

HSIUNG-NU INNOVATIONS

Overview Despite the many gaps in our knowledge about them, the Hsiung-nu had a profound influence on the history of not only the eastern steppe lands bordering China and China itself, but also on the historical development of lands and societies as far west as the Roman empire.

Pastoralist Empire

The Hsiung-nu were the first pastoralist people to create an empire, and the process by which they created their empire would be emulated by all successive pastoral empires. While the term 'Hsiung-nu' was applied to one tribal group, probably of Siberian origin, with its own customs and language, it also came to be used for the Hsiung-nu confederation which consisted of numerous tribal groupings. While these pastoral groups all had similar lifestyles and had been heavily influenced by the culture of the Scythians to the west, they came from diverse linguistic and ethnic backgrounds. This pattern of incorporating other pastoral tribes into a state under the leadership of one particular group would be repeated by other steppe peoples in the future.

In addition, the various types of interaction between the Hsiung-nu and the Han dynasty, based on the relative power of each side, would also be repeated by future Chinese dynasties in their relations with peoples of the steppe. Expansion of the Great Wall, diplomacy, alliances, trade, and the use of military force would continue to be used in different combinations in the following centuries.

Hsiung-nu – Huns Relationship

Perhaps the greatest historical impact of the Hsiung-nu was their link to Huns who would spread into Central Asia, India, Iran and eventually to Europe. The debate over whether the two groups were somehow related dates back to the 18th century, and generally focused on determining the ethnic identities of the Hsiung-nu and the Huns and establishing the Huns' direct descent from the Hsiung-nu. Such an approach encountered difficulties, difficulties which mostly disappeared when the two groups were viewed as mixed, tribal confederations. The question was now one of determining if the ruling tribes of the Huns claimed to originate in the lands of the Hsiung-nu, and if they claimed to be the political successors of the Hsiung-nu.

Documents dating from the late 3rd and early 4th centuries CE have helped to answer these issues. A letter written in 313 by a Sogdian merchant in Kansu mentioning the sack of the city of Luoyang by the Southern Hsiung-nu two years earlier specifically refers to the Hsiung-nu as Huns. Translations of Buddhist sutras dating from 280 and 308 and made by a Bactrian monk that were discovered at Dunhuang state that the *Huna* (the Indian form of the name Hun) are the Hsiung-nu, a state on the borders of China.

These sources all indicate that in the early 4th century the Huns in Central Asia were clearly considered to be linked to the Hsiung-nu. It is very likely that genuine Hsiung-nu groups were part of the Hunnic confederation, but probably as a minority. In addition to textual evidence, archaeological excavations support this link between the Hsiung-nu and Huns. One object in particular, the Hunnic cauldron which has been found at a number of sites in Hungary, has a clear Hsiung-nu origin. The fact that the Hunnic cauldrons all appear to have been used and then buried on river banks, exactly like Hsiung-nu cauldrons, demonstrates a cultural link between the two groups.

Readings

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Discussion Questions

1. How did the Hsiung-nu influence the course of Chinese history during the Han dynasty?
2. What made the question of determining the links between the Hsiung-nu and the later Huns so difficult to resolve?