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HSIUNG-NU HISTORY

Contents

POLITICAL HISTORY

GOVERNMENT

Overview The Hsiung-nu (匈奴, written *Xiôngnú* in the pinyin romanization system) were a pastoral nomadic people originally based in the Ordos region in the large northern loop of the Yellow River who dominated the eastern Eurasian Steppe from the 3rd century BCE until the late 1st-early 2nd century CE. First mentioned in 318 BCE in Chinese sources from the Zhou Dynasty, the Hsiung-nu were defeated by general Meng T'ien of the Ch'in Dynasty in 215 BCE, and driven north of their homeland in the Yellow River valley which was subsequently fortified. Led into the region of the Mongolian Plateau by T'ou-man, their first known *shan-yü* (or *ch'an-yü,* 單于, pinyin *Chányú*, the title of the Hsiun-nu ruler), the Hsiung-nu were reunified under T'ou-man's son Mo-tun in 209 BCE. Mo-tun proceeded to expand Hsiung-nu territory by defeating neighboring peoples, and in 200 BCE defeated Gaozu, the first Han emperor. In 198 BCE Emperor Kao-tsu implemented the policy of *ho-ch'in*, the marrying of Chinese princesses with foreign rulers together with regular supplies of gifts and goods, in exchange for peace. In addition, the lands in the Ordos beyond the Ch'in defensive walls were returned to the Hsiung-nu. In the following years the Hsiung-nu would state became a confederacy of tribes in the eastern steppe zone. The arrangement with the Han continued to 134 BCE when hostilities between the Han and the Hsiung-nu resumed, resulting in the Hsiung-nu being driven north of the Gobi Desert in 121 and 119 BCE.

Governmental Organization

According to the *Shih chi*, a Han dynasty history from the 1st century BCE, the Hsiung-nu government was a three-level hierarchy:

a. The *shan-yü*, the *T'u-ch'i* ("wise") Kings of the Left and the Right, the *Lu-li* kings of the left and right, the generals of the left and right, the commandants of the left and right, the left and right household administrators and the *Ku-tu* marquises of the left and right. This class of officials administered the empire as a whole with the *shan-yü* being the single point of contact between the Hsiung-nu empire and the Han government, both in war and negotiations.

b. Twenty-four leaders, usually imperial governors, with the title "Ten Thousand Horsemen", a reference to the number of cavalry soldiers they were supposed to have under their command. They were almost always either members of the Hsiung-nu aristocracy, or relatives of the *shan-yü*. Despite their title, only the most important officials actually commanded ten thousand men; less important members of this class might command only a few thousand men.

c. A group of various indigenous leaders and officials (vassal kings, tribal leaders, advisors, commanders, etc.) of unknown number based in their own territories.

Although the *shan-yü* was theoretically an absolute ruler, in reality tribal leaders remained relatively autonomous within the confederacy that constituted the Hsiung-nu empire. This flexibility contributed significantly to the Hsiung-nu's long dominance of the eastern Eurasian Steppe.

Policy

Internal policy of the Hsiung-nu was primarily aimed at maintaining the delicate balance of power that existed between the tribal leaders within the Hsiung-nu Empire and the *shan-yü* and his officials. Should a tribal leader become dissatisfied he had only three options: rebel, go south and seek refuge in China, or move west to lands beyond the *shan-yü*'s control. Any one of these actions could seriously impact the strength of the Hsiung-nu state.

External policy of the Hsiung-nu was concerned with two major issues: maintaining the physical security of their empire in the face of the much larger, wealthier and populous Han state; and maintaining its economic security. Security could be achieved through diplomacy alone, or through the use of military power followed by diplomacy. However, in order for the Hsiung-nu to counter the Han dynasty's larger armies, the Hsiung-nu needed to utilize classic nomadic tactics such as the feigned retreat and skillful employment of mounted archers, and their atttacks had to be quick and hard-hitting in order to impress the Han with their military power. Impressing the Han with their military might also aided the Hsiung-nu in maintaining one of the most important elements in their state's economy – free trade in the border towns. Although annual tribute from the Han as agreed to in several treaties was symbollically important, and perhaps helped the *shan-yü* to maintain the loyalty of his closest nobles, the free movement of goods and products in both directions across the Hsiung-nu – Han border was vital for the economic health of the Hsiung-nu state.

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Discussion Questions

1. What was the relationship of the Xiongnu *shan-yü* to the other two tiers of government and what were the restrictions on the *shan-yü*'s power?

2. What were the two main concerns of the Xiongnu rulers and how did they attempt to attain results favorable to their state?

