus, a semi-solid slag was obtained. This slag was reheated and hammered into wrought iron, which was then utilized to make tools. The process had to be repeated many times before iron was usable. From this raw iron, bloom or ingot, iron bars and plates were forged. In this form, the tensile strength of iron is similar to that of bronze. Methods were developed which made iron harder and thus more useful.

One such technique is called Steeling of Iron i.e. carburization, a process in which the bloom is directly in contact with charcoal. This leads carbon to diffuse into iron, thus converting it into carbon steel. In this form, iron has the microstructure of steel which makes iron harder. By twelfth century BCE, this technique was successfully used to make knives and blades in the eastern Mediterranean.

Using the **quenching** technique, iron was further hardened. The process of quenching involved heating of the material and then rapidly cooling it in water, oil, or air. How quick the hot iron has been cooled is significant in the quenching technique. However, at the same time, quenching makes the metal brittle therefore the technique of tempering was used. **Tempering** is reheating the iron again, making it ductile as well as hard. In a way it could be shaped according to need. But this process was mastered gradually by fourth century BCE.

By seventh century BCE, the process of **carburization** and quenching was used to produce form of iron i.e. steel which had a higher tensile strength. A harder iron could then be utilized to make better weapons and tools as compared to bronze.

Scholars point out that, besides a standard procedure, there were regional variations of iron smelting, which originated from traditions or ways of copper smelting and working. Therefore, iron smelting is also believed to have started as a by-product of copper technology. Iron artefacts were found in many Bronze Age cultures especially in eastern Mediterranean and Southwest Asia such as in Alaca Huyuk in Central Turkey, c. 2500-2300 BCE. Iron was also found in Troy (in modern-day Turkey) associated with bronze artefacts. Evidence of smelting of iron during the Bronze Age refutes the earlier notion of technological specialization and Hittite supremacy which would be discussed later in the Unit.

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## 10.4 EMERGENCE OF IRON

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Scholars point out two approaches to understand the shift from bronze to iron, first the circulation model, where scholars point out that decline in long distance trade with the decline of the Bronze cultures led to shortage of bronze and there was an increase in the use of iron and iron-based economies. Second is the deposition model, according to which, since iron was widely available it was the best metal for daily use. And as method of iron smelting was mastered by this period, iron became the metal of choice.

Pierre Villard (1996) mentions three stages of use and spread of iron: first, the initial phase when iron objects were found but the technology of iron working was not known. Second, when quality of iron (especially for tools and weapons) was recognized but



bronze was still in use. And finally, when most tools and weapons were made of iron, but copper was still in use. During the initial phase of its emergence, iron was considered as precious as gold and silver but later as the knowledge of its availability, access and the technological skill was attained, iron lost its status as an elite metal and became a metal for everyday use.

Yalçın (1999) proposes that in Anatolia, iron smelting can be seen through four stages. His classification is similar to that of Villard. Besides the first two, he puts the third stage between twelfth-ninth century BCE, when regular production of iron had started, it became dominant and was used for making weapons, tools, etc. Lastly, by the eighth century BCE onwards, iron was employed in daily use and number of weapons and tools made of iron increased manifold.

V. Gordon Childe (1956) is of the view that with the coming of the Iron age, civilization expanded to larger areas than it had during the Bronze age. According to him, iron and alphabet changed the nature of relationship between elites and commoners. With cheaper iron, commoners were no longer dependent on the elite household and farmers could clear land better with their iron tools. Iron thus brought about a change in the position of the peasants vis-à-vis the elites. In a way, Childe emphasized on the prominence of technology as it brought far-reaching changes. Starting from Asia and Greece and moving towards west with the Etruscans, a confederacy in Italy, dated to around seventh century BCE, and Phoenicians which was a maritime trading civilization in the eastern Mediterranean region from roughly fifteenth century BCE.

Thus, with the coming of the Iron Age we enter a new stage in history which is different from the Bronze Age empires. We notice change in technology, expansion of habitations and new political systems.

### 10.4.1 Evidences: Texts and Inscriptions

By the second millennium BCE, iron had emerged as an important metal. During this period, iron was considered valuable and was compared in worth with gold and silver. In the early texts iron symbolized monarchy. The Assyrian King Shalmaneser I (1274-1245 BCE) mentions in his records that he donated valuable stones, gold, silver, iron, copper, tin, etc. when he built the temple at Assur. Another Assyrian ruler Tiglath Pileser I (1115-1077 BCE) also records his pride in owning an iron weapon. The Hittite texts belonging to the second millennium BCE also use the word iron in connection with royalty. The king was sometimes compared with the hardness and endurance of iron. Thus during this period, iron was linked to the royalty as it was a precious metal.

Documentary evidences of iron and its products are dated from about second millennium BCE. Early Assyrian inscriptions found at Kültepe in early second millennium BCE, an ancient merchant colony in present-day Turkey, mention use of iron instead of copper in exchange for gold and silver. Iron was considered forty times more valuable than silver, which drastically changed later.

Sources used different local terms to refer to iron. For instance, the early Kültepe texts, second millennium BCE in the Akkadian language use the term *amutum* to refer to iron, while the Mesopotamians used the term KU.AN. The Hittites, on the other hand, used the Sumerian term AN.BAR in their inscriptions. These terms used in the texts represented power and strength. By 1800 BCE, as utility of iron was recognized it became a preferred metal for weapons and soon its use increased manifold.

Archaeological records from this period onwards show prevalence of weapons such as daggers, sword blades, knives, etc. made of iron. For example, Alaca Huyuk, Turkey where six iron daggers were found in the royal tomb besides other precious items such

as pins with gold heads etc. as early as 2800 BCE. During wars iron was mentioned as spoils of war as well as tribute. This was probably raw iron which could be used as required. The Assyrian king Tikulti-Ninurta II (890-884 BCE) mentions receiving hundred daggers as tribute.

References to usage of iron during the third-second millennium BCE in textual sources are available which tell us the relevance of iron in these early societies. These also tell us that iron was a precious metal as it was referred to in royal inscriptions and was mentioned as something worthy enough to be possessed as well as mentioned in records.

### 10.4.2 Archaeological Evidences

Early iron objects were mostly accidental by-products and the technological knowledge and skill of iron smelting developed and improved over a period of time. By first millennium BCE evidences in forms of weapons that have been found in Asia and after eighth century BCE agricultural tools such as hoe, ploughshare etc. have been found in excavations in many parts of the world.

Earliest archaeological evidence of an iron object is a smelted piece of iron found from a grave in Samarra, Northern Iraq around fifth millennium BCE. In Tepe Sialk, Iran, three balls of iron were found dated around c.4600-4100 BCE. These iron balls were described as heavy and hard. Because of their structure and the high nickel content these were thought to have been either originated from a **meteor** (small rocky or metallic bodies in outer space) or as accidental by-products of smelting.

Iron objects have also been found in Anatolia dating to c.3000-2000 BCE. Nine objects have been reported from Mesopotamia which include two broken dagger blades made from smelted iron, two fragmentary tools of meteoric origin and five of unknown origin. Yet recent researches show that both meteoric iron (metal found in meteorites) and **terrestrial iron** (iron that originates on Earth, also called Telluric iron) was originally a precious metal with ornamental and symbolic significance.

Evidences of iron from Assyria have been found in Khorsabad, Nineveh and Nimrud. These include iron daggers, pin heads, swords, scabbard tip, arrowheads, spearheads, lanceheads etc. belonging to mid-ninth century BCE. Armours made of iron were found from Assyria belonging to seventh century BCE; picks, adzes, hoe, plow, knives, sickle, saw, hammer etc. have been found in Nineveh, Khorsabad and other sites. During this period references to fetters, cuffs made of iron are available in the texts as well. In Khorsabad, iron used in construction was also found. Heaps of big chain links and cauldron hooks have been found. Later the Greeks and Persians used iron in constructions as well.

#### Check Your Progress Exercise-1

- 1) What textual and archaeological evidences of early use of iron are available for the ancient world?

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- 2) Describe the iron smelting technology and what role did it play in making iron as the metal of choice?

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## 10.5 SPREAD OF IRON AND ITS IMPLICATIONS

Iron technology and alphabetic writings developed by the end of the Bronze Age cultures. W.H. McNeill, quoted in J.D. Muhly (1985), describes that in the Middle East, diffusion of iron working skills precipitated a new wave of invasions and migrations between 1200-1000 BCE. New people entered historical records inaugurating a barbarous and much more egalitarian age. Iron as a metal to make weapons was believed to be a reason for the military success of the Hittites, special reference is made to the Battle of Qadesh, c. 1285 BCE, the Hittites having upper hand over Ramesses II, the Egyptian Pharaoh and the subsequent peace treaty between the two ruling states, i.e. the Treaty of Qadesh dated 1269 BCE.

As you will learn in Unit 11, by second millennium BCE, nomadic groups replaced the Bronze Age empires, which brought profound changes in socio-economic as well as cultural patterns across societies. This period saw the growth and expansion of the Assyrian empire in the East (you will learn the details of the Assyrian empire in **Unit-12**). The Assyrians were a military power and utilized iron to full extent because of their proximity to the source of the metal, for example, in the Taurus mountains. Evidence confirms that iron was used for making weapons. Many scholars suggest that the disruption of trade led to the scarcity of copper thereby leading to rise in the use of iron. As the 'Iron Letter' (Details discussed in **Section 10.7**) attests, iron was certainly an important article for commercial relations during this period.

Gradually by sixth century BCE, iron was used not only to make weapons but also agricultural tools such as ploughshare, hoe, picks, axes, etc. The introduction of these tools brought in large-scale changes in agricultural sector and led to increase in production. Thus, we notice a gradual shift from stone and wood used by the peasantry in metal tools which were stronger and durable. The wide spread of iron was described as a democratic metal due to its availability in all parts of the world. But these changes happened later and would be discussed later in the Course.

By the early first millennium BCE, iron was clearly playing an important role in the economy by facilitating better tools, territorial expansions, etc. Implications of the use of iron were widespread in the field of warfare also, as discussed below.

### Military Strength and Role of Iron

Iron brought in a major transformation in warfare because it was stronger as compared to bronze (Discussed above in **Section 10.3**). The emerging states, such as the Assyrians, the Hittites and the Mittanis, were well versed in weapons that were used for warfare. As these cultures discovered the relative advantage of iron over other metals, they introduced changes to their weapons and armoury. These new states could assert their military power with the use of iron weapons such as swords, daggers, spearheads, besides body armours and helmets, etc. According to P. Villard (1996), the increase in the demand of iron, which was used for weapons and tools by the Assyrians, gave a spurt to the development and popularity of iron. It was also seen as a reason for the success of these states as centres of power. These three states were major contenders of power in the Near East and had supremacy in terms of iron weapons and tools during the early first millennium BCE.

Another important change during this period was the introduction of horse in war. Horse had been domesticated and brought to the region of Near East before second millennium BCE and gradually its usefulness in war was recognized. Besides, bringing in a new technique in terms of warfare, it led to the introduction of a specialized warrior class on chariots and horses. Chariots with solid wheels had been used earlier by the



Sumerians but spoked wheel chariots drawn by horses was introduced by first millennium BCE.

Chariots and horse riding groups had an important role to play in the success of these new kingdoms. Along with the use of iron weapons it had a major impact on the military capabilities of the Mittanis and the Hittites. The new military technique soon spread to other regions and became a symbol of military superiority.

Use of iron in agriculture was noticed later by the seventh century BCE, when ploughshare made of iron was found in Mesopotamia. Sennacherib (c. 704-681 BCE) mentions use of iron implements to cut canals through mountains in order to provide irrigation in the region of Ninevah (Villard, 1996).

