

# *Historical Dynamics and Succession of Inner Asian Nomadic Empires<sup>1</sup>*

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*The constant and variable elements of the formation of medieval nomadic empires are the focus of the study. The basic economic system of pastoral nomads including the species composition of the herd and routes of migrations remained stable. There are several characteristics of the social-political organisation of nomadic empires which played a decisive role: tribal and supratribal genealogical loyalties, principle of administrative division of the empire; military-hierarchical character nomadic organisation; postal service; specific system of power succession. These elements were also exposed to change. However, several dynamic elements such as technology of transport, weapon and military arts, urbanisation, writing system, and world religions were due to the contacts with the neighbouring agricultural world.*

One of the important and permanently discussed questions in the nomadology is a problem of the historical dynamics and succession of the ancient and medieval nomadic empires. In the Soviet period, this question was considered in a majority of papers from the Marxist perspective.<sup>2</sup> Some researchers were of the opinion that the ancient nomads have stayed at a primitive or slaver stage of society, while the medieval nomads at a feudal one. It was a curious thought because the great empires of nomads (Khitan, Mongols and so on) were interpreted as the early feudal societies whereas the nomads of the Early Modern time (Kazakhs, Kirghiz, Turkmen) were considered as the societies of the developed feudalism. The next stage of discussion was related to the concepts of pre-class pastoral society<sup>3</sup> and early nomadic state.<sup>4</sup> These approaches referred

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<sup>2</sup> For further information, see: E. Gellner, *State and Society in Soviet Thought*. Oxford 1988; N. N. Kradin, *Kochevye obshchestva*. Vladivostok 1992; *Ibid. Nomads of Inner Asia in Transition*. Moscow 2014.

<sup>3</sup> G. E. Markov, "Die Wirtschaftliche und Gesellschaftliche Struktur der Nomadenviehzüchter-Völker Asiens," In: *Abhandlungen und Berichte des Staatlichen Museums für Völkerkunde zu Dresden* 31 (1970), 55-77; *Ibid. Kochevniki Azii*. Moscow 1976.

to the cyclical nature of the social processes in the nomadic societies and emphasised the important structural differences between them and the settled civilisations. Subsequently, these ideas were developed in the theories of the “nomadic civilisation”<sup>5</sup> and a special pathway of the social evolution of nomadic empires.<sup>6</sup>

It is not correct to deny the dynamics of nomadic societies. Some aspects of the life-sustaining activity of the nomadic societies have suffered the profound changes from the prehistoric times while the others remained nearly unchanged. The objective of this article is to show a nature of dynamics of different economic, social and cultural processes and institutions in the ancient and medieval nomadic empires of Inner Asia. The basis of the economy of the nomadic societies – pastoralism – has only changed slightly since the formation of nomadism. According to the archaeological data and reports of the chroniclers and travellers (from Sima Qian to F.W. Radloff), the species composition of the herd as well as routes of migrations and their length remained practically unchanged from the prehistoric times.

The Chinese chronicles describe the Xiongnu way of life. The great Chinese historian Sima Qian writes about the northern neighbours very early in his chapter 110: “The animals they raise consist mainly of horses, cows and sheep [...] The little boys start out by learning to ride sheep and shoot birds and rats with a bow and arrow, and when they get a little older they shoot foxes and hares, which are used for food. Thus all the young men are able to use a bow and act as armed cavalry. It is their custom to herd their flocks in times of peace and make their living by hunting, but in periods of crisis they take up arms and go off on plundering and marauding expeditions.”<sup>7</sup> Strangely enough, similar circumstances have been observed one and a half millenniums later by the Venetian merchant Marco Polo.<sup>8</sup> Comparable descriptions concerning nomads are visible in the studies from the 19th to the early 20th century.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> A. M. Khazanov, *Sotsial'naiia istoriia skifov*. Moscow 1975; Ibid. “The Early State among the Scythians,” In: *The Early State*, ed. H. J. M. Claessen, P. Skalnik, The Hague 1978, 425–439; Ibid. “The early state among the Eurasian nomads,” In: *The Study of the State*, ed. H. J. M. Claessen, P. Skalnik, The Hague 1981, 156–173; Ibid. *Nomads and the Outside World*. Cambridge 1984.

<sup>5</sup> N. E., Masanov, *Kochevaia civilizatsiia kazakhov*. Moscow–Almaty 1995.

<sup>6</sup> Kradin, *Kochevye obshchestva.*; Ibid. “Nomadic Empires in Evolutionary Perspective,” In: *Alternatives of Social Evolution*, ed. N. N. Kradin, A. V. Korotayev, D. M. Bondarenko, V. de Munck, P. K. Wason, Vladivostok 2000; etc.