MILITARY

Overview – Throughout the history of the Hsiung-nu and their empire the army played a central role, not only as the means by which the empire was created, but also as a major element in the identity of the Hsiung-nu as a people.

Training - Like other nomadic peoples of central Eurasia the Hsiung-nu boys began to ride horses from an early age and learned the use of the bow and arrow on horseback. They sharpened these skills by hunting, and the Han Dynasty historian Ssu-ma Ch'ien (Sima Qian) in his work the *Shiji* claimed that all young men of the Hsiung-nu were able to act as armed cavalry in times of war.

Weapons & Tactics - Descriptions of Hsiung-nu weapons and tactics can be found in the *Shiji* and other Chinese chronicles; they state that the bow and arrow were used at long ranges, while swords

and spears were used at close quarters. Hsiung-nu tactics were also typical of nomadic pastoralists and included feigned retreats, swarming, continual harassment to wear down the enemy, and surprise attacks. The Hsiung-nu only closed with an enemy when they were confident of victory, and would retreat if the course of the battle turned against them.

Roles - The Hsiung-nu army was used in a variety of roles throughout the history of the Hsiung-nu empire. It was obviously the main instrument in creating the empire by either conquering neighboring small states outright, or intimidating others to submit. Against the Chinese the Hsiung-nu's use of their army was more nuanced. In periods of Chinese weakness, such as the late Ch'in (Qin) Dynasty and early Han Dynasty, the Hsiung-nu army was able to conquer large areas of the Ordos region since it faced little or no Chinese resistance. Later, as the strength of the Han Dynasty grew, the Hsiung-nu army could be used defensively, to hold Hsiung-nu territory.

Border Raids - However, there were other ways to use Hsiung-nu military power. One was a booty raid, a quick attack, usually on border territories, generally for the purpose of gaining quick wealth. While such raids could be launched in any season and were potentially very profitable, the resulting destruction could seriously impact the border trade with China, a vital part of the Hsiung-nu economy. What limited, destructive border raids could be used for was as a means of persuasion. The threat of such raids was used to extract tribute from the Han on terms dictated by the Hsiung-nu. Similarly, the Han occasionally shut down markets in border towns that traded with the Hsiung-nu in an effort to strike the Hsiung-nu economically. Attacks against border fortifications and raids into Chinese territory along the border were used to force the Han to reopen the border town markets.

Decline - Such tactics were effective for the Hsiung-nu so long as the Han rulers believed that they were unable to match the Hsiung-nu army. However, beginning in 133 BCE, the Han conducted a series of military and diplomatic operations against the Hsiung-nu that continued for decades. On several occasions, when forced into a direct battle with Han armies, the Hsiung-nu suffered severe defeats. Despite their cost, the combination of military defeats, loss of allies and loss of tribute weakened the Hsiung-nu and in 60 BCE led to the first of what would be a series of civil wars over leadership of the Hsiung-nu, and a split into the southern Hsiung-nu who submitted to the Han, and the northern Hsiung-nu who attempted to remain independent. Neither group was ever able to revive the Hsiung-nu state or its military power, and the northern Hsiung-nu collapsed in the late 1st century CE, while the last *shan-yü* of the southern Hsiung-nu died around 220 CE.

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Discussion Questions

1. What were the characteristic tactics of the Hsiung-nu army and why were they difficult for Chinese armies to adapt?

2. What was the political function of Hsiung-nu military power in its relations with the Han Dynasty?

ECONOMIC HISTORY

Part I : Innovations
Part II : Trade

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 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 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 their 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.

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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?

TRADE

Overview Although contemporary historical sources are silent on this subject, it is quite likely that trade between the nomadic Hsiung-nu and the sedentary Chinese had been conducted at a private level for many years. However, with the establishment of their empire Hsiung-nu trade expanded and became more complex, forming an integral element of their empire. Broadly speaking, Hsiung-nu trade was conducted in two main areas, with China to the south and with the oasis communities that ringed the Tarim Basin to the west.

Trade with China

The Hsiung-nu acquired commodities from their powerful neighbor to the south through several methods. Some luxury goods and foodstuffs, primarily for the *shan-yü*’s court or for distribution as prestige gifts to the nobles, were acquired through the *ho-ch’in* (和親 pinyin *heqin*) system of marriage alliance. These treaties not only provided royal Chinese brides for the Hsiung-nu ruler, but also included an annual tribute in exchange for peace on the borders.

