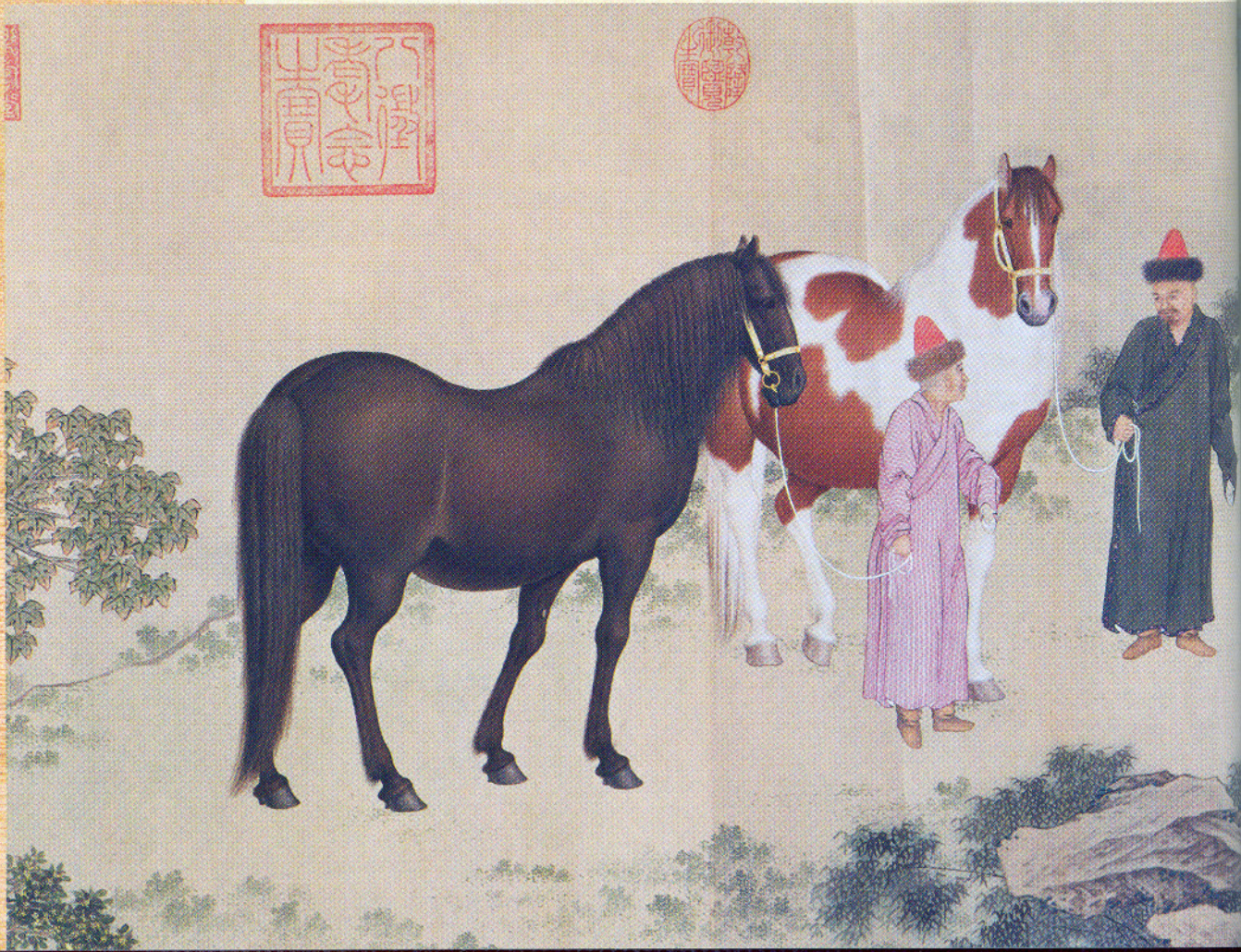


Chapter 4

Nomadic Challenges and Sedentary Responses

This 18th-century painting shows Kazak nomads bringing tribute horses to the emperor of China. Such tribute payments often were used by nomadic peoples to acknowledge their subordination to or alliances with strong dynasties in the civilized core regions, such as China. But splendid presents also were given by kings and emperors to nomad leaders. These exchanges of gifts also were used, particularly by the Chinese, to establish broader, more regular trading relationships.



- **VISUALIZING THE PAST:** Varieties of Human Adaptation and the Potential for Civilization
- **The Rise and Spread of Pastoral Nomadism**
- **Nomadic Society and Culture**
- **DOCUMENT:** Nomadic Verse and Nomadic Values
- **Nomads and Civilization**
- **IN DEPTH:** Nomads and Cross-Civilization Contacts and Exchanges
- **CONCLUSION:** Nomads and the Pattern of Global History

By the end of the 2nd millennium B.C.E., civilizations based on the Neolithic innovations of livestock domestication and sedentary agriculture had evolved in several core regions across all the continents of the globe except Australia and Antarctica. The achievements of the peoples who established the centers of civilized development were truly impressive. But the total area occupied by civilized sedentary agriculturists and town dwellers remained only a small portion of the earth. Seen in this larger context, the different centers of civilization were rather small cores, usually separated by thousands of miles and surrounded by peoples whom the civilized regarded as distinct and hostile.

Perhaps as much as 90 percent of the human population, which is estimated to have reached 200 to 300 million in this era, were sedentary agriculturists concentrated in the civilized cores. However, most of the inhabited earth was occupied by migratory peoples who practiced shifting rather than sedentary cultivation, were nomadic herders, or followed a hunting and gathering existence much like that of the Stone Age peoples before the Neolithic revolution.

Shifting cultivators predominated in the rainforest zones of Central and South America, west Africa, east and central India, and much of south China and the southeast Asian mainland and islands. *Nomads*, who herded domesticated animals, ranged over the great swaths of grassy plains that stretched across central Eurasia and fringed desert areas, such as the central Arabian peninsula and the Sudanic zone in Africa. In the Americas, hunters and gatherers occupied similar areas as well as the arid wastes between the plains of North America and the fertile valleys of central Mexico.

Although none of these migratory peoples produced its own civilization, many of them significantly influenced the development of the civilizations that arose in different areas. In some instances the impact of nonsedentary peoples was largely destructive, such as the nomadic Indo-Aryans' contribution to the decline of the Harappan complex in the Indus valley and the role of the hunting-and-gathering *chichimecs* in the collapse of early civilizations in Mesoamerica.

Other incursions of migratory peoples into the zones occupied by sedentary agriculturalists and townspeople were disruptive only initially. Eventually they led to the establishment of new civilizations or to even stronger dynastic control over existing civilizations that had come under assault. Such was the case in Mesopotamia after the Hittite (Indo-European) invasions at the end of the 2nd millennium B.C.E., in China with the rise of the Zhou kingdom in roughly the same period, and in the Americas with the establishment of great Toltec and Aztec cities and empires.