## 10.6 IRON AGE IN THE NEAR EAST

For a long time, scholars believed that the Hittites invented the process of iron smelting and it was only after their decline that it could spread to other parts of the Near East and later on to the West. References were made to the inscriptional as well as textual sources. Evidence of iron products could be found from the second millennium BCE and the first millennium BCE attests to its widespread use. Geologically, the Black Sea region contains sand rich in hematite. As Pierre Villard (1996) mentions, that early Greek scholars such as Strabo believed that iron was discovered in this region. Mining of the iron ore is attested to from about second millennium BCE in the region. The question that becomes pertinent here is whether iron smelting was introduced from the Near East to other parts of the world. Therefore, we need to look at the evidences from this region to understand the spread of iron technology. We take into account the use and spread of iron by the Hittites, Mittanis and Assyrians.

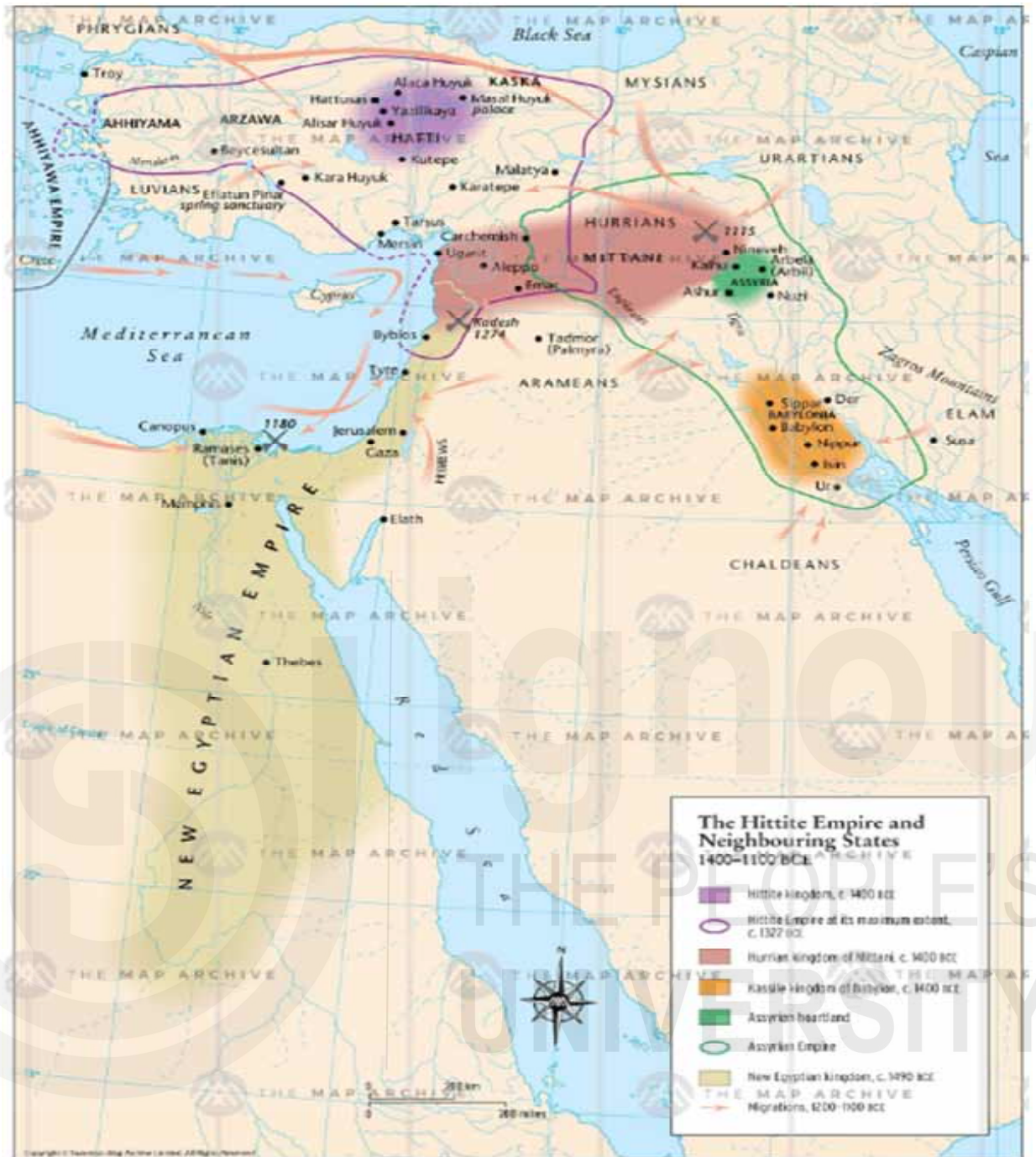
### The Hittites, Mittanis and Assyrians



Map 10.1: The Hittite Empire (outlined region) and Extent of Hittite Rule (shaded region)  
c. 1350-1300 BCE

Credit: Near\_East\_topographic\_map-blank.svg: Semhur

Source: Creative Commons ([https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Map\\_Hittite\\_rule\\_en.svg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Map_Hittite_rule_en.svg))



**Map 10.2 : The Hittite Empire and Neighbouring States 1400-1100 BCE**

**Source:** <https://www.themaparchive.com/the-hittite-empire-and-neighbouring-states-14001100-bce.html>

Around two hundred Hittite documents mention iron, on the basis of which scholars believed that the Hittites were large scale producers of iron objects. A letter written by a Hittite ruler (possibly Hattusilis III [1282 BCE– 1250 BCE]) to an Assyrian prince, which is popularly known as the ‘Iron Letter’ also acknowledges the Hittite command over technology. As mentioned in the letter, it not just refers to the metal but also talks about ‘good iron’ (believed to be indicating to steel). This would reflect their technological skill and ability to utilize iron as a strong metal. Iron ores found in the Anatolian region corroborates the Hittite capabilities in terms of iron production.

Scholars in support of Hittite supremacy refer to the ‘Iron Letter’ which mentioned the inability of the Hittite king to provide ‘good iron’ at that moment. This letter has been used to point out that the Hittites had iron production under their control and iron was a product of commercial exchange. Besides it was also used as a reference to their

technological superiority i.e. they could produce ‘good iron’ which has been understood as a reference to steel.

J. Siegelová, mentioned in Cordani (2016), outlines the process of proliferation of iron during the Hittite period as: first, during the Old Hittite Period i.e. from 1700-1600 BCE when iron was considered precious and was associated with rituals. Second, the Middle Hittite Period (1500-1400 BCE), when number of iron objects increased and iron was included in ceremonial items as well. Third, the period of the dominance of Hittite Empire (1300-1200 BCE) which saw the production of a range of iron products including daggers, knives, spearheads, etc. Although the use of iron jewellery had declined in this period. Through these divisions, Siegelová thus traces the trajectory of the use of iron from being hailed as a precious metal to a metal of common usage.

During the early period (1700-1600 BCE), the Hittites used iron solely for ritual purposes and it was mentioned along with lapis lazuli and other precious and semi-precious goods. In the clay tablets found in the palace of Bogazkoy (Turkey), iron is mentioned along with gold, silver, bronze and copper. An early Hittite text mentions iron throne and a scepter (decorated stick or wand held by a monarch). The written records mention knife, dagger, sword blades and other assorted tools. The Hittite texts mention iron workers as well.

However, scholars such as Yalcin, and others point to various regions like Anatolia where iron could have been smelted besides the Hittite empire. And on this basis, these scholars question the notion of the Hittite monopoly. However, the Hittite documents as mentioned above undoubtedly show that they could successfully produce iron and its implements by the second millennium BCE despite the fact that limited iron artefacts have been found in the archaeological remains. The political history of the region reflects power struggle between the Hittites and the Mitannis over resources. One of the causes of attack on the Mittanis by Hittite ruler Suppilulimas I (c. 1380-1346 BCE) and his subsequent control over Aleppo and Alaka may have been related to the need to control routes leading to the Mittanian sources of iron. Thus, it refutes the notion that only Hittites had the knowledge of iron working.

Scholars point out that well-made iron tools can be dated as early as the ninth century BCE. The evidence of an iron-bladed axe with bronze handle was found at Ras Shamra, Ugarit, which was a gift made to the Pharaoh, Amenophis III (1413-1375 BCE) by the Mittani king, Tusratta in c. fourteenth century BCE as mentioned in the Amarna tablets from Egypt. This again challenges the notion that only the Hittites had knowledge of iron working. Besides the gift list also makes a distinction between steel dagger and iron dagger. Thus, the Mittanis had technological knowledge regarding smelting of iron and could produce carburized iron i.e. steel.

Further, the earliest Assyrian evidence comes from iron hoards found at Khorsabad, Nimrud and Ninevah. Excavations of these palaces revealed evidence of spear-heads, daggers, arrowheads, helmets, fragments of armour, axes, sickles, picks, hammers, etc. Earliest evidence comes as a reference made to temple donations. Shalmaneser I (c. 1274-1245 BCE) in his inscription mentions valuable donations, which included iron, made to the temple at Assur (an Akkadian city). Similar to Hittite records, here iron was considered a precious metal during the early period. Later, iron was mentioned as weapon for the royalty. Another king Tiglath Pileser I (c. 1115-1077 BCE) mentions using iron tipped arrows for hunting in his inscriptions. Thus iron was used by the royalty and was considered as prestigious. For example, Assyrian King, Tukulti Ninurta II (c. 890-884 BCE) received a tribute of silver and hundred iron daggers. Even in the later seventh century BCE another ruler Assurbanipal (c. 668-627 BCE) mentioned

using iron dagger during hunts. The ninth century BCE Assyrian records mention iron as a tribute to kings. Similarly, Assyrian King Assurnasirpal II (883-859 BCE) mentions working in mountains with hatchets of iron and copper axes. Thus iron was important enough to be mentioned in inscriptions, sought as gift and offered as tribute to kings. It was a symbol of king's military strength.

Assyrian records as well as archaeological evidences show use of iron in implements by the late eighth century BCE. References were made to hoes, axes, picks, etc. in inscriptions of various rulers. Iron picks have been found during the excavations at Khorsabad. Similarly axe-adze have been found in the excavations at Nimrud. Iron plough was mentioned in records by seventh century BCE<sup>1</sup>. Some carpenter's tools also have been found in Khorsabad excavations (Pleiner et. al, 1974). Thus, iron which was earlier referred to as a prestigious metal for rulers, by the later eighth century was used for household purpose.

### **Check Your Progress Exercise-2**

- 1) In what ways did the knowledge of iron technology support the emergence of new states in the Near East.

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- 2) Why were the Hittites considered to have a supremacy in iron production?

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## **10.7 IRON AGE IN EUROPE**

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In Europe, the evidence of iron products is found around the twelfth-tenth century BCE and it was only after the eighth century BCE that its widespread use is attested to in the Greek colonies. After the collapse of the Mycenaean-Minoan Bronze age around 1200 BCE there was the so called Dark Age or the early Iron Age. Most significant, from technological point of view, was the adoption of the method of iron smelting. Iron was cheap as well as abundant and was used for a variety of tools.

In the European context, Iron Age saw the rise of tribes such as the Celts, Etruscan, Iberians and others. The Greeks obtained iron daggers and swords as well as the technology of iron working from Levant (Eastern Mediterranean) and West Anatolia. Iron working spread from the Hittite world to Iran and from the north-east across the Caucasus to Kobane regions. The early Iron tools such as swords found by the tenth century BCE in Europe were similar to those made during the Bronze Age.

The late Bronze Age cultures in Europe like the Urnfield people in Western Hungary

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<sup>1</sup> Iron plough was mentioned as a metaphor in Vassal treaties of Esarhaddon (c.680-669 BCE).