Beginning in 200 BCE and continuing well into the second half of the 1st century BCE, the *ho-ch’in* peace agreements made by the Han Dynasty at their maximum provided an annual tribute of approximately 2800 bushels of wheat, almost 20,00 liters of wine, over 92,000 meters of silk, and relatively small quantities of assorted luxury goods. While the quantities of wheat and wine were merely sufficient for the needs of the *shan-yü*’s court, and the various luxury goods were intended as gifts for the *shan-yü* from the Han, the quantities of silk provided to the Hsiung-nu could be redistributed to nobles and tribal leaders or traded in other locations.

While tribute from China might suffice to meet the demands of the shan-yü, his court and the elite of the empire, the demand for Chinese goods by ordinary tribesmen could only be met by raiding or regular border trade. Booty raids could be extremely profitable, but regular trade at border markets was more reliable; as a result, the Hsiung-nu (and occasionally with local Chinese support) pressured Han rulers to open border markets. The Han, however, were somewhat suspicious of cross-border trade fearing both the drain of Chinese resources and that the Hsiung-nu could acquire militarily valuable goods such as iron and weapons.

Despite these reservations, in the reign of the Han emperor Wen Ti (r. 180-157 BCE) officially sponsored border markets were opened on a large-scale. The Hsiung-nu were now able to acquire Chinese foodstuffs, prestige goods, and other goods more readily, and the Chinese purchased horses and other animals for transport, furs, carpets and precious stones. Despite the Chinese ban on trade in iron and weapons with the Hsiung-nu, smuggling was widespread and the Hsiung-nu were able to obtain these restricted goods with relative ease. The end results of both the *ho-ch’in* treaties and the border markets was that the Han gained a degree of influence in developments on the other side of the border and that, in spite of the occasional violence, corruption, deceit and smuggling that accompanied the cross-border trade, the Hsiung-nu and the Han Chinese developed a degree of mutual reliance in this period. However, when the Han were able to engage the Hsiung-nu militarily in the latter half of the 2nd century BCE, one of their first moves was to end cross-border trade.

Trade with the Tarim Basin

Under the leadership of Motun Shan-yü (r. 209-174 BCE) the Hsiung-nu gained control over twenty-six city-states in Kansu and Sinkiang first by inflicting a major defeat on the Han at the Battle of Baideng (

白登之戰) in 200 BCE, and then destroying the Yüeh-chih (月氏pinyin Yuezhi), a nomadic pastoral people who inhabited the grasslands of western Kansu, in 175 BCE. These conquests not only gave the Hsiung-nu control over the lucrative trade routes that passed through these regions, but also allowed the Hsiung-nu to collect tribute in goods from these oasis city-states. Rich silk, wool, linen and cotton textiles; metalwork; grapes; alfalfa; jade and other precious stones were collected and then traded to the Chinese at border markets or distributed among the Hsiung-nu elite and tribal leaders as gifts. The fact that the Han worked to take control of this trade before they attempted to take political control of the region underscores the importance of this trade to the Hsiung-nu.

Trade with Other Peoples

Other than China and the western regions of the Tarim Basin, southern Siberia was the only other region that provided anything of commercial value to the Hsiung-nu. Siberian tribes under Hsiung-nu domination provided tribute in the form of furs that could be traded with China.

Discussion Questions

1. What were the links between trade and politics in the cross-border trade between the Hsiung-nu empire and Han China?

2. Despite their need for certain products of the steppe regions, why was China hesitant to establish formal border markets for trade with the Hsiung-nu?

3. What were the advantages and disadvantages of this cross-border trade for the Chinese and for the Hsiung-nu?

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SOCIAL HISTORY

Part I : Social Structure
Part II : Gender Relations

SOCIAL STRUCTURE

Overview Our knowledge of Hsiung-nu social classes is limited due to the nature of the sources for Hsiung-nu history. Since the Hsiung-nu left no written sources of their own, scholars must rely on outside, foreign sources (mostly Chinese), and archaeology to reconstruct the history and society of the Hsiung-nu. Since these outside accounts were written by peoples whose relations with the Hsiung-nu were often hostile, and the finds from archaeological excavations are open to diverse interpretation, these sources must be used with caution. Nevertheless, they can provide us with some information on the social classes of the Hsiung-nu.