7500 B.C.E.	5000 B.C.E.	2000 B.C.E.	1500 B.C.E.	1 C.E.	500 C.E.	1000 C.E.
7500–7000 Domestication of sheep and goats; first pastoralists 7000–6500 Domestication of cattle	c. 5000 Llama is domesticated by Andes mountain dwellers 3000 First use of donkeys as pack animals	2000–1500 Domestication of horse and camel 1900–1000 Hittite (Indo-European) expansion throughout the Middle East 1800–1575 Hyksos invade Egypt c. 1600–600 Indo-European nomadic expansion	1122 Zhou nomads establish dominance in China 400–300 Hun invasions of China 170 B.C.E.–100 C.E. Waves of nomadic invasions into India	200–580 Era of nomadic dominance in China c. 370–480 First wave of nomadic incursions into western Europe 400–500 Hun invasions in India	650–750 Bedouin Arabs spearhead Islamic expansion across North Africa and the Middle East and into central Asia c. 750–850 Nomad invasions from North Mexico central valley c. 850 Teotihuacan destroyed by invading nomads 970–985 Toltec expansion throughout the central valley	1050–1250 Age of nomadic dominance in Northwest Africa and the western Sudan 1050–1420 Prolonged phase of expansion by Turkic and Mongol nomads 1375–1440 Rise of the Aztecs

In key phases of global history, nomadic peoples also served as links rather than barriers to civilization. They participated in trading networks, carried new religious ideas far from the lands where they first arose, and transmitted key inventions, plants, and diseases between the different pools of human civilization. Migratory peoples have had such a great impact on human history that it is essential to understand their lifestyles and the nature of their interaction with farming and urban populations (Map 4.1). Migratory peoples can be divided into several main types according to the ways in which they supported themselves and responded to different environments. After these basic types of migratory peoples have been discussed and their lifestyles and patterns of social organization have been compared with those of the sedentary agriculturists, the rest of this chapter is devoted to one variant of the migratory pattern: pastoral nomadism. Pastoral nomadism has had a lasting impact on the development of individual civilizations and on the contacts between the civilized cores. After we have explored the ways in which pastoralism shaped all aspects of nomadic life and culture and considered different forms of nomadic social and political organization, we will identify key patterns of interaction between nomads and sedentary peoples. Insights into the nature of nomadic lifestyles and responses to civilized peoples are essential to a full understanding of the history of virtually all civilizations.

THE RISE AND SPREAD OF PASTORAL NOMADISM

■ We do not know when nomadic societies first came into existence because the peoples who developed them had no written records. But nomadic alternatives to sedentary agriculture may have emerged earlier than the first civiliza-

tions, and migratory animal herders were widely distributed by 1500 B.C.E. By this time, many pastoral nomads may have been driven from the fertile river valleys of the civilized cores. Some societies may have originated among hunting-and-gathering bands that captured domesticated livestock in raids on agricultural villages. In the millennia that followed, pastoral nomad groups developed variants according to the animals they domesticated.

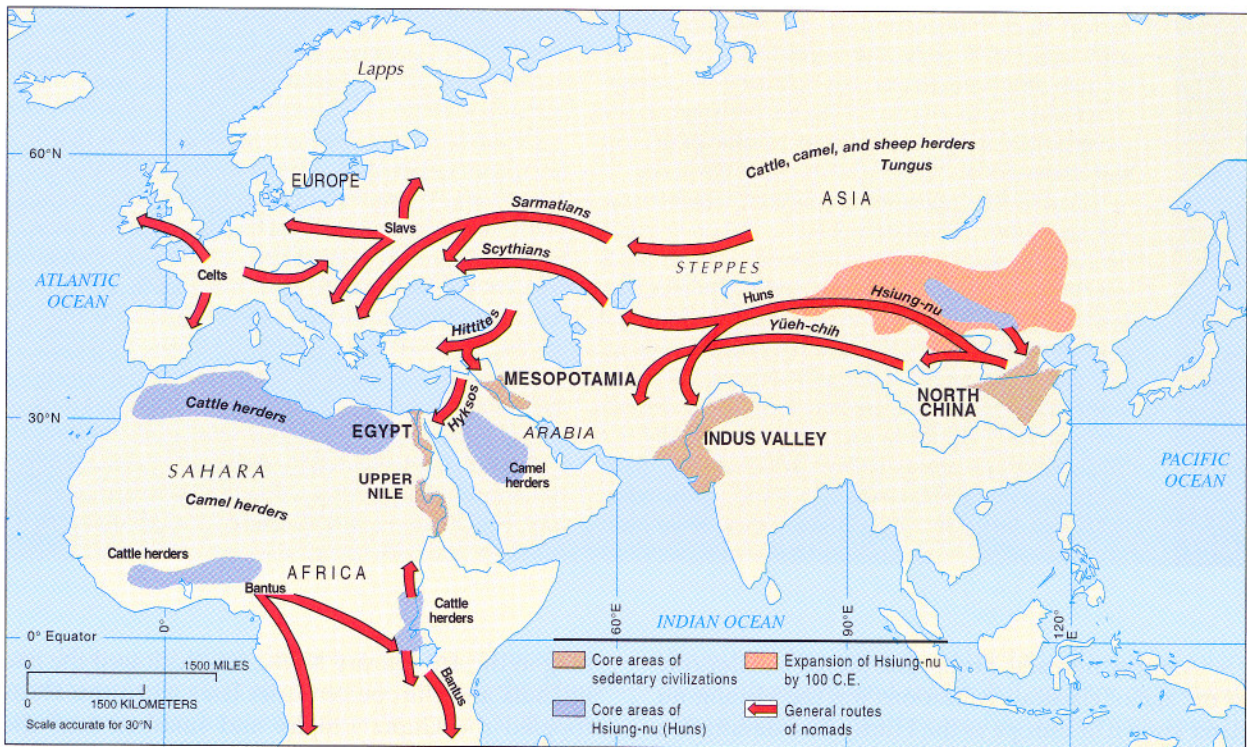
Nomadic peoples led their herds into the grassy but sparsely inhabited plains of central Eurasia. In this vast area and in similar zones in Sudanic and east Africa, Arabia, and highland South America, refugees and raiders found ample pasturage for their herds. They also discovered that they could live on the products the animals supplied. The regions into which nomadism spread received enough rainfall (considerably more than today) to support the grasses and other plant life on which herd animals feed, but not nearly enough for sedentary farming. Thus, nomadic peoples occupied lands that could not be claimed by rapidly growing farming populations. As they spread through the steppes and savannas, the pastoralists displaced the original hunting-and-gathering peoples or prompted them to adopt the herding lifestyle, which was better suited to the plains environment. The pastoralists, in turn, continued to hunt the abundant game animals of the plains for meat and fur.

The Horse Nomads

The first nomadic peoples about whom we know a good deal are the Indo-European tribes of the mid-

2nd millennium B.C.E. For more than a thousand years thereafter, they threatened the early civilizations of the Middle East and the Indus plains. Some Indo-European peoples, such as the Hittites and Hyksos, also established their own empires and centers of civilization, while others, such as the early Greeks, settled in the lands to which they migrated. As late as the last centuries B.C.E., these settled groups still struggled to fight off the incursions of later Indo-European migrants such as the Scythians, who invaded Europe and Asia Minor, and the Kushanas, who established an empire spanning northwest India and central Asia. Some Indo-European peoples migrated eastward, where they fought with other nomadic peoples for grazing lands, and eventually moved into northwest India, where they were an increasing menace to Harappan civilization.

The earliest Indo-European invaders did not ride the horses, which they raised in great numbers and prized as symbols of wealth and status. Instead, they fought from war chariots drawn by one or two horses. With the development of effective bridles and stirrups, however, Indo-European warriors began to ride horses during migrations or into battles.



Map 4.1 Earliest Civilizations and the Migration of Nomadic Peoples.

Visualizing THE PAST

Varieties of Human Adaptation and the Potential for Civilization

Perhaps the best way to understand and compare various human adaptations to environmental conditions is to relate them to the two extreme types of adaptation that ecologists call the *niche* and the *holding* patterns. In the first instance, the human group works its way into the environment in which it lives rather than transforming that environment. Like the plants and animals with which they share a particular ecosystem, these peoples simply occupy one of many niches available in the overall ecosystem. Their activities have a minimal impact on the other niches or the life forms that occupy them. In the most extreme manifestations of the niche pattern, exhibited by rainforest peoples of Central and South America, southeast Asia, and Africa, small human groups, *forest farmers*, hunt game and gather fruits and vegetables in the jungle without altering the forest environment. These peoples move continuously through large areas of the forest, ingeniously tapping the many sources of plant and animal food.