<sup>7</sup> *Records of the Great Historian: Han Dynasty II*. By Sima Qian. Transl. Burton Watson. Hong Kong–New York 1993, 129; cf. *Zhongyang minzu xueyuan yanjiubu*, [Collected data about the peoples of the different historical periods] Vol. 1. Beijing 1958, 3, 31; *Materialy po istorii siunnu*. Vol. 1., trans. V. S. Taskin, Moscow 1968, 34, 36.

<sup>8</sup> *The Travels of Marco Polo*, trans. M. Komroff, New York 2001, 76–78.

<sup>9</sup> N. M. Przeval'skii, *Mongoliia i strana tangutov*. Vol. 1. Sankt-Petersburg 1875, 141; I. M. Maisky, *Sovremennaia Mongolia*. Irkutsk 1921, 33–35; F. W. Radloff, *Iz Sibiri*. Moscow 1889, 130, 153–162, 168, 260, 335.

In the same way, the nomads were hunters and practiced agriculture and gathering. Of particular importance was the battue which was a fine way of acquisition of military skills.<sup>10</sup> The arable farming was known even to the Xiongnu.<sup>11</sup> The agriculture was, to a greater or lesser degree, practiced by the latter nomads.<sup>12</sup> As a rule, in the periods of existence of great empires, the efforts were made to resettle the farmers into the arid zones with the aim of providing the nomads with necessary foodstuffs.<sup>13</sup> As for the forcible sedenterisation of the nomads, such a policy usually proved to be ineffective. Any radical policy of the agricultural economy intensification in the environment of cattle-farmers would be effective only so long as this system was supported by the regime.<sup>14</sup>

Beginning with the late antiquity, the handicraft among the nomads was only used for domestic purposes. This is confirmed by the numerous evidences of the written sources from Xiongnu and Wuhuan to the modern times.<sup>15</sup> At the same time, it would be incorrect to deny the technological development. If the everyday implements of the nomads of the Xiongnu times are compared with those of the later-medieval period, then the dynamics is evident (substitution of ceramics by metal kitchens, emergence of the hard saddle, improvement of harness etc.). However, it is not all the result of developing own nomadic handicraft but also a consequence of the general diffusion of the technological innovations.

Large masses of craftsmen have concentrated in the special settlements and towns of nomadic empires. One can trace the gradual cumulative expansion in the number of sedentary settlements and sites on the territory of Mongolia beginning from late prehistory.<sup>16</sup> The first settlements and sites on the territory of Mongolia were established in the era of the Xiongnu Empire.<sup>17</sup> According to

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<sup>10</sup> S. G. Zhambalova, *Traditsionnaia okhota buriat*. Novosibirsk 1991.

<sup>11</sup> D. Eisma, "Agriculture on the Mongolian Steppe," *Silk Road* 10 (2012), 123–135.

<sup>12</sup> Khazanov, *Sotsial'naiia istoriia skifov*, 11–12, 117, 150–151; G. E. Markov, *Kochevniki Azii*, 159, 162–167, 209–210, 251–216; N. E. Masanov, *Kochevaia civilizatsiia kazakhov*, 73–76 etc.

<sup>13</sup> N. N. Kradin, "Archaeology of Deportation: Eurasian Steppe Example," In: *Central Eurasia in the Middle Ages. Studies in Honour of Peter B. Golden*. ed. O. Karatay, I. Zimonyi, Wiesbaden 2016, 209–219.

<sup>14</sup> G. E. Markov, *Kochevniki Azii*, 139–140, 163, 165, 143–244; A. M. Khazanov, *Nomads and the Outside World*. Cambridge–New York 1984, 83–84.

<sup>15</sup> N. M. Przeval'skii, *Op. Cit.*, 40; I. M. Maisky, *Op. Cit.*, 190, 220; N. N. Kradin, "Heterarchy and Hierarchy Among the Ancient Mongolian Nomads", *Social Evolution & History* 10/1 (2011), 194.

<sup>16</sup> D. Waugh, "Nomads and Settlement: New Perspectives in the Archaeology of Mongolia," *Silk Road* 8 (2010), 97–124; N. N. Kradin, "Goroda v srednevekovykh kochevykh imperiakh mongolskikh stepei," *Sredine veka* 72:1-2 (2011), 330–351.