(1800-1200 BCE) did not have a centralized state structure but could well utilize their environment. They included farmers, traders and metallurgists. Their trade networks played a significant role in the spread of iron technologies across Europe after 1000 BCE. It is generally held that the technological innovations related to iron working had originated in Anatolia and were diffused to other regions by the eastern Mediterranean settlers as well as by the semi-nomadic groups of the Black Sea region. One of the early iron objects found included bronze sword hilts from Switzerland, sword blades and arrowheads from France, among others.

As mentioned in the earlier Section, iron technology was different from bronze techniques but at the same time as it was widely available, it was a cheaper source and could be utilized for making weapons as well as implements. The use of iron in agricultural implements such as axes, hoes, ploughshare led to higher crop yields, and better food surplus, therefore played a prominent role in bringing change in Europe. We will look in detail at the Hallstatt culture, which is one of the early cultures, as a case study of the European Iron Age.

### **The Hallstatt Culture**

The Hallstatt culture emerged in the south of Austrian city of Salzburg where golden amber, glass, bronze and iron was found in burials. Swords, daggers, axes, etc. were also found in large number. The Hallstatt culture shows a transition from Bronze to the Iron Age in Central Europe. It started by the eighth-seventh century BCE and spread to the area which was earlier inhabited by the Urnfield people, a warrior group in Western Hungary dated to late second millennium BCE. They were defined by their burial pattern wherein the dead were cremated and ashes deposited in an urn. Later they spread to central and parts of western Europe. They were known for their bronze working and fortifications.

The Hallstatt, in Austrian Alps, emerged as a major trade centre around 800 BCE. Cemetery near the salt mines shows evidence of early Iron Age as many iron weapons such as large knives, spearheads, swords, etc. were found besides bronze articles. Trade in this region was well developed and it soon emerged as an important commercial centre, for example Heuneburg. Important feature of the period was appearance of burials in wooden chambers. The graves represented a warrior class as helmets, shields etc. made of bronze were found, along with various other kinds of vessels. Swords found in the graves were made of iron and sometimes were made of bronze.

During the Hallstatt period, the elites in West-Central Europe built fortified hilltop settlements which were also the seats of the administration and they buried their dead with exotic objects such as jewellery, shields, weapons etc. It reflects a civilization where war, raids etc. were important aspects of the society. They had well established connection with the Mediterranean region. Peter S. Wells (1994) characterized the western Hallstatt fortified settlements as 'towns', which had a commercial function. Whereas Arnold suggests that they were more symbolic in their function. The final phase of the Hallstatt culture was defined by short swords and some of the centres shifted towards west by 500 BCE. Heuneburg was one such seat of the Hallstatt chief. It was on a hilltop over the Danube, Germany. The fortification was renewed between 650-450 BCE. The walls were sometimes built with mudbricks which reflects Mediterranean influence. They traded from Massalia, a trade centre of Greeks near Rhine, in amphorae (jars and jugs) besides black fig, vases, silk, etc.

The wealth accumulated by the elite can be seen in the burials. The tombs had a variety of goods made of bronze, besides wood, bead, vessels etc. Although Mediterranean trade did not stop altogether but there was decline in the trade relations. By 400 BCE,

the site was abandoned and burials were no longer found. The Hallstatt culture was followed by the La Tene culture which is dated to the late Iron Age i.e. 600-400 BCE. During this period, regional centres of manufacturing and trade were found in Poland besides other regions. During this period iron working further disseminated and was no longer restricted to the elite groups.

**Check Your Progress Exercise-3**

- 1) Explain the emergence of Iron Age in Europe.

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- 2) What is the nature of the settlements established during the Hallstatt period?

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**10.8 SUMMARY**

The transformations seen in Asia and Europe during the second-first millennium BCE were supported by the new technological development i.e. smelting of iron. Iron smelting specially with the introduction of carburization and quenching methods, led to a stronger and better metal which could be used as weapon as well as implements. Although during the first phase, iron was treated as a valuable metal and symbolized monarchy but by the later phases, it had infiltrated deeper into everyday lives. Iron was a harder and tougher metal besides being widely available. In the beginning, iron was utilized to make weapons but as the technology further developed, better and harder tools could be made, which were used in agriculture as well. Along with spread of civilization, horse riding warrior class, money, towns, trade etc., iron brought in major transformations in the society. From weapons to agricultural tools, iron had far reaching implications for the society.

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**10.9 KEY WORDS**

<b>Carburization</b>	: process of heating iron in the presence of a carbon-bearing material such as charcoal in order to harden the metal.
<b>Meteor</b>	: small rocky or metallic bodies in outer space.
<b>Meteoric iron</b>	: iron found in meteorites.
<b>Ore</b>	: a natural rock or soil from which a metal or mineral can be extracted.



<b>Quenching</b>	: the process of heating and rapidly cooling a metal with water, oil, forced air or inert gases in order to obtain certain material properties such as hardening of the metal.
<b>Smelting</b>	: process of applying heat beyond the melting point to an ore to melt out a pure metal.
<b>Tempering</b>	: process of reheating iron to harden and strengthen it.
<b>Terrestrial iron</b>	: iron that is available on the upper layer of the earth.

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## 10.10 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS EXERCISES

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### Check Your Progress Exercise-1

- 1) Mention textual as well as archaeological evidences which points to the earliest use of iron. Add on the gradual process of use of iron. See Sub-sections 10.4.1 and 10.4.2.
- 2) Mention bloomery process and how carburization, quenching and tempering makes smelting of iron different from other metals such as copper. See Section 10.3

### Check Your Progress Exercise-2

- 1) Mention coming of the new states and how did they base their power on iron weapons and horses. See Section 10.6.
- 2) Refer to the 'Iron Letter' and other evidences such as availability of iron ore to elaborate on the Hittite supremacy. Also mention why do scholars object to this notion now. See Section 10.6.

### Check Your Progress Exercise-3

- 1) Mention the beginning of Iron Age in Europe. See section 10.7.
- 2) Mention the establishment of towns and the evidence of rich prosperous settlements. See Section 10.7.

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## 10.11 SUGGESTED READINGS

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## 10.12 INSTRUCTIONAL VIDEO RECOMMENDATIONS

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### Prehistoric Iron Smelting Demonstration

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KP4DjM3jBsw>

### Forgotten Empires: The Hittite Kingdom | Discovery History Channel

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5SmUAlFFwbk>

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## UNIT 11 NOMADIC GROUPS IN CENTRAL AND WEST ASIA\*

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### Structure

- 11.1 Objectives
- 11.2 Introduction
- 11.3 Geographical Features: Central Asia
- 11.4 Development of Nomadism in Central Asia
- 11.5 Nomads and Nomadic Empires in Central Asia
- 11.6 Bedouins: Nomads of West Asia
- 11.7 Major Nomadic Groups of Central Asia
  - 11.7.1 Scythians
  - 11.7.2 Xiongnu
  - 11.7.3 Huns
  - 11.7.4 Wusuns
  - 11.7.5 Turks
  - 11.7.6 Mongols
- 11.8 Political Structure
- 11.9 Nomadic Society
- 11.10 Nomadic Art
- 11.11 Summary
- 11.12 Key Words
- 11.13 Answers to Check Your Progress Exercises
- 11.14 Suggested Readings
- 11.15 Instructional Video Recommendations

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### 11.1 OBJECTIVES

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This Unit will discuss the major nomadic groups of Central and West Asia roughly from 7<sup>th</sup> century BCE. After reading this Unit, you will be able to:

- Explain the meaning of nomadism;
- Distinguish nomadism from pastoral nomadism;
- Trace the development of nomadism in Central and West Asia;
- Identify the major nomadic groups of Central and West Asia; and
- Learn about specific features of cultural, political and social life of major nomadic groups.

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## 11.2 INTRODUCTION

Nomadism, Pastoral Nomadism and Nomadic Empires are significant features of Central and West Asia. Nomadic tribes of Central Asia have always attracted the attention of historians and these nomads have received a special place in the history of nomadic world. Owing to its diverse landscape, Central Asia has been home to a varied population.

Sedentary way of life or sedentarism refers to the settlement of people in a particular place often by undertaking cultivation as a mode of living in that region. On the other hand, nomads are the group of people who roam from one place to the other. Basic factor for the adoption of nomadism lies in the environmental conditions of a region. In the case of Central Asia, nomadism coincided with sedentarism, for along with foraging certain nomadic groups adopted pastoral nomadism, and this paved the way for the establishment of Nomadic Empires.

The hunter gatherers of the last Bronze Age started to live in small groups of families, thus formation of tribes began. These tribes started keeping herds, for whom they had to move from one place to another in search of pastures<sup>1</sup>. Once these strong pastoral nomadic groups emerged they started attacking the sedentary societies which in turn resulted in the formation of the Nomadic Empires.

A.M. Khazanov explains that, 'Pastoral Nomadism is a food extracting economy where the entire community is dependent on its herds for the supply of food.' Thus, nomadism is entirely different from pastoral nomadism. Nomadism encompasses the group of people who used to roam from one place to another in search of food for their survival, whereas in pastoral nomadism, the nomads used to keep herds for their livelihood and migrated in search of pasture grounds for their herds. To fulfill all their requirements. The people of Central Asia adopted Pastoral Nomadism where they were completely depended upon their flocks for livelihood. For their herds they required extensive pasturage, so they remained in groups of four to five families. In different seasonal quarters, they moved from one place of pasturage to another place along with their herds. For the winter camp, they used to stay near the forests and in the mountainside valleys.

Nomadism is based on a single or a combination of economies which involve pastoralism, foraging, agriculture or trade. To understand the emergence of these features in the nomadic world, one must first learn about the circumstances that facilitated their development in Central and West Asia.

## 11.3 GEOGRAPHICAL FEATURES: CENTRAL ASIA

Central Asia covers parts of modern Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. Natural conditions and climate of the entire region is extremely varied. Territorially, western and northern parts are extensive plains; while southern and eastern area is mountainous. The mountain chain of Kopet Dag, ranging from southwest to Pamirs and Tien Shan in the east, divides Central Asia from other regions. Forest belt of Central Asia extended from 500 to 1000 miles (800 to 1600 kms.) in width and South belt with the steppes of Central Asia extended from Hungary to Mongolia. Thus, Central Asia had vast grasslands and was rich in islands, seas and lakes that aided in the development of Nomadic Empires.

<sup>1</sup> Pasture is a land that is covered with grass and other plants suitable for grazing animals, especially cattle or sheep.



**Map 11.1 : Central Asia**

**Credit:** Cacahuete

**Source:** Wikimedia Commons ([https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Map\\_of\\_Central\\_Asia.png](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Map_of_Central_Asia.png))

In the west it has the Caspian Sea, in the east Lake Balkhash, while Aral Sea lies in the center of the continent. There are two major river systems, namely, Amu Darya and Syr Darya – which joins at the Aral Sea. Aral Sea is surrounded in the south and west by two deserts – the Kara Kum (also known as Black Sands) and Kyzyl Kum (Red Sands). Kara Kum desert lies in northern Turkmenistan and received sufficient rainfall for the growth of plants and vegetables. Kyzyl Kum falls in Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and partly in Turkmenistan. This desert has plantation in the spring season and these vegetables and plants were most suited for supporting a sparse nomadic population.

In addition to these features, three oases are strung across the region – the Khivan oasis near the mouth of the Amu Darya, the Zarafshan (Zeravshan) Valley linking Samarkand and Bukhara, and the Ferghana Valley which is situated in the north of the Pamirs. These regions are surrounded by mountains and steppe (grasslands) which were of marginal use for agriculture but their rich pasture grounds proved suitable for the settlement of nomadic population.

The most striking geographical feature of Central Asia is its complete isolation from oceanic influence. Water is essential to life but Central Asia has been historically a geographical region that was short of water. Moreover, the high mountain peaks blocked the summer winds and monsoons from Central Asia. High pressure and winds in turn also blocked Mediterranean winter rain. It was only the summer westerly airflow from the Atlantic that reached Central Asia but that was also subject to variations. The wind did flow through a low pressure ‘gully’ between polar high pressure to the north and Saharan high pressure to the south but despite that rainfall in Central Asia was limited and erratic.