Before the Industrial Revolution, *sedentary wet rice agriculture*, which depended on elaborate irrigation systems, was the most developed form of the holding approach to ecological adaptation. Peoples who practice this approach extensively transform the natural environments in which they live. Wet rice farmers, for example, clear forests, haul away stones, and plow grasses and weeds to prepare large tracts of land for cultivation. They dig ditches to carry water to the rice fields, which are surrounded by dikes to hold the water in during the growing season. In addition, they clear fields and forests to support domesticated animals.

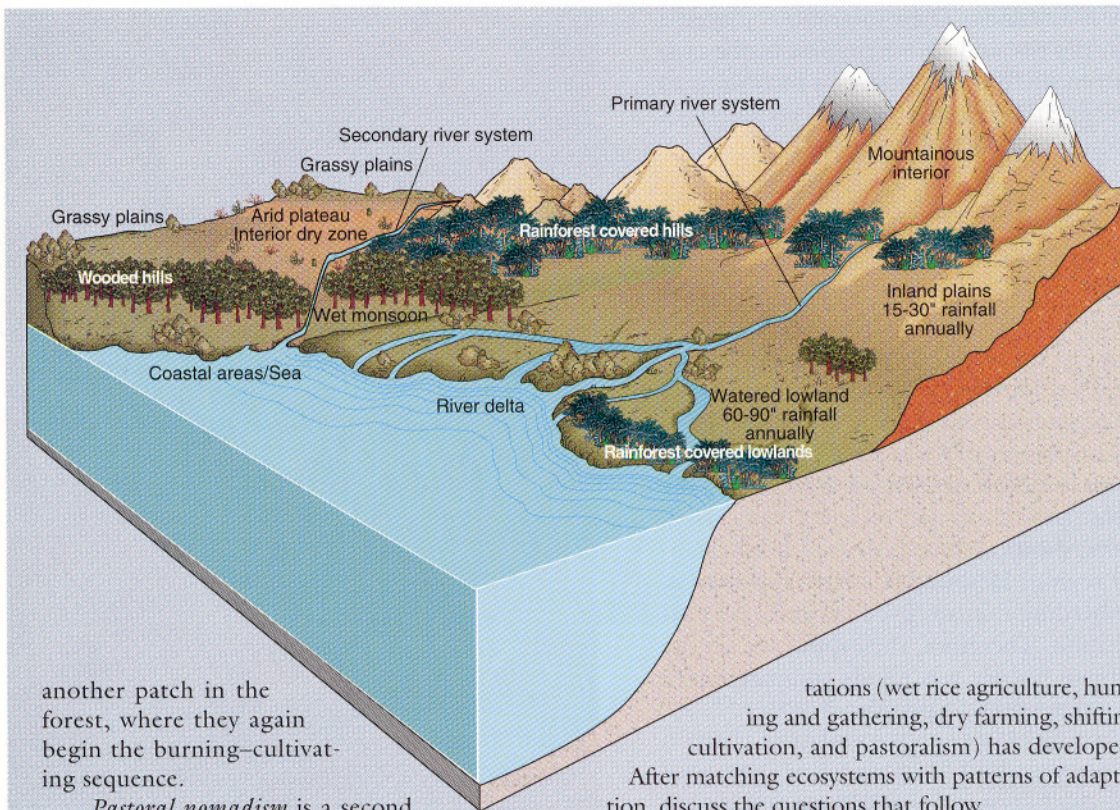
Thus, the original vegetation and animal life are supplanted by domesticated plants and livestock. The domesticated plants are arranged in patterns determined by human needs rather than natural processes. They are protected from wild animals by fences and shelters, and wild plants are removed. Areas near the rice fields are also transformed by the construction of human dwellings, shrines, and granaries, which are combined to form villages and sometimes grow into cities.

Between the niche pattern and the holding pattern, several intermediate forms of human adaptation have developed. One of the most important of these in terms of the numbers of humans supported by it is *dry farming* of grain crops such as wheat, rye, barley, and millet. Although the environment is not as extensively transformed by dry farming as by wet rice agriculture, both involve building permanent villages, raising livestock, and building systems of food storage and transportation.

Shifting cultivation (or *slash-and-burn* farming), concentrated in the rainforests of both the Eastern and Western Hemispheres, is an adaptation that is much closer to the niche pattern than either form of sedentary agriculture. Shifting cultivators burn off the jungle undergrowth but leave the large trees and the cover they provide to protect the fragile tropical soils. Using the ashes created by their fires as a natural fertilizer, shifting farmers cultivate the area cleared on the forest floor. The foods grown in this manner form the staples of their diet, which are supplemented by meat, wild berries, and other forest plants. After working a particular clearing for a year or two, shifting farmers move to

Another nomadic group that played a major role in the age of classical civilizations was the Hsiung-nu (later known in Europe as the Huns). The devastation wrought by Hsiung-nu incursions into China, begin-

ning in the 4th century B.C.E., foreshadowed the fate of India and Europe centuries later when the Huns toppled the Gupta Empire and smashed into the crumbling Roman Empire. The eastern branches of



another patch in the forest, where they again begin the burning–cultivating sequence.

Pastoral nomadism is a second major alternative between hunting and gathering and sedentary agriculture. Although nomadic groups differ in the kinds of animals they herd and whether they ride horses or camels or work their herds on foot, their pattern of adaptation to their natural environment is similar. Like the shifting cultivators, nomads do not seek to transform their natural environments in major ways. In the steppe and savanna grasslands where they live in the winter and spring, they introduce large herds of domesticated livestock. Their herds harvest the plant cover in these areas. The nomads also set up temporary camps of tents or wagons near their herds. When the hot, dry summer arrives, the nomads break camp and move with their herds to riverine or hilly areas where there is enough water and plant life to sustain their livestock.

This composite map contains examples of the different sorts of ecosystems in which each of these adap-

tations (wet rice agriculture, hunting and gathering, dry farming, shifting cultivation, and pastoralism) has developed. After matching ecosystems with patterns of adaptation, discuss the questions that follow.

Questions: Which forms of human adaptation are the most likely to produce civilizations as we have defined them in Chapter 1, and why? Which are the least likely, and why? In which areas will it be possible to build highly centralized political systems with considerable state control of local populations, and why? Which ecological zones are likely to produce highly autonomous, independent-minded social groups? Are such areas likely to shape societies in which women have higher or lower status and more or less critical social roles than in areas dominated by wet rice agriculture or dry farming? What would a people gain by choosing the holding pattern and developing a civilization? What might they lose by giving up a nomadic or shifting-cultivating way of life?

the Hsiung-nu tribes also competed for pasturelands with peoples such as the Tungus, whereas the Huns to the west fought constantly with sheep- and goat-herding nomadic peoples speaking a variety of Turkic

languages. From the era of the Indo-European migrations, droughts and intertribal warfare periodically drove large bands of central Asian nomads into the sedentary agricultural zones that fringed their far-

flung steppe homelands. Their migrations played a major role in the rise and fall of empires in the civilized cores from the time of these first incursions to the era of the great Turkic and Mongol conquests of the 11th through the 14th centuries C.E.

The Reindeer Herders of the North

It is possible that *reindeer-herding nomads*, such as the Lapps, were migrating with their flocks across the tundra of northern Europe even before the nomadic pattern spread to the steppe regions of central Asia. In the bogs of Scandinavia, archeologists have found the remains of sleds dating as early as the late Paleolithic era. The earliest of these sleds probably were pulled by teams of dogs or men on skis. But by the early Neolithic period, tamed reindeer were used, suggesting that pastoral nomadism had been established in the region. Despite their early appearance, the reindeer-herding nomads lived far from the centers of civilization. Therefore, their influence on the course of human history was minor compared with that of most other nomadic peoples.