<sup>17</sup> T. Hayashi, "Agriculture and Settlements in the Hsiung-nu," *Bulletin of the Ancient Orient Museum* 6 (1984), 51–92 S. V. Danilov, *Goroda v kochevykh obshchestvoakh Centralnoi Azii*. Ulan-Ude 2004.

the chronicles, Rouran was the capital.<sup>18</sup> Turks have preached a doctrine of anti-urbanism. Of the Uighur and Khitan times, the cumulative expansion of town-building on the territory of Mongolia is a characteristic.<sup>19</sup> A difference of the urbanisation processes in the Khitan society was caused by the fact that a large part of the population of the Liao Empire was formed by conquered farmers.<sup>20</sup> These tendencies evolved in the period of the Mongolian Empire. Karakorum became a true megalopolis – a city where the alliance of different cultural traditions of the East and West occurred.<sup>21</sup> However, a blossom of building of cities and monasteries fell on the times when Mongols were subjects of the Chin Empire.<sup>22</sup>

The biggest changes in the steppe environment were related to arms and military arts. The appearance of the wooden saddle in the late antiquity and of the stirrup in the 4th-5th centuries (Northern Korea?) has contributed to a shift in the role of cavalry. The light archers have formed the basis of the troops of ancient nomads and the basic tactics of nomads consisted in manoeuvrability and shooting up an enemy at a distance. In the armies of the agrarian societies, the cavalry was in fact of secondary importance. With the appearance of heavy cavalry, the attack of cavaliers with spears by the tight formation became the major tactical manoeuvre. Rouran-Avars have furnished the irons and saddle to Europe and this has provided them the advantage over the local people. In the period of the First Turkic Khaganate, the nomads established new tactical-operational weapons – heavy cavalry armed with long spears. In the 9th-10th

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<sup>18</sup> N. N. Kradin, "From Tribal Confederation to Empire: the Evolution of the Rouran Society," *Acta Orientalia Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae* 58 (2005), 149-169.

<sup>19</sup> A. L. Ivliev, "Gorodishcha kidanei," In: *Materialy po drevnei i srednevekovoy arkheologii yuga Dalnego Vostoka SSSR i smeznykh territorii*. ed. V. D. Lenkov, Vladivostok 1981, 120-133; A. Ochir-A. Enkhtur-L. Erdenebold *Khar bukh balgas ba tuul godyn sav dakh hyatany yeyn khot, suuringuud*. Ulaanbaatar 2005; J. Bemmman-B. Ahrens-C. Grutzner-R. Klinger-N. Klitzsch-F. Lehmann-S. Linzen-L. Munkhbayar-G. Nomguunsuren-M. Oczipka-H. Piezonka-B. Schutt-S. Solongo, "Geoarchaeology in the Steppe. First results of the multidisciplinary Mongolian-German survey project in the Orkhon valley, Central Mongolia," *Arkheologiin sudlaal* 30 (2011), 69-97.

<sup>20</sup> N. N. Kradin-A. L. Ivliev, "The Downfall of the Bohai state and the ethnic structure of the Kitan city of Chintolgoi balgas, Mongolia," In: *Current Archaeological Research in Mongolia. Papers from the First International Conference on "Archaeological Research in Mongolia" held in Ulaanbaatar, August 19th-23rd, 2007*. ed. J. Bemmman, H. Parzinger, E. Pohl, D. Tseveendorzh, Bonn 2009, 461-475; Idem. *Istoriia kidanskoi imperii Liao (907-1125)*. [History of Khitans Empire Liao (907 - 1125)] Moscow 2014.

<sup>21</sup> *Drevnemongolskie goroda*. Ed. S. V. Kiselev, Moscow 1965; *Mongolian-German Karakorum Expedition*. Vol. 1.: Excavations in the Craftsmen Quarter at the Main Road. ed. J. Bemmman, U. Erdenebat, E. Pohl, Wiesbaden 2010.

<sup>22</sup> V. N. Tkachev, *Istoriia mongolskoi arkhitektury*. Moscow 2009.

centuries, the Seljuks achieved perfection in sabre mastering. Finally, the Mongolian bow was the most forceful bow of the Middle Ages.<sup>23</sup>

The Mongols subsequently perfectly mastered the siege tactics. They adopted the advanced military technologies; the construction of siege towers including those with catapults, as well as different throwers shooting with arrows, stones and propellant powders, was undertaken in order to make powerful artillery preparation before the attack, to raise the dams for flooding of the enemy's city and to burrow the saps under the walls of fort royals. For these purposes, the nomads attracted the experts from the conquered agricultural countries.<sup>24</sup>