In this situation there were only two alternatives for humans: to stay at places where water was available or follow the course of water wherever it could be found. This, however, meant a complete abandonment of arable farming<sup>2</sup>. Nomadic tribes favoured

<sup>2</sup> Arable farming is the system of farming that concentrates on production of crops. In contrast, pastoral farming is a form of agriculture which aims at producing livestock.

a pastoral economy which enabled men to dispense with the toil of cultivating land and even establishing a permanent settlement in a particular place (Hambly, 1966: 10).

## 11.4 DEVELOPMENT OF NOMADISM IN CENTRAL ASIA

From the sixth to fourth millennium BCE, Central Asia was inhabited by the hunter-gatherers and fishing population. Around 2000 BCE, several communities began to use metal which paved the way for the onset of Bronze Age. The beginning of the formation of nomadic social structure in Central Asia dates back to the final phase of the Bronze Age (thirteenth to twelfth centuries BCE). In Bronze Age, these hunter-gatherers and fishing population begins to organize in groups (generally they were from the individual family) and moved together. This organization of hunter-gatherers in groups paved the way for the formation of the small tribes in the region of Central Asia. 'Here the culture of hunter and fishermen, who practiced some form of productive economy, were replaced during the second millennium B.C.E by herdsmen from the steppes and semi-deserts, who left behind them remains of the so-called steppe bronze' (Dani, 1993: 327). As early as 4500 BCE, small communities had developed permanent settlements in the region as they began to engage in agricultural practices including cattle herding. The huge territory of Kazakhstan, with particular geological conditions, was an important area for the spread of nomadism in Central Asia. The scattered nomadic groups used to keep herds of sheep, goats, horse and camels and used them for transport for the purpose of migration from one place to another in search of new pastures. This practice, of searching for new pastures by humans, is known as transhumance. These nomads domesticated horse, camels, sheep, cattle, yaks for their livestock and obtained food and clothing from them. These groups depended upon their sedentary neighbours for shelter, fuel, transport, grain and metal, which nomadic life could not provide them.

Nomadic culture begins with the domestication of horse in the steppe. Initially, horses were considered only a source of food and were kept for meat. The civilizations of Mesopotamia, Egypt and China were well acquainted with the horse, but they were not aware of horse riding. It was only around 4000 BCE that horse was used to pull chariots and wagons for transportation. This was the period in which humans began to domesticate horse. Wagons were used after the introduction of wheels by the Mesopotamians. From Mesopotamia, use of wagons turned its way towards Central Asia. Till the third millennium BCE, horses were used to pull chariots. Nomadic groups started using war chariots with wheels by 2000 BCE. The trend of using horse, around 2000 BCE, and shortage of water created a hurdle in practicing extensive agriculture in the region. Peter B. Golden (2011: 10) writes that, 'By 2000 BCE some subsistence agriculturalists, having become largely, if not wholly, dependent on their herds, engaged in seasonal migrations to establish pastures in the steppe. They became pastoral nomads'. The trend of using horse, around 2000 BCE, and shortage of water resulting in lack of irrigation facilities, all this created a hurdle in practicing extensive agriculture in the region. This was one of the major factors for the rise in pastoralism in Central Asia.

By the time the nomads of Central Asia got well acquainted with horse, nomads of the steppes of Eurasia had begun using iron seats while riding on horse. This period can be referred to as the period of 'Horse Culture' in the steppes. Horse riding with iron sheets was first introduced by the Scythians. Scythians had also introduced the saddle<sup>3</sup> for riding. Around the same time, Alan (the nomadic group which was already familiar with iron) had started using **stirrup**<sup>4</sup>.

<sup>3</sup> Seat fastened on the back of a horse.

<sup>4</sup> Loop or ring attached to both side of a horse's saddle to support a rider's foot while mounting and riding the horse.



Horseback riding brought with it a drastic change in the costumes of these nomadic groups and they started to wear trousers which helped in free use of the legs while riding. Scythians also started using leather boots. The use of leather shoes and boots began in Central Asia and gradually spread to other parts of the world. A horse rider's upper part of the body was covered with a coat. Scythians also used to wear a defensive armor which was used as a shield. The armor included a chest plate that was worn over the torso for protection. They also used helmets. All these articles were made of leather. With the realization of horse's strength and introduction of horse riding, the nomadic groups gave up the use of chariots and began to utilize individual horses for riding. Given the hilly terrain of the steppes, riding on horse (about 1700-1500 BCE), instead of a chariot, also brought ease and speed in movement (Golden, 2011: 11). Horse riding thus became an important factor that facilitated domination of the nomads in the region for the next several millennia (McGovern, 1939: 47). Along with horses, cattle, camel and yaks were utilized for transportation and enabled to meet the dairy needs of the nomads. Since each of these animals had different subsistence requirements, in terms of grass and grazing space, they were bred and proved useful in different parts of the steppe terrain.

Another important feature of the nomadic tribe was their settlements. Being nomadic tribes they did not build any permanent cottages to live in, instead relied on tents. The nomads of Central Asia built a peculiar tent dwelling which is known as *yurt*. Every group had several *yurts*, each with an accommodating capacity of about five people. The *yurts* were 'tents with a light wooden structure covered with skin or felt, which could easily be assembled and taken down' (Harmatta, 1994: 485). The specialty of *yurts*, as in any other tent, was that they could be disassembled and transported easily. In the nomadic groups, type of *yurt* described the state of that particular nomadic tribe. The *yurts* were subdivided according to principles of social hierarchy. 'The higher a nomad's status, the bigger was his *yurt*' (Adle et al., 2008: 121). These *yurts* were cylindrical, round in shape, with conical roofs. They were usually made of hides, wood and willow branches which were linked by leather crosspieces and covered with layers of skins or woven carpets. Framework of *yurts* consisted of a wooden lattice in six to ten separate divisions which could be widened out or pushed together for binding. Roof frame was made of light rafters for keeping the roof together in a ring above. The furniture inside the *yurts* was simple and covered with felt mats and carpets. In fact it seems likely that woven carpets in Central Asia were initially produced from felt.<sup>5</sup>



**Figure 11.1 : Yurt**

**Credit:** Aleksandr L. Kun, 1840-1888

**Source:** [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Syr\\_Darya\\_Oblast.\\_Kyrgyz\\_Yurt\\_WDL10968.png](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Syr_Darya_Oblast._Kyrgyz_Yurt_WDL10968.png)

<sup>5</sup> A type of thick cloth made by tightly pressing and packing a mass of wool, often also combined with other fibers.

We get the first reference of *yurts* from the writings of Herodotus who mentioned about the Scythians – the first nomadic group – in 449 BCE. In making a comparison of the Ancient Eastern Iranian Massagetae nomads with the Scythians, he wrote that, ‘a people without fortified towns, living as Scythians do in wagons which they take with them wherever they go, accustomed, one and all, to fight on horseback with bows and arrows and dependent for their food not upon their agriculture but upon their cattle’ (Herodotus, 1920: 47). Huns who established one of the great nomadic empires after destroying the Roman Empire, also contributed in the spread of *yurt culture* in Central Asia.

In sum, the basic features of nomadic pastoralism were grasslands, animals for subsistence and mobility. Together these could supply the fundamental human material needs of food, clothing and shelter. Food came from milk products and meat. The Central Asian nomadic groups’ clothing included sheepskin, spun and woven woolen goods, and leather or felt boots. Fur was a luxury which was made with layers of animal skins.

The nomads went where they expected to find grass. It was a hard life with constant battle against harsh environment and meteorological uncertainties. Moreover, nomadic pastoralism did not provide for a self-sufficient life. While meat-based diet was rich in protein, nomads needed grains to acquire carbohydrate element of diet. They also felt the importance of acquiring iron tools and weapons. The nomads thus depended on sedentary groups of farmers, artisans and merchants of Central Asia to meet and improve their subsistence and lifestyle needs. Whenever possible, the nomads bought the products from these sedentary groups and in other cases, used force to acquire for their needs. The latter became the cause of their conflicts with the sedentary societies.

Thus, the development of nomadism was due to climate change and simultaneously with the growing demand for livestock, that fulfilled the domestic requirements of nomadic people. Further, the introduction of new technologies like horse riding and wagons also played a vital role in the growth of nomadism in Central Asia.

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## **11.5 NOMADS AND NOMADIC EMPIRES IN CENTRAL ASIA**

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As explained in the previous Section, geography played an important role in the development of nomadism in Central Asia. Central Asia had scarcity of water which forced men to move in search of water for survival. This led to the development of nomadic pastoralists who concentrated on ‘moving herds from pastures to pastures around a fixed point, but moving the point itself, generally in a fixed cycle’ (Adshead, 1993: 15). The nomads always move towards pasture land.

The situation of Central Asia favoured a Pastoral Economy ‘which enabled men to dispense with the toil of cultivating the land and even permanent settlement in one location’ (Hambly, 1969: 7). Thus, the people of Central Asia adopted Pastoral Nomadism wherein they fully depended upon their flocks for livelihood.

Up to the third millennium, keeping herds by the native people of Centre Asia began and herding became their main profession. This horseback-riding population emerged in steppe-dwelling stock-herders during the second millennium BCE (Peter, 2011: 10). For the maintenance of these herds the native people started to move. At the same time, they began to use bows. The first stage in the development of Nomadism was when these nomadic groups started horse riding and keeping herds for their livelihood. The second stage was marked by the usage of iron weapons i.e. bows. These bows

helped them to fire in all directions while riding on horseback. With the use of weapons these nomads attained supremacy on the settled civilizations (Golden, 2011: 11).

Such nomads had complete mastery on warfare tactics. Usually the entire tribe was expert in horse riding and had perfected the skills of a warrior. In contrast, settled communities of the region usually had only a dozen trained soldiers. The superiority in warfare helped nomads to dominate the settled groups and thus, nomads were able to easily conquer the settled civilizations. In case if the opponent (settled groups) seemed stronger, the nomads used to leave the battlegrounds and preferred to run away. The warrior society of nomads was well organized and used to migrate in search of water and grass on a well-planned route and pastures.

The nomads were able to subsist indefinitely on milk products and meat, with clothing, shelter and equipment derived chiefly from animal products. True nomadic groups were those that did not take up farming and depended upon their sedentary neighbours for agricultural products. They used to procure farming goods and luxury items of consumption from the settled people. In return they provided them with goods (made by nomadic groups with the skin of animals) and services. Sedentary people imitated nomads in arms, ornaments, modes of fashion and tradition.

Pastoral nomads depended on sedentary farming. Central Asian nomads used to keep a variety of animals, although horse remained a primary symbol of their wealth and focal point of their way of life. Beckwith (2011) has remarked that nomads acquired the vast majority of their luxury goods through peaceful trade with the settled cultures. But if the settled people created any obstacle in this trading system then the nomads became furious and generally plundered their lands. The nomadic tribes required grain, weapons, tools and luxury textiles. Similarly, sedentary people required meat, wool, transport animals, fur, leather and security from the nomadic groups.

Nomads were always ready to fight and if at any stage they found themselves unsafe they plundered and looted the area occupied by the settlers. On the other hand, if the settlers defeated the nomads they were to get nothing in lieu of that victory. This is the reason that for thousands of years' nomads remained unconquered in battle. They plundered and made their supremacy upon the settled. Their relationship is very briefly explained by Beckwith who states that, 'The oasis (settled population) needed government and protection: the steppe (nomads) could provide both. The steppe lacked administration and education: the oasis could provide both' (Beckwith, 2011: 25).