The Camel Nomads

The spread of pastoral nomadism in the central Asian steppes hinged largely on the domestication of the horse. Farther west, in the Arabian peninsula and the Sudanic zone that stretches across north central Africa, another animal played a pivotal role in the spread of the nomadic lifestyle. As early as 1700 B.C.E., the camel was mentioned in Egyptian sources as a pack animal, but it had not yet been ridden by humans. It is likely that pastoralism based on the camel had been established in western Asia even before camels were first ridden during the last centuries B.C.E.

Camels are remarkably well adapted to the barren regions that fringe the Sahara and Arabian deserts. They can carry loads of up to 400 pounds and travel 60 miles a day. Once they have filled the fatty-tissue reservoirs in their humps with water, camels can sustain this pace for more than 20 days without water in temperatures averaging 120 degrees Fahrenheit. If they are occasionally fed a little green fodder, camels will plod on indefinitely. Without the fodder, they will continue for another 5 days before lying down to die. Although horses and cattle were introduced into Arabia and the Sudanic area, the camel has remained central to most of the nomadic cultures that have developed in these regions. These “ships of the desert” have been essential to the great trading systems that developed in these areas and to



Figure 4.1 *The seasonal journey in progress for these horse-riding, cattle herding nomads fording a small river in present-day Iran was an annual occurrence for peoples who followed a pastoral way of life. As grasses, and often water, for the nomads' herds dried up in the heat of the summer months, they had to pack up all of their possessions and set off with their herds on difficult, and sometimes dangerous, migrations to riverain or hilly areas where food and water could be found. In the early spring, they would return to the plains, where the grasses had recovered and there was ample fodder for the domesticated animals around which they organized their lives.*

the formidable capacity of their nomadic masters for making war.

The Cattle Herders

Beginning in the upper reaches of the Nile River in the central and southern portions of the present-day nation of Sudan and expanding north to south across the rift valleys and plains of eastern and southern Africa, yet another major variant of pastoral nomadism developed. In this vast and varied region,

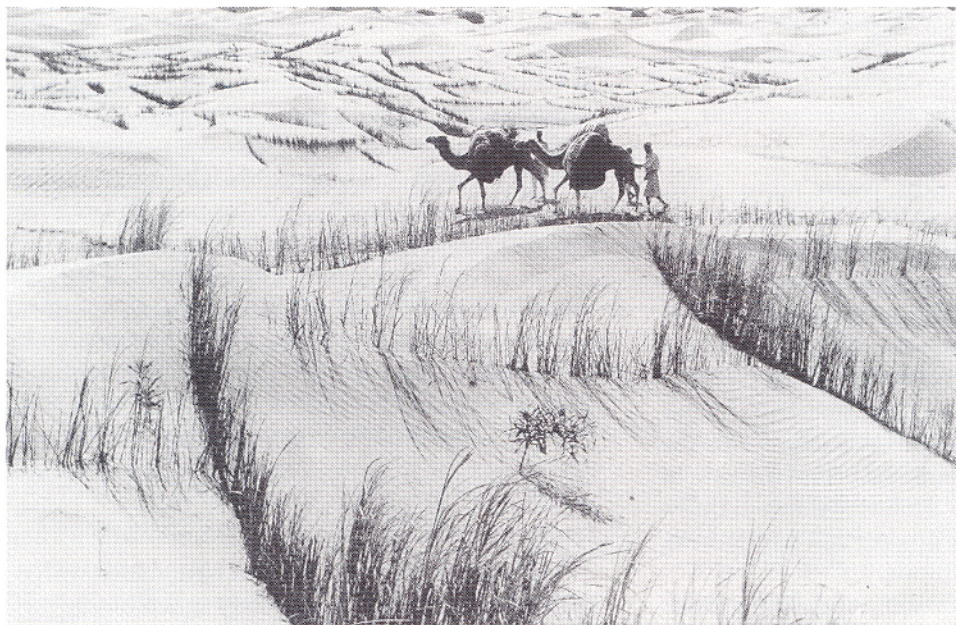


Figure 4.2 Desert nomads trek with their heavily burdened camels through the arid terrain of sand and scrub near Tripoli in present-day Libya. Human survival in such an unforgiving environment depends on great skill in navigating by the sun and stars and knowledge of where water and shelter from fierce sand storms can be found. The loss of one's camel or failure to keep one's bearings usually proves fatal.

warrior-dominated societies based on cattle herding coalesced and expanded. Because the climate and especially the disease environment posed major barriers to horse breeding, the cattle nomads migrated, hunted, and fought their wars on foot. But cattle provided their sustenance and the basis of their material culture. Cattle were the prime gauge of wealth and status, the focus of religious rituals, and the key item given to the bride's family in arranging marriages.

Like the northern tundras where the reindeer herders lived, the regions occupied by the cattle nomads were distant from major civilized centers. Therefore, we know little of the early history of these peoples. However, unlike the Lapps and other pastoralists, the cattle herders of Africa eventually played major roles in the history of the continent.

Nomadic Peoples of the Americas

Because most of the large mammals of the Americas had died out by the end of the last Ice Age, pastoral nomadism played almost no part in the history of these continents until horses, cattle, and other domesticated animals were introduced by the Europeans after 1492 C.E. Only in the highlands of the Andes, where llamas and alpacas survived in large numbers, was it possible for truly nomadic cultures to develop. But even in this limited area, pastoralists played a minor and subordinate role. The prairie and semidesert regions of the Americas that might have supported pastoralists were occupied by hunting-and-gathering peoples.

The absence of large mammals prevented the nomadic peoples of the prairies and arid plains from fully tapping the potential of their environments and deprived them of the superior mobility necessary for raiding and conquering in the civilized heartlands. If the Aztecs can be considered typical, however ferocious the *chichimecs* were in battle, they were poor wanderers until they established themselves in the sedentary zones. The Aztecs' arrival in the central valley of Mexico was little noticed by the civilized peoples who lived in great cities along its lakes. While they struggled to establish themselves in the region, the hapless and weak Aztecs were beaten in battle, enslaved in large numbers, and finally driven to a marshy island refuge in Lake Texcoco. The contrast between the treatment of incoming migratory peoples in civilized Mesoamerica and the impact of invading horse- and camel-herding nomads on the civilized centers of Eurasia is striking evidence of the power of pastoral adaptation.

NOMADIC SOCIETY AND CULTURE

❖ *More than any other feature, migratory patterns define and structure the lives of pastoral nomads. These movements reflect both the nomads' dependence on domesticated animals and the extent to which humans and animals*

adapt to their environments. Nomads and herds migrate to survive. Their social systems, attitudes, and material culture are shaped by the migratory patterns that dominate their existence.

The steppe or prairie areas, where nomads live, undergo extreme changes in temperature and weather conditions. For example, temperatures in the steppe regions of central Asia can range from 45 degrees Fahrenheit below zero in the winter to more than 120 degrees in midsummer. In the steppe and the desert fringes of the Sahara and Arabia, there are also extreme daily variations in temperature. Temperatures can soar well above 100 degrees in the midafternoon and then plummet below freezing at night. In both regions, powerful winds, able to throw a rider from the saddle, stir up dust and sand storms, which batter the sparse plant life.

In this harsh environment, nomadic peoples must migrate regularly to feed and water the herds on which their survival depends. Year after year they usually follow the same routes between the different areas in which they pasture their herds. In late winter or early spring, they drive their herds onto the plains, where the seasonal rains provide rich vegetation to nourish their calving or lambing animals. When the dry winds and heat of summer begin to wither the grasses and shrubs of the steppe or the desert fringe, the nomads drive their herds into hilly regions, to the lower slopes of distant mountains, or to riverine areas, where pasturage can still be found. After wintering in these regions, they return to the plains to celebrate rituals of renewal and fertility amid their feeding and growing herds.