Ruling Elites and Incorporated Tribes The social classes of Hsiung-nu society are mirrored in the organization and structure of the Hsiung-nu state. However, class in Hsiung-nu society was a complex issue, the interplay of social rank, lineage, and tribal affiliation. The description of the Hsiung-nu state given in the *Shiji* (2nd century BCE) provides a clear description of this mix. The Hsiung-nu ruler, the *Shan-yü*, the Wise Kings of the Left and Right, other commanders, administrators, and Ku-tu marquises who assisted the *Shan-yü* in administering the empire, and all other members of the *Shan-yü*'s court all came from the leaders of the core tribes of the Hsiung-nu. Presumably, by putting the indigenous leaders of the main Hsiung-nu tribes in positions of authority the loyalty of the ordinary tribesman to the *Shan-yü* was secure since they were linked to the *Shan-yü* both directly and through their tribal leaders' loyalty to the ruler. In addition, the highest offices in the *Shan-yü*'s court were hereditary, filled by members of three aristocratic families.

Below these officials were the leaders of the tribes that had been incorporated into the Hsiung-nu state through alliances or military conquest. Technically, the leader of an incorporated tribe was a member of the imperial hierarchy, linked to the *Shan-yü* through one of the twenty-four imperial commanders who functioned as the *Shan-yü*'s representatives to the incorporated tribes. Despite these ties to the *Shan-yü* and his administrators, incorporated tribal leaders remained relatively autonomous since their power was ultimately based on the support of his own tribe.

Non-nomadic peoples The Hsiung-nu aristocracy and ordinary tribesmen, as well as the leaders and members of the incorporated tribes were free, nomadic people. However, there are indications from both written sources and archaeological excavations that there were also agriculturists in Hsiung-nu territory. These farmers appear to have been Chinese who were either captured by the Hsiung-nu, bought by the Hsiung-nu as slaves from other tribes, or Chinese who fled oppressive conditions in Chinese territory by moving into Hsiung-nu lands. Whatever their origin, they were forcibly resettled, often in the vicinity of Hsiung-nu fortresses, and then either grew crops or produced handicrafts for the benefit of the Hsiung-nu. Whether these Chinese groups were considered slaves, free or fell into some other category is unclear.

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Discussion Questions

1. How is the division of Hsiung-nu social classes reflected in the organization of the Hsiung-nu state?

2. Why were the non-nomadic peoples living in Hsiung-nu territory vital to the Hsiung-nu state?

GENDER RELATIONS

Overview Hsiung-nu society was a male-dominated society and varying roles and the social status of Hsiung-nu men is well documented in the historical sources. However, in these same sources of information about the Hsiung-nu practically no information about the role and status of women in Hsiung-nu society is provided. From what is known about women in other, better documented nomadic pastoral societies in central Eurasia, it is likely that Hsiung-nu women had a higher status and relatively more

freedom than women in settled, agricultural societies. In addition to their traditional roles as wives, mothers, and their responsibilites in the campsites, Hsiung-nu women were probably invaluable partners in caring for the tribe's herds.

Royal Brides Although Hsiung-nu women are almost invisible in the historical record, there is one group of women in Hsiung-nu society who are mentioned more frequently – the Chinese princesses sent as brides to the Hsiung-nu rulers as part of a peace alliance known as the *ho-ch'in* (pinyin *heqin*). However, the status of these royal brides or their role, if any, in Hsiung-nu court life is unknown.

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Discussion Questions

1. Why do the surviving historical sources provide almost no information on the role and status of women in Hsiung-nu society?

2. Why were Chinese princesses included among the gifts provided to the *Shan-yü* as party of the *ho-ch'in* treaties?

CULTURAL HISTORY

Part I : Art
Part II : Religion

ART

Overview Examples of Hsiung-nu art come almost exclusively from archaeological excavations of Hsiung-nu burials. As a result, our knowledge of Hsiung-nu art is restricted to works produced for the Hsiung-nu elite and made from materials (metals) that can survive for centuries buried in the earth.

Objects and Stylistic Features

The vast majority of Hsiung-nu art has survived in the form of metal belt plaques, or metal appliqué ornaments; jewelry with artistic motifs has survived in more limited quantities. Hsiung-nu art shows many links with the art of other steppe peoples, and shows little variation over time, but a much greater variation between locations. Although Hsiung-nu art is quite distinctive from the art of neighboring cultures in notheast China and south-central Inner Mongolia, it appears to have originated in the Pazyryk cultural sphere of the Altai Mountains and also shows many similarities with Scythian art.

The similarities with Scythian art can be seen in both the depiction of humans and animals, but also in the iconography. Hsiung-nu art includes all the elements of the "Scythian triad" – the deer, the tiger and the head of a bird of prey – as well as some depictions of humans. Nonetheless, Hsiung-nu does have its own unique characteristics that distinguish it from Scythian works. For example, later Scythian art frequently depicts winged, horned horses but images of such horses are never found in Hsiung-nu art. Animal predation is a common image in Scythian art, but the uniquely Hsiung-nu version of this theme is that of a tiger carrying dead prey. The heads of birds of prey are frequently used images in both Scythian and Hsiung-nu art, but the Hsiung-nu bird heads have more moderately sized beaks and eyes, and have ears.