Thus, Nomadic Empires were created by the nomads of the steppe after marking their supremacy over the settled people. When these nomadic groups were divided into a number of groups, they never had the power to stand against the agrarian settlements of the steppe but when they united into a single group they became the most effective enemy of the settled empires (Barfield, 2001: 12). Formation of Nomadic Empires developed in three stages in Central Asia, first is the tribal formation of clans without any strong leader. For getting the pasture facilities nomadic groups camped in small units, usually four or five families, who moved together. Second stage is about the development of tribes and chiefdom. These chiefdoms acted as the head of the tribal groups. Later on all these small nomadic groups got together under the supremacy of a strong nomadic group who led the military organization of the tribal confederation (group of different tribes). The third stage was the formation of Nomadic Empires after defeating settled civilization by these chiefdoms (Kradin, 2002: 370). In these tribal unification almost all members of the nomadic groups were strong military men and experts in warrior attacks. So it was very easy for the nomadic groups to attack the sedentary societies of the steppes. Moreover, the use of horses made them strong enough to run

fast and attack their enemy. These Nomadic groups had some specific features by which they were able to establish a unified Empire. Firstly, these nomadic groups were self-dependent, autonomous and had a strong bondage within the tribal community. Secondly, all the pastoralists were economically independent and personally free. All this helped tribal groups strengthen their power and facilitated the establishment of nomadic empires. Thus these nomadic Empires can be defined as, ‘nomadic society organized on the military-hierarchical principle, occupying quite large area and exploiting nearby territories, as a rule, by external forms of exploitation (robbery, war and indemnity, non-equivalent trade, laying under tribute)’ (Kradin, 2010: 23).

The Nomadic empires began first by conquering other nomads, incorporating them into tribal unions. Then they made a strong tribal group after clubbing the same nomadic clans and groups. That particular nomadic group who got superiority over the others attacked the adjoining settled people. ‘The key to the nomad’s success was a singular military advantage, i.e. horse cavalry, and an imperial state organization that distributed revenue to subject nomad groups instead of collecting it’ (Barfield, 2001: 13). Since the nomadic groups were illiterate and did not acquire the skills of irrigation, commerce or urban system, they completely relied on the settled societies for advice in matters of administration. Moreover, while the nomads established their supremacy over the settled population, they adopted the cultural and political elements of the settled and the conquered civilizations.

The military superiority made these nomads strong enough to get political domination in the region. By getting political power these nomadic groups were able to establish Nomadic Empires in the region (Khazanov, 1994: 25). Thus, nomads remained successful in establishing a strong nomadic empire because of their singular military advantage, horse cavalry, and imperialistic state organization – in which revenue was distributed among all the nomadic groups. In their imperialistic leadership, ruling lineage was at the first stage and governors were at the second stage who looked after the tribal leadership and commanded armies in the war. At the third level of the organization were the local tribal leaders (Barfield, 2001: 14).

In the sixth and seventh century, the Hephthalites were the most powerful nomadic group of Central Asia and almost the entire region of Central Asia was under the supremacy of this group. However, by the tenth and eleventh century, several powerful states including that of Samanids, Seljuk Turks and Khwarezm Empire had emerged powerful in this region.

### Check Your Progress Exercise-1

- 1) State the geographical features of Central Asia that aided the development of nomadism in the region.

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- 2) Distinguish between nomadism and pastoral-nomadism.

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- 3) Assess the development and importance of horse culture in Central Asia.

- 4) What were the specific features of nomadic empires?

## 11.6 BEDOUINS: NOMADS OF WEST ASIA

**Bedouins** were nomadic groups that spread over the pastures of the Arabian Peninsula. Arabian Peninsula is a region in Southwest Asia. It is one of the driest and hottest regions. It lies between the Red Sea and Persian Gulf. The region received little rain and is almost covered by deserts. The land once formed natural continuation of the Sahara which is a sandy belt and covers the areas of Persia and the Gobi Desert. The northern boundary of the Arabian Peninsula is an imaginary line 'drawn due east from the head of the Gulf of al-Aqabah in the Red Sea to the Euphrates' (Hitti, 1937: 14). The southern sides of the Peninsula are the fringes of Tihamah, Najd, and the North Central Plateau. The land of Hatti divided the inhabitants of the area into two main nomadic groups, i.e. Bedouins and the settled folk. Livestock and herding camels was the principal traditional means of livelihood of Bedouins.

The Arab nomads, known as the Bedouins, occupied interior of the Arabian Peninsula, Southern Syria and Iraq. They used camels for transportation as the region of Arab is fully deserted. They were also partially sedentary as in several areas they cultivated for a year and then moved on to another place. Sheep and goat were domesticated in West Asia since the Neolithic period and with the passing of time skills in sheep breeding were learnt and enhanced. For this, grazing grounds were required and thus, the Bedouins started to move in search of grazing land along with their cattle and camels were domesticated by the Bedouins around the eleventh century BCE.

<sup>6</sup> Region on the southern end of the Arabian Peninsula.

According to scholars such as Coon, the camel-breeding Bedouins could have been derived from the cattle-breeding people called Gara of Hadhramaut<sup>6</sup>. Owing to the resource crunch of the mountains, the Gara are said to have been forced to move north into the desert where they could neither subsist on cattle breeding or agriculture and thus, took upon the breeding of camels which was well suited to the desert environment. Another view regarding the origins of Bedouins opines that they might have evolved from the Qahtani of the Hadhramauti highlands. The term Qahtani is used for Arabs who originated from the southern region of Arabian Peninsula. They were camel breeders and also monopolized the caravan trade. The Qahtanis traced their descent from one Ya'bub ibn Qahtan ibn Hud, presumed to be one of the monotheistic Prophets.

An important feature of the Bedouins in West Asia was their relationship with a group of people known as Sleybs. The Sleybs are said to have evolved from a tribe of hunting-gathering nature in Arabia. The distinguishing feature of Sleyb way of life from that of the Bedouins was that they did not live off by herding camels or other animals. Rather they subsisted as wood-workers, cattle surgeons or traders. By virtue of the crafts and skills of Sleybs, the Bedouins often depended on the Sleybs to acquire products necessary for camel-herding in the desert.

Although the culture of Central Asian Nomads was related to the West Asian Nomads, yet the Nomads of the Central Asia were different from the ones belonging to West Asia. In comparison to the West Asian, pastoral nomads of Central Asia were self-sufficient. Among the Central Asian tribes, the cult animal was horse and among the Bedouins camel breeding was common. Lance was the prime weapon of camel breeding Bedouins. Nomads of the Arab used to live in the hair tents<sup>7</sup> while the nomads of the central Asia lived in their *yurts*. They provided an ideal shelter in the desert.

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## 11.7 MAJOR NOMADIC GROUPS OF CENTRAL ASIA

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Some of the nomadic groups who were able to establish their empires in Central Asia were Scythians, Huns, Turks and the Indo-Europeans such as the Tocharians, Persians, Yuezhi, Wusun, and Mongols.

### 11.7.1 The Scythians

Scythia was the name given by Ancient Greeks to the region lying in the north-east of Europe and northern coast of Black Sea<sup>8</sup>. Scythians were the first tribal group who inhabited the banks of the Black Sea. After Scythians this area was occupied by the Huns. The part of Eurasia that lies between River Danube and the mountains of Tian Shan, denoted as the Altai mountain range, and where the Bronze Age began, was also known as the land of the Scythians. Between 750 to 700 BCE, Cimmerians – a nomadic group believed to be of Indo-European origin – were dispossessed (Grousset, 1970: 6) from the steppes of southern Russia by the Scythians who came from Turkestan and Western Siberia and established their sway in the region. Scythians trace their descent from the Iranians and they adopted a nomadic life in the steppes of the Iranian country i.e. present-day Russian Turkestan.

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<sup>7</sup> Hair tents are the tents of the Bedouins made by the wool of the goat and sheep hair. Goat and sheep hairs were spun into strands and then it was woven as per the width and length of the panels of the tents.

<sup>8</sup> For more information on the Scythians, one can refer to <http://blog.britishmuseum.org/introducing-the-scythians>.



The strongest king of Scythia was King Ateas (429-339 BCE) who established his rule after uniting various tribal communities. Scythians established a strong empire in southern Russia and Crimea i.e. Ukraine (Crimean Peninsula lying between Black Sea and Sea of Azov). This empire survived from fifth century BCE to second century BCE.

The Scythian men are known to adore a beard. They wore tunics and wide trousers with pointed caps that were meant to protect their ears from high pressure winds of the plains. Horse was their companion and bow was their primary weapon. These Scythians had no houses. They used to stay in wagons (four wheeled vehicles pulled by horse or cattle) which were small carts with four wheels. These wagons served as their moving houses. They moved together in huge groups which were well organized and had helping staff in their wagons. It seemed like a travelling city with wagons accompanying them during migration. Thus, for their seasonal mobility in the steppes, apart from the horse, the Scythians used carts and covered wagons. In fact, these wagons were the *yurts* of the tribal group. When they stayed at a place, these wagons served as *yurts* (stable hut on ground) for the nomadic community. Their wealth of gold remained in plaques and carpets, which were unique in Scythian art, and were kept in safe custody.

The Scythian tribes lived in complete independence, but they developed a well-organized 'state' system that lasted for several centuries. This 'state' was divided into six major provinces which were further subdivided into a number of *nomes* or districts which were governed by a 'nomarch' or governor. Istvan Zimonyi (2016) explains that although we do not get any evidence about the provinces of the Scythians, *nomes* (districts) could be different nomadic groups or tribes which were incorporated by the Scythians. They were an important part of the military organization of the Scythians and military leaders of all these tribal groups used to gather to make their tribute for the entire nomadic group at large. The Scythian tribes were largely feudal in terms of composition.

Between 750-700 BCE, the Scythians moved from the Turgai region and the Ural River into southern Russia where they drove out the Cimmerians. The Scythians remained lords of the Russian steppe from the seventh to the third century BCE. They crossed the Derbent Gateway and came into contact with the Assyrian Empire. Scythians became a threat for the neighboring civilization of Persians, Greeks and Mesopotamians. They always indulged in conflicts with the Achaemenid Empire. The western Scythians were defeated by Macedonia in fourth century BCE and eastern Scythians were attacked by Xiongnu, Yuechi, and Wusun in the second century BCE. Afterwards they migrated towards South Asia where they become Indo-Scythians (the term used to refer to the Scythian [*saka*] who migrated into parts of Central, Northern and Western Asia from second to fourth century CE). In the second century BCE, Scythians of Turkistan degenerated by several attacks launched by other groups like Xiongnu and Yuechi. And ultimately, they were pushed out by the Huns who moved towards the western world.

### 11.7.2 Xiongnu

Xiongnu, also known as Asiatic Huns, was another nomadic tribe of Central Asia, that lived between third century BCE and late first century CE in the Mongolian Plateau i.e. in the modern day territories of Mongolia, southern Siberia, western Manchuria<sup>9</sup> and modern Chinese provinces of inner-Mongolia. The Xiongnu are believed by some to be of uncertain origin while others argue that the group comprised of several nomadic groups belonging to various ethnicities. The Xiongnu emerged as the first unified empire

<sup>9</sup> A region in Northeast Asia.

of the nomadic people. China at the time of Xiongnu was divided into several states (Qin, Zhao, Yan, Qi, Lu, Wei, Han, Chu) so it was easy for Xiongnu to conquer different states. They started continuously attacking Northern China throughout the fourth and third centuries BCE.

To save themselves from this nomadic group, the king of China, Chin-Shi Hwang Ti (also known as the First sovereign emperor of Chin; 259-210 BCE) united the great part of China into a single kingdom and to prevent the Asiatic Hun invasions in China he constructed the Great Wall of China. He remained successful in driving away the Asiatic Huns from Aurdun and Shensi. Touman (220-209 BCE), was the strongest ruler of this tribal community, who united all other nomadic groups of Mongolia and invaded Northern China. Northern China had sufficient pastures for this pastoral group and they concentrated on strengthening their positions in the region. Touman's son Maodun (209-174 BCE) proved even more powerful than his father. He defeated *Yuezhi* in 203 BCE. His son Jiyu (174 BCE) was comparatively weak, after whom Xiongnu power declined.