The history of the familiarity of the Inner Asia nomads with the writing system has passed some stages. The ancient nomads (Xiongnu and others) had no writing system on their own. For maintenance of diplomatic correspondence, they have employed services of Chinese scribes.<sup>25</sup> The Turks were the first to use the runic writing system. The memorial inscriptions are well-known, in which different aspects of life of the nomads as well as their ideological ideas are reflected.<sup>26</sup> In the times of Uighurs, the Old Uighur written language was also used apart from the runic one. However, in the diplomatic correspondence with China, Chinese language and people familiar with hieroglyphics were used as before.<sup>27</sup> The Khitan, conquering North China, met with another practice. For the management of subjugated territories, they used the Chinese language. In addition, they have created their own script (small and large) that is known mostly on the epitaphs.<sup>28</sup>

In the period preceding the Chinggis Khan's Empire, the elite of some Mongolian chiefdoms was familiar with the Uighur writing system. After the overthrow of the Naimans, Chinggis told them to teach his children the Uighur letters. Furthermore, Mongols started to use the Uighur alphabet in order to write texts in Mongolian; their own writing system was subsequently created on this basis. Capturing the great territories of North China, the Mongols have paid a considerable attention to the training of competent interpreters for the management of tributary areas. In 1269, under Khubilai, the Tibetan lama Phags-pa invented the so-called Square script. It had only a short history and, upon the return of Mongols to the steppe after the downfall of the Yuan dynasty, the nomads again turned to the Uighur script. This writing system was also used in the Golden Horde where the Mongolian elite provided the *yarlyks*

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<sup>23</sup> S. A. Nefedov, *Voina i obshchestvo. Faktorny analiz istoricheskogo protsessa*. Moscow 2008.

<sup>24</sup> T. Allsen, 2002. "The Circulation of Military Technology in the Mongolian Empire," In: *Warfare in Inner Asian History (500-1800)*, ed. N. Di Cosmo, Cambridge 2002, 265-293.

<sup>25</sup> N. N. Kradin, *Imperiia Hunnu*, 2nd ed. Moscow 2002, 84-85.

<sup>26</sup> S. G. Klyashtornyj, *Old Turkic Runic Texts and History of Eurasian Steppe*. Bucuresti-Braila 2008.

<sup>27</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>28</sup> D. Kane, *The Kitan Language and Script*. Leiden-Boston 2009.

written in Mongolian using the letters of the Uighur alphabet.<sup>29</sup> In the 13th-14th centuries, several attempts of the ancient Mongolian script unification were undertaken.<sup>30</sup>

The question of the similarity and succession of the social-political organisation of nomadic empires occupies a highly important place. This problem was thoroughly interpreted in the papers by Vadim Trepavlov;<sup>31</sup> however, in virtue of the unpopularity of diffusion ideas at that time, it did not go any further. Only a few years ago, Daniel Roger again drew attention to this factor.<sup>32</sup> In terms of the dynamics of social and political organisation, one can suggest that it has slightly changed at the root since the Xiongnu times. The following features were characteristic of all nomadic empires,: (1) multi-stage hierarchical character of the social organisation riddled at all levels with tribal and supra-tribal genealogical loyalties; (2) dual (in wings) or threefold (in wings and centre) principle of administrative division of the empire; (3) military-hierarchical character organisation of nomads, most commonly, on the decimal principle, which coexisted in parallel with the tribal structure; (4) postal (*yam*) service as a specific way of organisation of the administrative infrastructure; (5) specific system of power succession (empire is a heritage of all having khan's blood, institution of co-government, *quriltai*); (6) distant hybrid war and exploitation as a particular character of relations with the agricultural world.<sup>33</sup>

Nevertheless, there was a certain variability of each of the identified indicators. For example, the threefold structure was characteristic of Xiongnu in the period of its establishment; it later transformed into the wing structure.<sup>34</sup> There is some evidence of the existence of the postal "governmental" communication system even in the Xiongnu polity but it flourished most in the Mongolian empire (*yam*). In recent times, the usability of the concept "tribal organisation", "tribe" and "chiefdom" in respect of the ancient and medieval nomads has been questioned. This is because, in D. Sneath' opinion, the social-political or-

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<sup>29</sup> A. Mostaert-F. Cleaves, *Les Lettres de 1289 et 1305 des ilkhan Aryun et Oljeitu a Philippe le Bel* (Harvard-Yenching Institute Scripta Mongolica Monograph Series). Cambridge 1962; L. Ligeti, *Monuments en écriture 'phags-pa. Pièces de chancellerie en transcription chinoise* (Monumenta linguae Mongolicae collecta III). Budapest 1972; A. P. Grigoryev, *Mongolskaia diplomatika XIII - XIV veka*. Leningrad 1978; I. T. Zograph, *Mongolsko-kitaiskaia interferentsiia: yazyk mongolskoi kantseliarii v Kitae*. Moscow 1984.