The significance of the imagery in Hsiung-nu art is uncertain, but there appear to be three distinct sets of iconography: mythical-religious, socio-political, and mythical-historical, although this last category is

less certain. In this interpretation of Hsiung-nu iconography animal predation scenes that represent the triumph of life over death make up the mythical-religious category. Depictions of same-animal combat make up the socio-political category, representing struggles for power. The final category, mythical-historical consists of images of human beings, however the interpretation of these scenes combat and wrestling remains highly speculative.

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Discussion Questions

1. What are the difficulties in the interpretation of Hsiung-nu art?

2. What sources could help in deciphering the imagery of Hsiung-nu art?

RELIGION

Overview Like almost all aspects of Hsiung-nu life and culture, information on their religious beliefs and practices must be gleaned from the limited references in historical sources and from archaeological excavations. Although the information available in these written sources tends to be brief, it is possible to gain some idea of the Hsiung-nu’s religious beliefs and practices from them. Hsiung-nu artwork recovered from archaeological excavations frequently uses mythological motifs and symbolism whose meaning is unknown.

Written Sources

Information on the Hsiung-nu’s religion is found primarily in two sources: *The Records of the Grand Historian* (*Shiji* 史記) by Ssu-ma Ch’ien (pinyin Sima Qian) and finished c. 94 BCE, and *The Book of Han* (*Hanshu* 漢書) written by a court official, Ban Gu, and finished in 111 CE. From these works it is clear that the Hsiung-nu religion was shamanistic, polytheistic and included a god of war. In addition, there was some form of ancestor worship or veneration, and the sun, moon, heavens and earth were all considered divine. Both animal and human sacrifice were practiced. An agreement between the Hsiung-nu and the Han was sealed by the sacrifice of a horse whose blood was mixed with wine and then drunk by both parties from a cup fashioned from the skull of Yüeh-chih. Human sacrifices were made to the god of war.

Although not confirmed by archaeological evidence, there are references in the *Hanshu* to Hsiung-nu religious statues in human form. Taken by the Han as booty in a successful war against the Hsiung-nu, these statues apparently depicted a foreign god since the image was unfamiliar to the Chinese chroniclers. The lack of such statuary at known Hsiung-nu sites has led to speculation that the sculptures were of either Indian or Iranian origin.

In addition to the mention of Hsiung-nu religious statues in the Hanshu, there is also mention of a temple in China dedicated to the *ching lu shen* (pinyin *jinglu shén*徑路神), or *ching lu* spirit. However, the exact nature of the *ching lu* temple and why this foreign temple was located in China is unclear from the text. Further complicating the issue is the fact that in the only section of the *Hanshu* that uses the term *ching lu* in conjunction with the Hsiung-nu, it is clear that the *ching lu* is a type of knife. Whether *ching lu* was the name of a Hsiung-nu divinity, or the ritual use of a *ching lu* knife made it sacred, or the knife itself was the symbol of a god (similar to the use of a sword to represent a Scythian god) in still unknown.

Art & Archaeology

Hsiung-nu art provides some clues to their religious beliefs since it frequently employs mythological motifs, many of them similar to those of other steppe cultures, the Scythians in particular. While much

of the symbolism of these images remains a mystery, comparison with the imagery of Ossetian myths and legends which is believed to have preserved many Scythian traditions, allows a partial interpretation of the Hsiung-nu imagery.

Archaeological excavations of Hsiung-nu burial sites have also provided some evidence of Hsiung-nu religious beliefs, but like their art, these finds are open to interpretation. The tombs of Hsiung-nu rulers contained various grave goods, and the remains of sacrificed sheep, horses, cattle and even Chinese women. These would all appear to indicate that the Hsiung-nu believed in an afterlife and that these offerings would accompany the deceased ruler into that afterlife. While the practice of placing goods and sacrifices in rulers' tombs was common among other steppe peoples, unlike the Scythians the Hsiung-nu did not sacrifice and bury large numbers of horses with their rulers.

Readings

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Discussion Questions

1. What are the difficulties in attempting to reconstruct the Hsiung-nu's spiritual beliefs?

2. What are the main sources of information for reconstructing Hsiung-nu religious beliefs and what are the limitations of each of these sources?