Xiongnu's political organization was based on full-fledged hierarchy in which the emperor had control over the other small leaders of the group. In the eastern and western regions, there were four governorships which followed the rules as established by the 'central' government. Though, the kings of Xiongnu wielded power, the four governors formed very much part of the empire and they were predominantly the family members of Xiongnu. They used to pay tribute to the king and governing body of the 'central empire'. In 129 BCE, Chinese attacked Xiongnu and the strong empire of Xiongnu split into two separate empires i.e. Eastern and Western Xiongnu. Western Xiongnu Empire was destroyed further by the Han (a Chinese dynasty; 206 BCE-220 CE) attack. However, Eastern Xiongnu retained power until 31 BCE and upto 18 BCE, they further extended their sway over a vast area from Manchuria upto Kashghar. Finally, Han rulers of China subjugated them in 216 CE. As a result, Xiongnu drove out the Yuechi tribe from the area of Xinjiang and Gansu. Following this development, Yuechi migrated towards eastern Kazakhstan. Yuechi were creators of the great Kushana kingdom which stretched from Tarim basin in north to northwestern India in the south.

Kushan Empire was created by the Yuechi tribe (135 BCE to 375 CE) in Bactria region in northern Afghanistan. Yuechi were living in the area of Dunhuang i.e. modern Chinese province of Gansu. From there they were defeated by Xiongnu and forced to move towards southwest beyond Dayuan where they conquered the people of Daxia and became the Kushans of Iranian, Afghan and Indian history.

### 11.7.3 Huns

The *Huns* were a nomadic group who emerged prominent in the fourth and fifth century CE. Their definite origin is unknown but they are believed to have originated somewhere between the eastern edge of the Altai Mountains and Caspian Sea. Huns were mounted, meat eating and booted warriors who constantly attacked the Chinese<sup>10</sup>. Huns used to keep horse, camel, sheeps, and donkeys amongst other animals. Scythian lands of Tyanshan and Altai (now occupied by China and Soviet Union) were merged into the pastures of the Huns. They were experts in horsemanship and their warrior nature gave them a remarkable niche throughout Europe.

<sup>10</sup> For further details on the Hun Attacks and illustrative Map please refer to: <https://www.enchantedlearning.com/history/asia/huns/>



Map 11.2 : Extent of Attila's Empire

Credit: Slovenski Volk

Source: <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Huns450.png>

While in China this dominant empire was known as the Hsiung-nu, the Romans and Indians addressed them as the Huns. Huns became a strong group in the third century CE. At the end of the third century CE, the Huns emerged stronger and powerful on account of their rising prosperity from cattle breeding, development of iron equipment and strengthening of their military skills.

Till 454 CE, Huns were the only group of pastoralists who used to roam from one place to another, without having any strong king. In 432 CE, the Hun chief Rua or Rugila (d. 434 CE) united Hun groups and strengthened the tribe. Hun invasions were the primary reason behind the fall of the Roman Empire during 376 to 476 CE. After the death of Rua, his two nephews Bleda (c. 390-434 CE) and Attila (c. 434-453 CE) assumed power. They entered into peace treaty with the eastern Roman Empire in which the Roman emperor agreed to double the amount of subsidies which they used to pay to the Huns to protect their empire from their attacks.

One of the specific features of the nomadic groups of Central Asia was that they always forced their settled counterparts to serve them via subsidies (gold and other essential things) for protecting their kingdom from their barbaric attacks. Huns also made their supremacy over China on similar lines. Huns used to plunder China and looted its towns and villages in the south. Huns' power reached at the peak in the 450 CE under their king Attila. After Attila, Hun Empire rapidly disintegrated, as his sons were not able to keep the empire intact.

The administration of the tribe was democratic in nature and the chief had no right to claim a special status for himself. Hun children were trained in grazing cattle, riding a horse and slinging their small bows to slew rats, jackals and rabbits. For their food, Huns relied on milk and meat. Their clothes were made of leather and felt. The warriors were the most respected members of the tribe and they received the food of their choice.

Huns hold importance in the history of the Far East as well. By the fifth century CE, Huns had occupied Turkistan. After the occupation of Turkistan, Huns came in contact with the Sassanid Empire of the Persians. This occupation of Turkistan became the cause of conflict between the Persians, Huns and the Hephthalites. In this fight for power, Sassanid's strong emperor Peroz I was killed in 484 CE. After this victory, the Huns forced the Persians to pay a heavy tribute in order to keep their territory safe from the Hun invasions.

Following this, Huns spread far and wide and by virtue of their expanse, they emerged as the strongest Eurasian Tribe. One of their descendant groups, the Magyars are still found in modern-day Hungary.



**Figure 11.2 : Huns in battle with the Alans**

**Credit:** Peter Johann Nepomuk Geiger (1805-1880)

**Source:** <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Hunnen.jpg>

The movement of Huns was restricted by the Gepids<sup>11</sup>, who were also brave warriors, and like the Huns could shoot their arrows from horseback. Ardaric, the king of Gepidea, defeated the Huns at the battle of Medao in 454 CE.

#### **11.7.4 Wusuns**

Like most other nomadic groups of the steppe, Wusuns were nomadic herdsmen who roamed from one place to another in search of water. Their origin is not clear but it is assumed that they were originally from Europe and at times, are considered an offshoot of Scythians. They lived between the Qilian Mountains (present province of China, Qinghai) and Dunhung (Gansu, located in the northwest of China). They occupied the region extending from Carpathians to the Kokonor. The history of Wusuns can be

<sup>11</sup> East German tribe in the territory of Romania, Hungary, and Serbia.



traced from the Bronze Age. Wusun territory was surrounded by the Fargana valley, which was famous for its horse breed and extremely prosperous for having the Silk Road. Thus, both Xiongnu and Chinese were interested in keeping relations with the Wusun. In 80 BCE, Xiangnu attacked and defeated Wusuns. In retaliation in 72 BCE Wusun chief Kunmi sought the Han assistance and defeated the Xiangnu. This strengthened Wusun's power and Kunmi controlled Yarkand.

In the west, Yuezhi got involved in a war with the Wusuns. Yuezhi killed the Wusun king Nandoumi (d. 173 BCE) and destroyed Wusuns completely. In 162 BCE Xiongnu defeated Yuezhi and they forced Yuezhi to move to the west. Liejiaomi, prince of the Wusuns, survived in the war and was adopted by the king of Xiongnu. This gives us an impression that Xiongnu and Wusun had cordial relations. However, they emerged most powerful in the second and third century CE – the period that coincided with the spread of Hun power and it was the time when Xiongnu and Yuezhi were involved in a long-drawn war.

When the prince of Wusun, Liejiaomi grew strong, he took the force of Xiongnu and attacked the Yuezhi in Ili Valley in 133-132 BCE. Wusun prince defeated Yuezhi (133 BCE) and forced them to migrate towards Sogdia, from Sogdia Yuezhi expanded into South Asia. This victory raised the power of Wusuns. They owned a huge area and controlled the silk route. Chigu, the first nomad royal city was established by Wusun lying on the Silk Road. They were close allies of Hans and shared cordial relation with Han China, and were the main suppliers of horses within their territories. In 115 BCE, Han ruler Zhan Qian sent an ambassador to Liejiaomi Wusun and offered Han Princess Xijun in marriage. With the downfall of the Han dynasty in China, the power of Wusuns also declined and slowly they disappeared from the history of Central Asia, probably they got subsumed into the later Hephthalites. The last mention of the Wusuns in Chinese sources comes from 436 CE as having settled in Pameer mountains when a Chinese envoy was sent to Wusun and they reciprocated.



**Map 11.3 : Tribes of Central Asia in 200 CE**

**Credit:** Thomas A. Lessman

**Source:** Wikimedia Commons ([https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Asia\\_200ad.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Asia_200ad.jpg))

### 11.7.5 Turks

In the period between c. 500 CE to c. 1500 CE nomadic groups were involved in incessant warfare. During this time, a strong nomadic group, Turks emerged. Turks are said to be the descendants of a small tribe of horsemen who originated in the Altai Mountains. The Altai Mountain region is situated between the Gobi Desert and the Siberian Plain. The word 'Turk' is derived from the Chinese words 'tu-kin' which means 'forceful' and 'strong', hence denoting strong people. Later this word was used to identify the union of tribes called Turks (Roudik, 2007: 24). Altai Turks, thus, were considered as brave and strong, who were united by Bumin.

Bumin (551-552 CE) was the strongest chieftain of this tribal group, who subjugated all the tribes of the Mongolian steppe and established a strong Turkish Empire in the region. With their far flung domain, the Turks established a strong Turkic empire that remained a dominant force for about two centuries in Central Asia (Roudik, 2007: 37). Turks established their Empire in the sixth century CE which stretched from the present-day Mongolia to the northern frontier of China to the Black Sea and also held control over the Silk trade route between China and the West. This tribal group became economically strong by getting the control of Silk trade route and their stable economic condition helped them to establish a permanent settlement in the region of Central Asia. They used to raid and plunder the Chinese border. The Chinese tried to please them by sending gifts and giving Chinese princesses in marriage to Turkish nobles.

The Turks were the first Central Asian group who left written records. They communicated in the Turkic language. The oldest existing Turkic written records come in the form of seventh century inscriptions found on the funeral stones near the Orkhon River in Mongolia. The Orkhon inscriptions provide significant information about the internal stresses of a pastoral nomadic state that, at the height of its power, stretched from the border of China to Byzantine.

Under Nivar (581-587 CE), there was a rift among the Turks and they got divided into Eastern and Western Turks. The Western Turkish Empire got destroyed by the internal conflict that arose among the clans. The Orkhon inscriptions state the reason for this internal discord:

Because of discord between the nobles and the commoners, because of the cunning and deceitfulness of the Chinese who set against each other younger and elder brothers, nobles and commoners the Turk people caused the disintegration of the empire that had been their own, [and] caused the ruin of the *kaghan* who had been their *kaghan*.

*History of Civilization of Central Asia, Vol. III, 1994: 331*

The Second Turkish Empire was established in 630 CE by the Eastern Turkish tribes in the north of Ordos and Shansi. Till 681, this Empire did not reach its full zenith. In 687, Ilterish (682-691 CE) conquered central and northern Mongolia. Ilterish established the *kaghan* traditional structure of Turks in which *kaghan* controlled the state and emerged as the head of the tribal group. Kyrgyz, one of the nomadic groups of Turks, remained in power till 840 CE.

Turks had their pastures situated on the Tu-chin Mountains. They visited their pastures every year and offered sacrifices at the time of waxing moon. Their favourite drink was *koumiss*, which was fermented liquor prepared from mare's milk. Turkish nomads followed a democratic procedure in choosing a successor.



In the early period of its history, this Turkic group of nomads embraced Buddhism<sup>12</sup> but later on they adopted Islam. Despite adopting these religions, the Turks did not give up their tribal funerary customs like placing the corpse in front of the dead man's tent where each one of his children, grandchildren and other kinsmen would come and present a horse or a sheep. As part of this custom, grief was expressed by slashing off one's face with a knife so that the tears were mixed with blood. Stones were set up on the graves as symbols of mourning and the number of stones placed on the grave denoted the number of the enemy slain by the dead warrior.

Thus, the Turks created first Central Asian transcontinental Empire from Manchuria to the Black Sea. They were later incorporated into the Mongol Empire.