The distances over which nomadic groups migrate vary greatly, from tens to hundreds of miles depending on the size and needs of their herds and the environment in which they live. In addition to temperature and rainfall, their movements may be determined by other factors. In eastern Africa and the western Sudan, for example, cattle-raising peoples must drive their herds from areas where the tsetse fly thrives in certain seasons or risk disease among their livestock. The camel-herding nomads of the Arabian peninsula must allow their animals to feed regularly on the salt-laden grasses at the desert fringe, for without the salt the camels will sicken and die.

Prolonged drought in regions where nomadic peoples normally pasture their animals can lead to temporary, and at times permanent, changes in their routes and destinations. But nomads are reluctant to

shift their migratory routines because of the risks involved in moving into unknown regions and the potential for conflict with other nomadic groups. Although the nomad's sense of property is focused on livestock, pastoral groups stake out particular areas and watering places as their own. The use of another tribe's migration route, wells, or pasture lands can provoke violent conflict and the expulsion or elimination of one of the competing groups. Thus, the nomads' struggle to survive in the harsh environment of the steppe and desert fringe is complemented by an ongoing contest to keep their own pasturelands from rivals or to take control of other areas in times of population increase or natural calamity.

Societies Oriented to Domesticated Animals

Although most nomadic peoples have traded with or raided the settlements of sedentary agriculturists, their survival depends primarily on the well-being of their livestock. The herds supply the meat, milk, and dairy products that are the nomads' staple foods. Nomads use the hides or fleece of their livestock to make clothing, tent and wagon covers, weapons, eating utensils, jewelry, and works of art. Because prize animals from their herds are their most valued possessions, animal sacrifices are at the center of the nomads' religious rituals. The size and quality of a nomad's herd is the prime indicator of wealth and status.

Peoples who raise camels and horses also depend on their animals to transport their belongings from one pastureland to another and to carry trade goods to and from the market. The goods the nomads trade are derived primarily from their herds: meat, milk products, skins, wool, and bone sculptures. The mobility they gain from the animals they raise plays a key role in their survival. It allows them to flee from powerful enemies or to reap the advantages of speed and surprise in raids. To the horse- or camel-herding nomads, the loss of the animals they ride is in effect a death sentence. For this reason, in the steppes and the desert fringe, horse and camel stealers are severely punished, often by death.

Herding and hunting strongly influence the artistic themes and styles of nomads' material culture. Much of the artwork of nomadic peoples, such as bone sculptures, wood carvings, and woven rugs, depicts stylized animals. Sometimes the animals are domesticated, such as bulls, hawks, and horses; more often they are wild creatures, such as lions, serpents, and deer. Often the animal depicted is a clan or tribal

totem, which is seen as a mythic ancestor of the group and is venerated as its progenitor and protector. Often the animal is shown fighting with one of its own kind, preying on another species, or struggling to free itself from a predator.

Nomadic artwork is largely utilitarian. Images are carved on the poles and entranceways of tents or on the sides of wagons. Animal motifs appear on belt buckles, jewelry, weapons, or the rugs used to pad and insulate wagons or tents. It is rare to find art for art's sake because the highly mobile existence of pastoral peoples renders paintings or sculptures burdensome.

Like their art, other aspects of nomadic culture are linked to their pastoral lifestyle. Their housing, whether tent or wagon, is easily dismantled and reassembled (Fig. 4.3). Their clothing is adapted to their animals and the environment. Pants, or trousers, were invented by the horse nomads of the central Asian steppes. The horse nomads also used skins or wool to make leather or felt shirts and pointed caps with ear flaps to protect them from the icy winds of the winter steppe. Not sur-

prisingly, nomadic peoples from central Asia also invented stirrups, mouth bits, reins, and saddles.

Courage Cultures and Nomadic Patriarchy

The harsh environment in which nomadic peoples struggle to survive shapes virtually all aspects of their social organization and cultural expression. The lives of nomadic peoples have tended to be marked by intermittent violence. It is likely that the life expectancy of nomads has been considerably shorter than that of sedentary peoples at comparable times. The hard-skinned, sun- and wind-cracked faces of nomadic peoples reveal their constant struggles for survival. Their history of intertribal feuds, warfare, and forced migrations reflects the ways in which the struggle to survive set human group against human group. Their harsh environment and the chronic violence in their lives prompted nomadic peoples to develop what anthropologists call *courage cultures*.



Figure 4.3 In the daytime, the flaps of this nomad's tent, here pitched near an abandoned town in the central Arabian desert, are opened to catch desert breezes. At night, the flaps are closed to hold in warmth as the desert temperature falls sharply.

Cultures of this type are dominated by physically strong, warlike men bound to each other by strong ties of personal loyalty. Members of such a society place a premium on personal honor and value physical courage and heroic deeds above all other human attributes and accomplishments.

Although there have been regional variations, most nomadic peoples have lived in kin-related bands that range in numbers from 10 or 20 to more than 100. In times of crisis and exceptionally strong leadership, these bands have been brought together in great encampments numbering in the tens of thousands. But most nomads have lived most of their lives among their clanspeople, who were often linked to those in neighboring bands by tribal membership. This meant that each traced his or her origins back to a common, often mythical ancestor. The fact or fiction of common origins did not prevent clans from fighting over pasturelands, campsites, or livestock. In fact, interclan quarrels accounted for much of the social violence in nomadic societies. Oral traditions suggest that these quarrels could erupt from the flimsiest pretexts: a snub in the marketplace or a dispute over the ownership of a fine horse or camel.

Whether arising from insults or competition for herds or pastureland, these violent confrontations set in motion cycles of raids, killings, and reprisals that could span generations and even centuries. The deep-felt hostility of these *vendettas* was a major barrier to interclan and tribal cooperation and alliances that would have allowed nomadic groups to project their power beyond the steppes and desert margins. They also had devastating effects on nomadic society, as the following Arab verse vividly illustrates:

Clan Amir's broken and gone. Nothing is left
of her good.
In the meadows of A'raf now—only ruined
dwelling places.
Ragged shadows of tents and penfold-walls and
shelters
Bough torn from bough, all spoiled by wind
and weather.
All gone, the ancients gone, all her wise counsel
gone.
None of us left but folk whose war-mares are
only fillies. (timid people whose horses are
not fit for war)

Nomad Hospitality: Legends and Realities

The violence and suffering that resulted from the vendetta cycle were offset to some extent in many nomadic societies by an emphasis on hospitality (Fig. 4.4). Providing travelers or refugees from clans that had fallen on hard times with food, drink, and shelter made sense because it fit into a larger strategy of survival in the harsh environments where nomadic people lived. Those who refused hospitality to the weary or needy risked retribution from other nomadic groups when they themselves were lost in a storm or wounded in an ambush. Once accepted as a guest within a nomadic encampment, even from a rival or enemy clan an individual was safe from bodily harm, a tradition that a nomad band broke only at its own peril.

But often the nomads' hospitality went beyond the needs of their never-ending struggles for survival. Tribal legends celebrated leaders for their generosity as well as their aptitude for war. For example, Arab nomads still delight in the tale of a young man who slaughtered the fattest of his father's meager supply of camels to feed some weary strangers who were passing by his encampment. Praised by the strangers for his lavish hospitality, and asking nothing in return, the young man proclaimed, "I have made you immortal." As this legend demonstrates, along with physical courage, endurance, and loyalty to one's clan, hospitality was one of the most valued human qualities. In most nomadic societies, generosity was measured according to the power and wealth of the giver; the more one had, the greater the obligation to sponsor feasts for guests or clan celebrations of important victories or rites of passage.