<sup>30</sup> D. Kara, *Knigi mongolskikh kochevnikov*. Moscow 1972.

<sup>31</sup> V. V. Trepavlov, *Gosudarstvennyi stroi mongol'skoi imperii: problema istoricheskoi preemstvennosti*. Moscow 1993.

<sup>32</sup> D. Rogers, "The Contingencies of State Formation in Eastern Inner Asia," *Asian Perspectives* 46 (2007), 249-274.

<sup>33</sup> N. N. Kradin, *Nomadic Empires*; *Ibid.*, "Nomadic Empires in Inner Asia," In: *Complexity of Interaction Along the Eurasian Steppe Zone in the First Millennium CE*, ed. J. Bemmann, M. Schmauder, Bonn 2015, 11-48.

<sup>34</sup> N. N. Kradin, *Imperia Khunnu*.

ganisation of Mongols in the modern period was based on the different structural principles.<sup>35</sup>

An interesting dynamic is traced in regard to the perception by nomads of the world religions.<sup>36</sup> The ancient and medieval nomads of the Inner Asia were generally shamanists and offered worship to the Eternal Sky (*Tenggeri*). It is confirmed by information of written sources and runic inscriptions of the ancient Turks.<sup>37</sup> Nevertheless, there are traces of penetration of different religions into the steppe. Hence, the Uighur elite accepted the Manicheism. Later on, the Nestorianism became known in the steppe. Mongols have stimulated the religious diversity.<sup>38</sup> Over time Mongols in the Middle East, Central Asia and Golden Horde converted to Islam – the religion of fighters and merchants.<sup>39</sup> In Mongolia, Buddhism expanded from the end of the 14th century. It became an important factor of reconciliation of nomads – a resolution for good for the Chinese steppe problem.<sup>40</sup>

To summarise, on the one hand, some aspects of the life-sustaining activity of nomads were determined by the environmental conditions, such as cattle breeding or social organisation. On the other hand, it is evident that certain dynamics in other components of culture of the steppe societies (means and technology of transport, weapon and military arts, urbanisation, writing system etc.) were defined by different external and internal factors. Finally, many cultural impulses were accepted from the agricultural world by way of diffusion or assimilation (a number of technologies, world religions etc.).

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<sup>35</sup> D. Sneath, *The Headless State: Aristocratic Orders, Kinship Society, and Misrepresentations of Nomadic Inner Asia*. New York 2007; *Ibid.*, "Ayimag, uymaq and baylik: Re-examining Notions of the Nomadic Tribe and State," In: *Nomad Aristocrats in a World of Empires*, ed. J. Paul, Wiesbaden 2013, 161–185; N. N. Kradin–T. D. Skrynnikova, "Stateless Head': Notes on Revisionism in the Studies of Nomadic Societies," *Ab Imperio* 4 (2009), 117–128.

<sup>36</sup> A. M. Khazanov, "The spread of world religions in medieval nomadic societies of the Eurasian steppes," In: *Nomadic diplomacy, destruction and religion from the Pacific to the Adriatic* (Toronto Studies in Central and Inner Asia, Vol.1), ed. M. Gervers, W. Schleppe, Toronto 1994, 11–33.

<sup>37</sup> P. B. Golden, "Imperial Ideology and the Sources of Political Unity amongst the Pre-Cinggisid Nomads of Western Eurasia," *Archivum Eurasiae Medii Aevi* 2 (1982), 37–76.

<sup>38</sup> I. de Rachewiltz, "The Ideological Foundations of Chingis Khan's Empire," *Papers on Far Eastern History* 7 (1973), 21–36; K. Sagaster, "'Herrschaftsideologie und Friedensgedanke bei den Mongolen,'" *Central Asiatic Journal* 17 (1973), 223–242; J.-P. Roux, *La religion des Turcs et des Mongols*. Paris 1984.

<sup>39</sup> J. Fletcher, "The Mongols: ecological and social perspectives," *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies* 46 (1986), 11–50.

<sup>40</sup> K. Kollmar-Paulenz, *Die Mythologie des tibetischen und mongolischen Buddhismus*. Stuttgart 2002; T. May, "Mongoly i mirovye religii v XII veke," In: *Mongolskaia imperiia i kochevoi mir*, ed. B. V. Bazarov, N. N. Kradin, T. D. Skrynnikova, Ulan-Ude 2004, 424–443.