### 11.7.6 Mongols

The Mongols were a tribal union who inhabited the steppe of Central Asia in the late twelfth century. In this group of tribal union some were steppe nomads, while others indulged in hunting and fishing. They were organized in different lineages and clans, but were united as a tribal group. Ata Malik Juvaini (1226-1283 CE)<sup>13</sup> in his work describes that Mongols before the rise of Chinggis Khan (1206-1227 CE)<sup>14</sup> were devoid of a ruler, were disunited and constantly fought with one another. 'Some of them regarded robbery and violence, immorality and debauchery as deeds of manliness and excellence'. They dressed in the 'skins of dogs and mice' which together with 'other dead things' and *koumiss*, formed their diet (Golden, 2011: 77).

Mongols used to graze their flocks and herds beside the Onon and Kerulen rivers in Mongolia. Different tribal groups were scattered in the Mongolian region at that time. North of the Mongols were *Naiman* (tribal group) who extended to the Irtysh River in Siberia. South of Mongolia were *Tatar* (tribal group) and *Karaites* lay in the West. North of the *Karaites* and the *Naimans* were other tribes, of which the *Oirots* (or *Oyirad*) and the *Merkits* (or *Mergid*) scattered in the south of Baikal region were the most important (Golden, 2011: 77). All these tribes (*Tatar*, *Karaites*, *Naiman*, *Oirots* and *Merkits*) are collectively designated as 'Mongols' after their unification under the Mongol Khan. *Khan* was the designation of the tribal chieftains and the leader of all the tribes was *khaqan* (Hambly, 1969: 87). The Mongol tribe was formed after the unification of Turkic and Mongol tribes in the year 1206 under Chinggis Khan.

Unification of Mongols, was started before Chinggis Khan. Qaidu, who was a tribal leader of Mongols, in the late eleventh and early twelfth centuries was the first leader who started to gather all tribal groups under the leadership of Mongols. Qaidu's grandson Qabul (probably first half of twelfth century) was the first *khan* who ruled over different Mongol tribes (Golden, 2011: 77).

'Under Qabul Khan in the first half of the twelfth century, the Mongols of the Three River region became powerful enough to be united into a state-like confederation (*ulus*).'

*Asimor, 1999: 251*

Thus, Qabul started the unification of tribes known as *ulus*. This unification was disintegrated in the late twelfth century due to the constant war between Tatars and Mongols. This conflict arose among the Mongols and Tatar due to the intervention of

<sup>12</sup> Taghpar (572-581 CE), embraced Buddhism. Taghpar's brother Nivar (581-587 CE) also promoted Buddhism.

<sup>13</sup> A Persian historian who wrote an account of the Mongol Empire.

<sup>14</sup> Genghis Khan as spelled in Turkic.

the Jin dynasty's rulers of China. Chinese rulers were not in favour of the unification of the tribal groups as they were always apprehensive of their attack on China. Thus, rulers of the Jin dynasty of China (1115-1234 CE) were trying to divide the tribal union of Mongolian groups and they succeeded in taking the favour of *Tatars*. *Tatars* (one of the strong tribal group of Mongolia) helped Jin to capture Ambhaghai Khan – Qabul's successor, who was killed by the Chinese in 1160 CE. This led to war between Mongols and *Tatars* (Golden, 2011: 77).

Under this background of conflicts among tribal groups of Mongolia, Temujin/Chinggis Khan (1206-1227 CE) was born in the aristocratic family of the Mongols in 1167 CE. He subdued inter-tribal warfare and then expanded the Mongol dominions across Central Asia. *Kurultai* (tribal council) in Mongolia appointed Temujin as their leader in 1206 CE and named him as Genghis Khan (Universal leader). He subjugated the ruler of Jin dynasty of China in 1211. Then he attacked Iran (1223), Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. He also defeated the tribal union of Tangut (1226) of northern China. The Mongol Empire was the largest nomadic empire in the Central Asian History. It was the first Nomadic Empire which included the tribe as an entity (as unifications of all Mongol tribes) and encompassed many regions (China and other parts of inner Asia). The Mongol Empire, thus founded by Genghis Khan in 1206, covered the territories from Southeast Asia to Eastern Europe. After establishing his territorial supremacy, Genghis Khan prepared a code of law for his tribal group which was known as *Yasa*. The *Yasa* was a collection of mandatory decrees to be obeyed by the members of the community without questioning. It also reflected upon the Mongol customs and manners of life.

The Mongol supremacy in the thirteenth century was a significant victory of the nomadic people over the sedentary world. The Mongols governed much of Central Asia for at least another century and their Turkic speaking descendants dominated the region for another century and a half.

### Check Your Progress Exercise-2

- 1) Who were the Bedouins?

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- 2) Give a brief account of the administrative set up of the Scythians in 50 words.

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- 3) Write a short note on the Huns in about 50 words.

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- 4) Under what circumstances some nomadic groups were able to establish empires?

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- 5) Who was Genghis Khan? Briefly describe his territorial conquests.

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## 11.8 POLITICAL STRUCTURE

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The greatest confederation of nomads (Xiongnu, Turks and Mongols) arose in the steppe of Central Asia. The political power of the head of the tribal leader can be seen in the writing of Maudun, the Xiongnu king to the Chinese Emperor Venti (169-56 BCE): 'I have united all the Tatar tribes who can bend the bow on horseback into one kingdom. I have destroyed the Yuchis and the Turbugtais, Lannor and twenty-six kingdoms surrounding it are under my control. If you do not want that Hung-Nu should cross the Great wall you should not allow the Chinese to come near the wall. See also that my messenger returns safely and is not kept as a captive' (Sankrityayana, 1964: 19). These nomads were constantly engaged in conflict with the settled empire of China. There was conflict between Xiongnu and the Chinese ruling dynasty of Qin/Han; nomadic Turks and Sui/Tang of China; nomadic Mongols and the ruling dynasty of Song. When these groups were scattered, they could not stand against the strong empire of China. But when united under a strong leader, they always stood as the greatest enemy of China. This was due to their strong political organization.

These strong nomadic groups of the steppe established a well organized political system. Political structure of the nomadic groups had three basic levels of organization, the centre was controlled by the ruling lineage of the tribe; at the second level were the governors who supervised various tribal groups and also commanded the armies. At the third level of organization were local tribal leaders of different groups. They were the leaders of their tribal community and discharged their duties according to the orders of the *Khaqan* of the tribe.

State power among the nomadic tribes of Central Asia remained weak until the time of Genghis Khan. Genghis Khan introduced several new features to the nomadic set-up of steppes. Political organization of the tribes was based on the clan composed of several families of the same blood. Leader of the political group was decided by the

assembly of the leaders of these clans known as *Kurultai*. *Kurultai* decided political position of the leader of the tribal group. *Yasa* was the code of law adopted by the tribal organization. *Yasa* helped in the governance of society and dictated the legal behaviour of the Nomadic Empire. Nomadic tribes led their lives under the leadership of their chiefs and these chiefs possessed a great deal of power over the fellow tribesmen. These heads of the tribes used to divide the plunder among the warriors after a successful battle. They used to resolve disputes and hence, acted like judge.

## 11.9 NOMADIC SOCIETY

The nomads were an important and integral part of the Eurasian society. They established a characteristic economy, with highly developed techniques of livestock-rearing, grazing of herds, nomadic movements and various forms of crafts and warfare. They also had a unique and highly developed social structure based on the dual system of individual ownership of herds and communal ownership of pasture lands. Nomadic society was mobile in two senses: first, the internal mobility of the society itself and, second, its external mobility, the capacity to execute rapid, far-reaching movements, both peaceful and military. As stated earlier, nomads usually lived close to the oasis, where settled agriculturists used to lead urban life. Thus, there were interactions among them, i.e. the nomads and settled societies of the steppe. This relationship of alliance included marriage relations that existed at some places whereas they were seen to be engaged in war at the other places. Their relationship has been studied by Barfield (2001) and is of the opinion that the Nomads of the steppe adopted *the outer frontier strategy* towards the settled empire of China. He explains that:

The outer frontier strategy had three major elements: violent to terrify the Chinese court, the alternation of war and peace to increase the amount of subsidies and trade privileges granted by the Chinese, and deliberate refusal to occupy Chinese land that they would then have to defend

**Barfield, 2001: 15**

In response to this strategy Emperor of China also adopted three policies:

(1) respond defensively, fortify the frontier, and ignore the nomad's demands (2) respond aggressively, raise an expeditionary cavalry force, and attack the nomads on the steppe, (3) appease the nomads with expensive peace treaties that provided them with subsidies and border markets

**Barfield, 2001: 16**

Thus both shared the bond, although it was only for the sake of fulfillment of their own needs, but both these communities remained busy in working out the relationship with each other.

The primary concern of nomadic society was to find grazing ground for their cattle. Nomadic society was never troubled by the problems of the disputes over sovereignty, jurisdiction and property-rights which played an important role in the history of settled civilizations. However, in the nomadic society there was no restriction to the exercise of unrestrained tyranny by the ruler. In practice, tyranny could only be curbed by tradition and strength of the clan feeling of social hierarchy and fear of revolt.

### Social Structure of the Nomadic Groups

Steppe society was based on the moveable culture of different tribal groups. The migration cycle was the essential part of the nomadic culture. Among the tribal groups there was inequality on the basis of strength of the animals and human groups. All the articles of domestic needs of these nomadic people were made of wood and leather. In the society both males and females shared equal responsibilities.

The male's responsibilities included grazing the cattle as well as making bows and arrows and other tools. The rest of the time they busied themselves with hunting, archery and military campaigns. All other labour fell to the women - housework, milking and preparing other products from livestock and raising the children. When the men were absent, the women had to take on the entire burden.

Kradin, 2018: 2

In the Scythian society, women were valued on parity with men. In Scythian society there were great women leaders who indulged in political affairs. For example, in 530 BCE, Persians invaded the territory of Massagetae Scythians under the leadership of Cyrus.<sup>15</sup> In this war Cyrus defeated Scythia and Cyrus killed the army commander of Scythian named Spargapises. Tomyris, the Scythian Queen, then took charge of the army and revenged the Persians for the death of her son, Spargapises. In one of the most famous grisly stories of antiquity, Tomyris ordered the head of Cyrus the Great, the Persian King, to be cut off and placed into a wineskin filled with his blood. The bravery and determination of Tomyris is highly praised even today. As evidence to her popularity, today the female name, Tomyris, is common in Kazakhstan as a symbol of national pride (For illustration of Queen Tomyris of Sythiaa receiving the Head of Cyrus, King of Persia, See: [http://www.wga.hu/html\\_m/p/preti/tomyris.html](http://www.wga.hu/html_m/p/preti/tomyris.html)).

The Scythians had a tradition of burying their dead with their belongings. The *Kurgana* graves throw light on the lifestyle of the Scythians. The items found in the *Kurgana* grave indicate the social status of the dead. In *Issyk Mound*, Scythian king was buried together with his long sword, a short dagger, clay jars, wooden trays with meat, and precious bowls of gold and silver, which indisputably signify his wealth. In other Scythian graves, there were more modest items which were buried with the dead men. This indicates that there were social stratifications within the Scythian society.

Hun society possessed its own customary legal system. According to this, drawing of a sword was punishable by death and theft was punished by confiscation not only of the thief's property but also that of his family. Minor crimes were punished by cuts on the face. The Hun society can be labelled 'proto-feudal'. As in a feudal society, fiefs of land were passed down to the feudal lord of the empire but in the Hun society, people were passed down. As the Huns conquered more and more territories, members of the royal houses of conquered states were also given to the people of the Hun Empire who helped them to rule. Foreign captives were often enslaved and sold to the Roman slave dealers. The Huns did not have Hun slaves. A slave owned by a Hun family was often well treated and were allowed to buy their freedom or earn it by fighting on their master's side in combat. Hunting and archery played a major role in the daily life of Huns. They actively encouraged their children to learn hunting from an early age. The Hun women were not only remarkable horse-riders but expert archers, using bows and arrows, and assisted their husbands in defending children and old people from enemy attacks. On the wall of the Talas fortress (36 BCE) they fought valiantly along with their menfolk and against the Romans and Chinese troops, and were the last to leave their posts. The participation of women in defence and training of children to handle the bow-and-arrow were evidently indicated by the necessities of life. This helped nomadic Huns, who were a numerically small group, to defend their independence. The Huns worshipped the sun, the moon and other heavenly bodies and made sacrificial offerings to the heavens, the earth, spirits and their ancestors (Harmatta, 1994:159-160).