Cultures Made for War

Because raising stock did not involve the intensive labor needed for sedentary cultivation, men in nomadic societies could devote long hours to honing fighting skills. In horse and camel societies, young boys could ride almost as soon as they could walk. Human and animal came to function as one. Horse nomads, such as the Mongols, learned to depend on their legs alone to grip and direct their war steeds, thus freeing their arms and hands to use their powerful bows and arrows. During an assault, a horseman could swing beneath the belly of the horse and shoot arrow after arrow while denying the



Figure 4.4 Camps, such as the one in central Asia depicted in this Persian miniature, were critical points of refuge in lands where the environment was harsh and inter-clan and tribal rivalries fierce. In these isolated and temporary settlements, where the number of tents or huts could range from a half a dozen to hundreds, weary travelers could find food and shelter for themselves and their animals. Camp hospitality was repaid in part by the excitement of visitors and the news of the outside world they brought to the settlements. Often gifts were exchanged between guests and hosts, and both sides assumed that the hosts' generosity would be reciprocated by their guests at some future date.

enemy a clear target. Horse and camel nomads could live on their mounts for days, giving them a degree of mobility denied to all other peoples until the advent of the railroad.

This mobility has also proved critical in the nomadic peoples' ability to ward off the attacks of sedentary peoples. In one of the earliest recorded instances of this capacity to defend themselves through retreat, the Scythians drew the Persian emperor Darius and a large army into a prolonged and futile chase through the steppes of western Asia in the 6th century B.C.E. As recently as the late 19th century, this pattern was followed by the cattle- and camel-herding nomads of the Sudan. They drew a British-led Egyptian army of more than 5000 soldiers into the desert wastes of the Upper Nile region. When the invaders were exhausted and dying of thirst and disease, the nomadic warriors ambushed them.

Both mounted nomads and those who fought on foot displayed considerable skills in battle and earned a reputation for ferocity among sedentary peoples. Many of the tales of their "barbarities" were hearsay or pure fiction, but some of them were accurate. The

Scythians and Hsiung-nu, for example, had drinking cups made from the skulls of defeated rivals. The leaders of the Huns lined these skull-goblets with gold. Both the Scythians and Hsiung-nu practiced head-hunting, and on the death of a rival chief, a warrior would slit the throats of the deceased leader's wives and servants and bury them with him. The exploits of Turkic warriors (whom the Chinese called the T'u-chueh) were commemorated by stones piled on their tombs—one stone for every enemy they had killed in battle.

Family Ties and Social Stratification

Male monopolization of animal husbandry, band security, and warfare ensured that men would dominate gender relationships. Men controlled the herds that were the most valued property for pastoralists, traded with outside peoples for goods, and controlled their households strictly. Inheritance was through the male line. Although marriage patterns varied, young women usually went to live in the households of older husbands. Polygamy was common, and a woman's

DOCUMENT

Nomadic Verse and Nomadic Values

Much of what we know about nomadic attitudes and social interaction in the centuries before they adopted writing systems (based on languages such as Arabic and Chinese) has been gleaned from ancient myths, legends, and poetry. These works, which are among the finest artistic creations of nomadic peoples, were originally sung or recited at clan and tribal gatherings and passed orally from one generation to the next. The three excerpts that follow were composed by camel-herding peoples of the Arabian peninsula. They provide some of our surest insights into pre-Islamic culture among the nomads of that region and reflect values characteristic of pastoral cultures in most areas of the globe.

Yet envy not even him of whom they say:
Ripeness and wisdom came with length of
days.
Love life—live long—live safely—
All the same
Long living leaves its furrow on thy face.
Time has taught me something; all other
things have lied;
The wasting of the days lets things
unguessed stand clear.
And I know this at last: how powerful men
use power.
All powerful men get praise, whatever
shame they earn.

This too I know: poverty wears great hearts
down,
And the wearing's like the lick of a rawhide
whip.
A poor man looks at glories he can never
climb
And sits among the rest silent, silent, silent.
Endure. For a man free-born only
endurance is honor.
Time is fell; there's neither help nor heal of
his hurt.
Even if it availed a man to obey his fear,
Or a man could parry trouble by any low
consent,
Still to endure the full brunt, cut and thrust
Of Fate with a manly front, to endure's the
only honor.

Questions: What attitudes toward life does the first verse reflect? Do these verses picture humans in charge of their own fate or at the mercy of some predetermined destiny? What does the second verse tell us about nomadic social structure among the early Arabs? Does it suggest that birth or merit determines one's place in the social order? How much social mobility do you think there was in this society? What sorts of values does the third verse express? How would you compare them with the values dominant in your own culture?

position in her new household depended on her ability to produce healthy children, preferably sons.

Although the bards of many nomadic peoples told of young men's infatuation with legendary beauties and ill-fated romances, marriages were primarily alliances between families and clans. In some societies, the bride was considered a piece of property as the men from her own family and her prospective in-laws haggled over the number of camels or mares to be included in her dowry or paid as a bride-price to her kinsmen. Once married, young women had little choice but to make the best of a life in transit dominated by domestic tasks such as breaking and reestab-

lishing camp, cooking, sewing, and rearing children. Women of all ages had to endure the natural hardships and insecurities of nomadic life with little of the honor or excitement that could be enjoyed by their warrior fathers, husbands, and sons.

In some nomadic societies, women held positions of prestige and power. Among the Samaritans of west central Asia, for example, women served as priests, fought in wars, and even ruled. Among the Mongols, it was the custom for the young widows of deceased tribal leaders to rule as regents until their infant or adolescent sons came of age. Instances of strong-willed women, such as the Mongol dowager



Figure 4.5 This drawing depicts a Mongol hunter in pursuit of wild game. Notice how the hunter's ability to ride and guide his horse with his legs alone leaves his arms free to shoot his bow and arrow. Peoples like the Mongols hunted wild game to provide additional meat in their diets and add furs to their wardrobes. But the meat, milk, and hides derived from their domesticated herd animals were overwhelmingly the main source of food, clothing, tools, and shelter.

Nomolun, who was slain while trying to avenge the death of six of her seven sons at the hands of a raiding band, do appear in nomadic tales and legends. But such instances of female dominance are remarkable for their rarity rather than suggestive of a recurring pattern or a social norm.

Despite the emphasis on individual skills in nomadic warrior cultures, pastoral groups generally have displayed some degree of social stratification and dependence. Some households and kin groups control much larger herds and pasturelands than others; some families own neither. The kin groups that control substantial resources become the patrons and protectors of weaker and less wealthy families within the band or tribal group. In exchange for access to the resources of their patrons, the less wealthy

become the loyal clients of clan and tribal notables and warrior-leaders. These clients help to raise the patrons' livestock, assist them in times of feuding, raiding, or war, and defer to their decisions in matters of tribal politics or family difficulties.

Beyond gender and patron-client distinctions, there has been little social differentiation in nomadic societies, largely because of the lack or low level of occupational specialization. Although smiths who could forge tools and weapons were revered specialists in some nomadic societies, in most only the shamans or religious experts were distinguished by occupation from the rest of the population. In addition to their ceremonial roles, shamans also served as healers, soothsayers, and, in some cultures, keepers of the tribal traditions.

NOMADS AND CIVILIZATION

■ *Although nomads generally have been regarded as cruel and destructive barbarians by the chroniclers of sedentary peoples, the actual history of their interaction with civilized centers has been many-sided and complex. Nomads have raided, pillaged, and conquered civilized centers, but they have also served as the protectors of failing dynasties and long-term rulers in their own right. Throughout human history, nomadic peoples have traded with sedentary peoples, exchanged ideas, weapons, and tools with them, and served as key links between the regional pools of civilized life.*

The image of nomadic peoples throughout recorded history has been created mainly by hostile town-dwelling writers. Not surprisingly, that image has rarely been flattering. In biblical times, Jewish prophets such as Jeremiah depicted the nomads as cruel and without mercy and declared that they were agents by which God chastised his people for their wickedness. The peoples of the crumbling Roman Empire believed that the Huns were the offspring of evil spirits and witches and that their most infamous leader, Attila, was “the scourge of God.” The Chinese regarded the many nomadic peoples who pressed in on their walled northern borders as uncouth and backward barbarians whose brutality and delight in destruction posed a constant threat to their civilization. The coming of the *chichimecs* in Mesoamerica and the Mongols in the regions that fringed the steppes of central Asia was equated with great natural catastrophes, such as earthquakes in Mesoamerica and the spread of the plague in central Asia.

