

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE

HSIUNG-NU SOCIAL STRUCTURE

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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.

Readings

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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?