<sup>15</sup> Cyrus was the great king and the founder of the Acamenid Empire (550 BCE), the first Persian Empire, which included the area of present day Bulgaria, Romania and Ukraine.

In Turkish society, we notice discrimination and hierarchies within the society on the basis of social and economic status. The nomadic society of steppe was now divided on the basis of the wealth. In the Turkish inscriptions rich persons (*Bays*) are shown as superior in contrast to poor people (*Cygay*). Poor men were described as pitiful, insignificant and base. The Türks' principal wealth and most coveted booty, however, was livestock, especially herds of horses. The burial mounds of the common soldiers were insignificant as compared to the burial site of higher aristocrats.

In the graves of the poorest peasants, however, neither costly weapons nor horses were to be found. Impoverished nomads who had lost their livestock were settled in winter quarters and in small, permanent settlements (*balıqs*), where they engaged in a primitive form of agriculture. They mainly sowed millet and built small forts (*qurgans* or *kurgans*) in which to store their grain. But no matter what quarrels soured relations between poor and rich *ers*, and between *begs* and the 'common people', the community as a whole was quite distinct from another sector of the population – the slaves (*qul kün*, male and female slaves), who were entirely dependent on the *ers*, enjoyed no rights and formed the periphery of ancient Türk society.

*History of Civilization of Central Asia, Vol. III: 331*

Tribal society of the Mongols was known as *Ulus*. In this society possession of animals decided the status of the tribal members of the group. *Noyan* were the lords of the tribal groups in the union of the Nomadic society. They were the advisors of the *Khan/khaqan* – king or emperor of the nomadic empire. Their main function was also to control the migratory movement of the clan and military leaders during raids and wars. They were also the organizers of military movement of the tribe. *Arat* were another group of herdsmen within the tribal groups who owned lesser herds and received pasture from the group leader. They provided intermittent services to the *Khan* and *Noyan*. Another group among the lower ranks was *bogol* who might have belonged to the *noyan* and *arat*. They worked for the group leaders. Herding was largely done by children and teenagers. Women used to process milk, wool and meat in the *yurts*. Camels in the Gobi Desert did not require much care, however, for the horses, grazing grounds were required.

## 11.10 NOMADIC ART

Despite ethnic and linguistic differences among the nomadic groups, the steppe lifestyle was quite similar across cultures and regions. On the basis of the linguistic difference the steppe people of the Central Asia can be classified into three main linguistic groups: Indo-European,<sup>16</sup> the Turks<sup>17</sup> and the Mongols.<sup>18</sup> The nomadic tribes remained active in Central Asia for more than twenty centuries. They were called barbarians by the settled people of the Central Asia due to the reason that they used to attack the sedentary people to plunder the things they wanted. The artistic culture among these nomads flourished under the impact of the settled civilizations. These nomadic people, who moved from one place to another, left bronze, silver and gold artworks. Their art focused on the richness of dress, ornamentation of equipment, plaques for belts, harness plates, sword belt buckles, wagon panels, handles, hilts and carpets.

Culture of nomadic tribes began with the Scythian, the first nomadic tribe who established

<sup>16</sup> Early speakers of this language were settled around Ukraine and neighbouring regions in the Caucasus and Russia. The Cimmerian, Scythian and Sarmatian spoke Indo-European Language.

<sup>17</sup> The Turkic culture and language had originated in the 5<sup>th</sup> Century BCE around the upper Enisey river in today's Siberia.

<sup>18</sup> Mongol speaking tribes were from Mongolia and Manchuria and expanded towards the northern steppe.

strong Nomadic Empire. Scythian introduced several cultural aspects to the nomadic art. Scythians used axes, spears and swords in the battle. Scythians are also given credit for the introduction of bows and arrows. Their bows were made of bone, stone or bronze. Scythians were also creators of the animal art. Animal art flourished since the time of the Scythians among all nomadic tribes. This was also due to the reason that these nomadic groups were hunter-gatherers. The Scythian art had influenced the Assyrian natural art. Thus, the animal art of Scythian was referred to as the art of Assyrian<sup>19</sup> naturalism. Assyrian art flourished on the walls of the palaces of the kings but Scythians used gold to make animal sculptures in a decorative way. Thus in contrast to Assyrian art, Scythian art was the culture of nomadic tribe, although the theme of their artist creations was animals or birds, but they decorated it in a much fine way. Scythian used gold to prepare their ornaments and jewellery. Birds and animals remained the theme of all the nomadic arts of Central Asia. The first Scythian work: the iron and gold axe of Kelermes in Kuban (dating from about the sixth century) displays the old Assyro-Babylonian and Luristanian theme of two ibexes standing next to the tree of life. 'The animals are depicted in a realistic manner and the art form is clearly inspired by Assyrian animal art.' Sythian art started from this, 'which may be defined as turning Assyrian (or Greek) naturalism to a decorative purpose' (Grousset, 1970: 11-12). The art of Scythians appears in its definitive form with the golden deer of the Kostromskaya tomb. In the art of nomads, naturalist touch and decorative style both were unique. Realism of the animal style was depicted in their art.



**Figure 11.3 : A Scythian gold plaque with panther, end of 7<sup>th</sup> century BCE**

**Credit:** Sailko, 2011

**Source:**[https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/d/d3/Placca\\_pantera%2C\\_da\\_regione\\_di\\_krasnodar%2C\\_kurgan\\_chertomlyk%2C\\_oro\\_a\\_sbalzo\\_e\\_cesellato%2C\\_fine\\_VII\\_sec\\_ac..JPG](https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/d/d3/Placca_pantera%2C_da_regione_di_krasnodar%2C_kurgan_chertomlyk%2C_oro_a_sbalzo_e_cesellato%2C_fine_VII_sec_ac..JPG)

In the excavations of Narin in Tyanshan (Khrgyzia), special kinds of arrow-heads used by Scythians and round clay pots were found, which reflect their nomadic cultural style. Bronze weapons used by the Scythians have been found from Eastern Europe (Chertom Lik) to the border of the Lake Baikal and Manchuria.

The principle sites of the Hun art are also found in the Lake Baikal range at the border of Hopei, Shansi and Shensi, which throws specific light on the culture of the Huns:

<sup>19</sup> Assyrian Empire was the kingdom of Mesopotamia who started to use animals and nature in their art around 1500 BCE.



- 1) At the north site of the Lake of China are tombs in Trasbaikalia (second to third centuries BCE) where Chinese Han coins issued after 118 BCE have been discovered.
- 2) In Outer Mongolia, Noin Ula near Urga, the tomb of a Hun prince has been found, which probably belongs to the second century. The tomb contained bronzes of steppe art, splendid woolen fabric adorned in the same manner (griffin fighting an elk, lion attacking a yak), etc.

The art of the Huns is very characteristic and was represented by belt plaques or plaques of other kinds, mounts, hooks and studs made of bronze and 'stylized animal motifs, or by the butts of staves terminating in the figures of hinds. This art is often known as *ordos* art, from the name of Mongol Ordos tribe which from the sixteenth century CE had occupied the loop of the yellow River to the north of Shensi, a region where finds have been particularly plentiful' (Grousset, 1970: 24). Ordos art was a branch of stylized animal art of the steppe and its plaques were ornamented with fighting horses, horses or deer in combat with tigers, bears and fantastic beasts.

In the steppe nomadic groups, Turks were known for creating number of monuments. One of their most noted monument was the statue of the 'stone man'. This 'stone man' monument represents Turkic warrior who used to stand in a long robe, holding a cup filled with fire, the other hand gripping the handle of a knife. This indicates that the animal and natural art which flourished from the art of Scythian and Huns, changed in the time of Turks. Now these nomads have started giving importance to their warrior soldiers instead of animals and nature. In addition to the art of 'stone man', burial sites of Turkic leaders are also found in parts of the Mongolian region. In these burial sites there were statues along with Turkic inscriptions about the buried people. These burial sites were organized into big complexes with buildings and numerous sculptures.

Mongols like other nomadic groups also adopted and appreciated the art of the sedentary peoples. All the rulers (*khans*) of the Mongols provided patronage and adopted the art of the settled people. Mongolians have the tendency to decorate every item at home, inside their *ger* and on the trappings of their animals. Mongol capital city Karakhram was built and decorated by Genghis' son Ugudei. Mongols loved music. In music, they developed a unique form of singing known as throat singing or *khoomi*.

### Check Your Progress Exercise-3

- 1) Describe the political structure of nomads of Central Asia.

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- 2) Write five lines on the social structure of Scythians and Huns.

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- 3) Discuss the main features of the Nomadic art of Central Asia.

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## 11.11 SUMMARY

While the nomadic empires ruled over the sedentary societies for several centuries, the nomads never changed or evolved with the ways adopted by the sedentary groups. The nomads always preferred to use bows for fighting. For instance, while the people of the settled cultures improvised modern technologies, the nomads continued to use bows for fighting. The armed weakness of the nomads allowed the settled groups to subdue them in due course of time. Their rigidness or firm belief in nomadic lifestyle was also evident from the life of Timur, the Turko-Mongol conqueror and last of the nomadic leaders who, even after establishing the huge Timurid empire in Persia and Central Asia, continued to support nomadic lifestyle. This support of the nomadic life was however based on their military vision of conquering the world, for life as a nomad fitted well for a soldier, ever ready for battle.

## 11.12 KEY WORDS

<b>Bedouins</b>	: A group of nomadic Arabic people who inhabited the desert regions of North Africa, the Arabian Peninsula, Iraq and the Levant.
<b>Noyan</b>	: Noyan was a title for military commanders under Mongol Empire, and later used as a title of authority. Or a term to address a person of authority.
<b>Stirrup</b>	: Ring that holds the foot of a rider; attached to the saddle by a strap.
<b>Yurts</b>	: Round tents used as dwellings by nomads of Central Asia.

## 11.13 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS EXERCISES

### Check Your Progress Exercise-1

- 1) See Section 11.3 for details
- 2) Define Nomadism and Pastoral Nomadism. For differentiation, see Section 11.2
- 3) See Sections 11.4 and 11.5
- 4) See Section 11.5. Mention the reasons responsible for the establishment of Nomadic Empires in Central Asia.

### Check Your Progress Exercise-2

- 1) See Section 11.6

- 2) See Sub-section 11.7.1
- 3) See Sub-section 11.7.3
- 4) See Section 11.7
- 5) See Sub-section 11.7.6

### Check Your Progress Exercise-3

- 1) See Section 11.8. The strong nomadic groups of the steppe established a well organized political system.
- 2) See Section 11.9
- 3) See Section 11.10

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## 11.14 SUGGESTED READINGS

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## **11.15 INSTRUCTIONAL AUDIO/VIDEO RECOMMENDATIONS**

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### **Horse Lords: A Brief History of the Scythians**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-IAxEtT3lfA>

### **Traditional knowledge and skills in making Kyrgyz and Kazakh yurts: UNESCO**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5fvjX90MfSw>

### **Who are the Turks?**

<https://15minutehistory.org/2013/11/13/episode-31-who-are-the-turks/>

### **Biography of Genghis Khan**

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2UCF\\_X73y-w](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2UCF_X73y-w)