In fact, contacts between nomadic and farming or town-dwelling peoples were often more regular, peaceful, and mutually beneficial than these stereotypes suggest. Many accounts of pastoral peoples depict them living in self-sufficient isolation. In this view, pastoralists had little need of contacts with sedentary peoples. Thus, nomadic incursions into settled agrarian regions are routinely accounted for by either natural calamities, which drive pastoralists into civilized domains, or political weaknesses in the latter, which tempt nomadic warriors to loot and pillage.

Recent research suggests that this view of sedentary–nomad relations is inaccurate. It oversimplifies the motives that have led nomads to move into areas dominated by agrarian states. It also ignores the fact that nomadic peoples have often had to fend off attacks by neighboring sedentary societies and attempts to settle in their pasture lands. All but the most isolated nomadic peoples maintained regular contacts with farming villages and urban centers. Although nomads sometimes have attempted to take food and other products of the sedentary areas by force, more often they have gained them by trading goods or providing services.

Most nomadic peoples traded regularly with peasants and town dwellers for grains and vegetables that could not be grown on the steppes or desert fringe. They also traded animals and animal products for cotton or silk clothing, iron tools and weapons, and food for their animals. Sedentary peoples normally were less in need than the nomads of what the two exchanged in trade, but the meat and dairy products bartered by the pastoralists could provide important supplements to the largely vegetarian diet of many cultivating peoples. In addition, nomads traded valuable furs and hides to neighboring sedentary peoples and eventually to market centers thousands of miles away. For sedentary peoples in areas such as China, Sub-Saharan Africa, India, and western Asia, the nomadic steppes were also a prime source of war-horses.

Nomads as Mercenaries and Empire Builders

Despite ongoing contacts and nomadic contributions to civilized development, the most common responses of settled peoples to pastoralists have been fear and hostility. Their military prowess and the ecological crises that have forced nomads to raid sedentary areas help to explain these reactions. Very often, sedentary peoples have tried to ward off nomadic assaults by ensuring through tribute payments, which the Chinese aptly called goodwill gifts, that their pastoral neighbors were well supplied with the goods they might want from the towns and villages. Rulers of sedentary states have also hired nomadic peoples as mercenary soldiers. These mercenaries rode into battle with the ruler’s own armies and also served as frontier defenders against other pastoralists or the forces of rival empires. Before the rise of the first Islamic empires, for example, the rulers of Byzantium

and Persia guarded their common borderlands with colonies of sedentary and nomadic Arabs.

This practice could prove costly to the patron state. With the conversion of these frontier peoples to Islam in the 7th century C.E., Byzantium and Persia were particularly vulnerable to attack by the very peoples who had once defended them. In China, border guardians, such as the Zhou, repeatedly built rival states of their own. On a number of occasions these upstart kingdoms overthrew the dynasties they had originally been hired to protect. Even when nomadic mercenaries remained loyal to the sedentary rulers who recruited them, they proved difficult to tax and often looted the peasants who lived near their camps. These dangers may explain why strong dynasties were reluctant to recruit nomadic allies, preferring to build long walls, such as the Great Wall in China, or chains of fortified garrisons, such as those of the Romans, to keep pastoral peoples out of their empires.

Whether they began as mercenaries within sedentary zones or as raiders from without, again and again nomadic groups have overthrown dynasties established in the agrarian cores. At times, nomadic victories have interrupted civilized development, as did the Hyksos' invasion of Egypt in the 2nd millennium B.C.E. In other instances, nomadic incursions have hastened the end of once-flourishing civilizations, as did the Aryan migrations into India in the 1st millennium B.C.E. and the attacks of peoples such as the Hittites and Kassites on the empires of Mesopotamia throughout the ancient period.

Just as often, however, nomadic invaders have captured rather than destroyed the targeted empires and civilizations. After seizing the throne of a defeated dynasty, nomads have governed largely through the institutions and personnel of conquered peoples. The nomadic warriors who have settled down in sedentary zones often have adopted elements of the culture of their farmers and town dwellers. Chinese history provides some of the best examples of this pattern, but as the experience of invaders such as the Mongol conquerors of China in the 13th century C.E. demonstrates, often the nomads struggled to remain culturally distinct from the subject peoples.

Soft Living and the Lure of the Desert and Steppe

Despite the new rulers' attraction to the luxuries of civilized towns, nomadic peoples have been suspi-

cious of or antagonistic toward the "soft" living of city dwellers. The great Muslim historian *Ibn-Khaldun* (C.E. 1332–1406) incorporated this ambivalence in his theory of a three-generation cycle for dynasties founded by nomadic warriors. In the first generation, the ruler is vigorous and the kingdom strong. But each succeeding ruler, reared amid the temptations and luxury of palace and harem, is weaker and less occupied with the affairs of state. By the third (or fourth) generation, the successor of the hardy nomadic warrior-conquerors is a dissolute wastrel, incapable of defending his throne from internal enemies and foreign invasions. The dynasty collapses, and another vigorous warrior dynasty is established by new invaders from the steppes or desert fringe.

Although the histories of dynasties founded by nomadic chieftains have varied greatly in duration and vigor, the general patterns Ibn-Khaldun described have proved remarkably accurate. At times, warrior-conquerors fled the soft living of the palace centers for the rugged life of their steppe or desert encampments. Some may have remained in the new capital but longed for the simpler life of their homelands, a sentiment that is wonderfully captured in the following verse by the wife of an early Islamic ruler:

A tent flapping in the desert air is dearer than
this towering house;

Wind rustling over the sandy waste hath a
sweeter sound than all the king's trumpets;

A crust in the nook of a wandering tent more
relish than all these delicate cates
[sweetmeats];

And a noble clansman's more to my lust than
the paunchy longbeards about me here.

It is said that the great Mongol conqueror *Chinggis Khan* saw only potential pasturelands in the intensely cultivated millet fields of northern China. Most pastoral conquerors, such as the Aryans in India, tended to destroy or neglect the irrigation systems of the areas that came under their rule. Often, the dynasties established by nomadic conquerors were overthrown within a century or two by internal rebellions or the successful challenges of new invaders from the steppes or desert. Those who had not assimilated the culture of the conquered peoples or become mercenary troops in the armies of the new dynasty returned to the steppes from which their forebears had come.

IN DEPTH

Nomads and Cross-Civilization Contacts and Exchanges

Through much of recorded human history, nomadic peoples have been key agents of contact between sedentary, farming peoples and town dwellers in centers of civilization across the globe.

Nomadic peoples pioneered all the great overland routes that linked the civilized cores of Eurasia in ancient times and the Middle Ages. The most famous were the fabled *silk routes* that ran from western China across the mountains and steppes of central Asia to the civilized centers of Mesopotamia in the last millennium B.C.E. and to Rome, the Islamic heartlands, and western Europe in the first millennium and a half C.E. (Map 4.2).

Chinese rulers at one end of these trading networks, and Roman emperors and later Islamic

sultans at the other end, often had to send their armies to do battle with hostile nomads, whose raids threatened to cut off the flow of trade. But perhaps more often, pastoral peoples played critical roles in establishing and expanding trading links. For periodic payments by merchants and imperial bureaucrats, they provided protection from bandits and raiding parties for caravans passing through their grazing lands. For further payments, nomadic peoples supplied animals to transport both the merchants' goods and the food and drink needed by those in the caravan parties. At times, pastoralists themselves took charge of transport and trading, but it was more common for the trading operations to be controlled by specialized merchants. These merchants were based either in the urban centers of the civilized cores or in the trading towns that grew up along the Silk Road in central Asia, the oases of Arabia, and the savanna zones that bor-



Map 4.2 Main African-Eurasian Trade Routes in the Classical Age.

dered on the north and south the vast Sahara desert in Africa.

Until they were supplanted by the railroads and steamships of the Industrial Revolution, the overland trading routes of Eurasia and the Americas, along with comparable networks established for sailing vessels, were the most important channels for contacts between civilizations. Religions such as Buddhism and Islam spread peacefully along the trading routes throughout central Asia, Persia, and Africa. Artistic motifs and styles, such as those developed in the cosmopolitan Hellenistic world created by Alexander the Great's conquests, were spread by trading contacts in northern Africa, northern India, and western China.

Inventions that were vital to the continued growth and expansion of the civilized cores were carried in war and peace by traders or nomadic peoples from one center to another. For example, central Asian steppe nomads who had been converted to Islam clashed with the armies of the Chinese Empire in the 8th century C.E. The victorious Muslims found craftspeople among their prisoners who knew the secrets of making paper, which had been invented many centuries earlier by the Chinese. The combination of nomadic mobility and established trading links resulted in the rapid diffusion of papermaking techniques to Mesopotamia and Egypt in the 8th and 9th centuries and across northern Africa to Europe in the centuries that followed.



Figure 4.6 For millennia, camel caravans have made their way through the desert terrain of Arabia. Caravans were key links for trade and cultural exchange between the civilizations of Africa and Eurasia. Depending on the area and trading route in question, caravans could vary in size from a few camels and people to collections of humans and animals numbering in the hundreds. Some traders carried their goods directly to markets, and others brought them to long-distance caravans at key regional centers of finance and exchange.

Nomadic warriors also contributed to the spread of new military technologies and modes of warfare, particularly across the great Eurasian land mass. Sedentary peoples often adopted the nomads' reliance on heavy cavalry and hit-and-run tactics. Saddles, bits, and bow and arrow designs developed by nomadic herders were avidly imitated by farming societies. And defense against nomadic assaults inspired some of the great engineering feats of the preindustrial world, most notably the Great Wall of China (discussed in Chapter 5). It also spurred the development of gunpowder and cannons in China, where the threat of nomadic incursions persisted well into the 19th century.

In addition, nomadic peoples have served as agents for the transfer of food crops between distant civilized cores, even if they did not usually themselves cultivate the plants being exchanged. In a less constructive vein, nomadic warriors have played a key role in transmitting diseases. In the best-documented instance of this pattern, Mongol cavalymen carried the bacterium that causes the strain of the plague that came to be known as the Black Death from central Asia to China in the 14th century. They may also have transmitted it to the West, where it devastated the port cities of the Black Sea region and was later carried by merchant ships to the Middle East and southern Europe.

Questions: What other groups played roles as intermediaries between civilizations in early global history? What features of the nomads' culture and society rendered them ideal agents for transmitting technology, trade goods, crops, and diseases between different cultural zones? Why have the avenues of exchange they provided been open only for limited time spans and then blocked for years or decades at a time? What agents of transmission have taken the place of nomadic peoples in recent centuries?

isolated peoples. But the harsh environments in which they lived and the limitations in scale and occupation imposed by their lifestyle have made it impossible for nomads to build civilizations of their own or to dominate, for long, those developed by sedentary peoples. Steppe peoples, such as the Hittites, Mongols, and Turks, could forge great empires by winning political control over one or more civilized cores. But their dynasties usually were short-lived and their rule dependent on the personnel, skills, and institutions of the conquered sedentary peoples. The more stable and productive economic base of sedentary societies has allowed them to carry much larger populations on much smaller land areas than nomads. It has also led to occupational diversity, a capacity to build enduring, large-scale state systems, and a level of accomplishment in technology, science, and the arts that was far beyond anything nomadic peoples could match.

As a result, nomadic peoples have periodically affected the course of civilized history, and for brief periods have dominated it. For example, Indo-European nomadic invaders such as the Aryans and Hittites played major roles in the rise and fall of civilizations in western India, Egypt, and the Fertile Crescent. In China, nomadic peoples vitally affected the rise of the Shang and Zhou kingdoms, which laid the basis for civilization in eastern Asia. In later chapters we shall see that new waves of nomadic assaults in Eurasia, Africa, and the Americas had much to do with the rise of great classical dynasties, such as the Guptas in India and the Hun in China, and even whole civilizations, such as the Roman Empire in the Mediterranean. This impact continued throughout the five continents where civilizations developed, building to the great Mongol and Turkic expansions from the steppes of central Asia in the 11th to 14th centuries C.E. But most of human history has been lived and made by sedentary agrarian peoples and the city dwellers they supported.

Further Readings

For a highly readable application of the patterns of ecological adaptation, see Lucien M. Hanks's *Rice and Man: Agricultural Ecology in Southeast Asia* (1972). The best general work on nomadic societies, which covers a wide range of different types over much of Eurasia and Africa, is A. M. Khazanov's *Nomads and the Outside World* (1984). A volume edited by Wolfgang Weisleder on *The Nomadic Alternative* (1978) contains several excellent case studies on different types of Afroasian nomads. For insights into the ecological bases of nomadic and sedentary societies and the interaction between the two, see Owen Lattimore's *Studies in Frontier History* (1962). René Grousset's *Empire of the Steppes: A History of Central Asia* (1970) covers some of the most important nomadic societies in terms of their impact on sedentary peoples from prehistoric times through the centuries of Mongol dominance. On the development of

Conclusion

Nomads and the Pattern of Global History

Their military prowess and greater dependence on the products of sedentary peoples have given nomadic pastoralists a far greater role in world history than other, more

nomadism among the Middle Eastern Arabs, see Richard Bulliet's *The Camel and the Wheel* (1975). Jacques Maquet's *Civilizations of Black Africa* (1972) includes introductory sections on the cattle-herding nomads of Africa.

On the Web

An excellent overview of the inner working of nomadic societies, past and present, which includes portraits of two such societies in the western Sahara and in western Tibet can be found at <http://life.csu.edu.au/pta/gtansw/infogta/publications/nomads.html>.

While horse and camel nomads (http://a2z.srv.lycos.com/wguide/wire/wire/_385880955_9685_3_1.html and <http://www.unesco.org/whc/exhibits/africa-c.htm>) are familiar factors in the evolution of civilization, the less well-known reindeer nomads also have a place in the history, as two web sites (<http://www.enontekio.fi/eng->

[lish/info/pasami.html](http://info/pasami.html) and <http://www.museum.state.il.us/exhibits/changing/journey/hunters-domest.html>) remind us.

Nomads without animal transport also made their mark, as is exemplified by the place of the Chichimecs in Mesoamerican history (<http://www.wsu.edu/~dec/CIVAMRCA/AZTECS.HTM>).

Nomadic and pastoral peoples played a major role in the functioning of major conduits of long distance trade and cultural exchange in the ancient world, such as the Silk Road. A virtual tour of the Silk Road center of Dunhuang is available at <http://www.silk-road.com>. You can take a virtual journey across the entire length of the Silk Road from China to Venice—a journey very few took in ancient times—at <http://academy.d20.co.edu/cms/Ziek/The%20Silk%20Road%20Index.html>. The “Spice Road” across southwest Asia to Petra and beyond can be travelled at http://www.avu.cz/star/maps_txt.html.