BARBARIANS AT THE WALL

The First Nomadic Empire and the Making of China

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

John Man is a historian with a special interest in Asia and the nature of leadership. His books, published in over twenty languages, include bestselling biographies of Genghis Khan, Kublai Khan and Attila the Hun, as well as histories of the Great Wall of China, the Mongol Empire and the Amazons.

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For Ge Jian, with thanks

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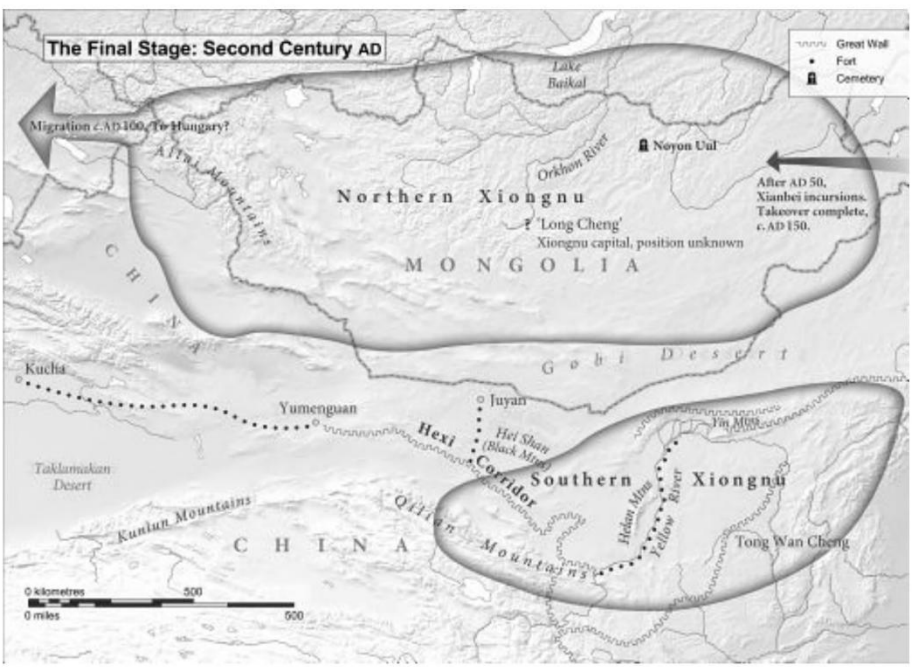


Introduction

A NEW BROOM SWEEPS THE CHINESE SKIES

In the spring of 240 BC, astronomers employed by the nineteen-year-old King Zheng of Qin, deep in the heartland of modern China, reported the appearance of a comet. It was in fact the comet now named after Edmond Halley, the British astronomer who in the early eighteenth century discovered that it returned every seventy-six years. To Zheng's astronomers this comet, like all comets, was a heaven-sent omen of change – possibly good, possibly disastrous. Comets were commonly called 'broom stars', because, wrote a sixth-century Chinese historian, 'the tail resembles a broom ... Brooms govern the sweeping away of old things and the assimilation of new ones.'[fn1]

As in the heavens above, so in the earth below: King Zheng, ruling with the Mandate of Heaven, was already something of a comet himself, the newest of brooms. In the course of five centuries of incessant warfare, states, mini-states and city-states had whittled themselves down to seven. Among them, Qin (pronounced 'Chin') was the hardest of the hard, with an army honed for conquest. Being the first among equals was not enough for Zheng. He wanted to be the one-and-only ruler. It took nine years of war. In 221 BC, Qin emerged as the core of today's China, with Zheng as its First Emperor, ruling in this world and (he assumed) the next, as tourists by the million can see when they admire his spirit warriors, the Terracotta Army.

But the Great Comet of nineteen years earlier foreshadowed more than just change. Disaster also loomed, from beyond the borders of Zheng's new empire. To the north, in the vast

grasslands and semi-deserts of Inner Asia, were tribes with a very different lifestyle: no cities, no farms, an endless supply of horses, and fearsome skills with bows and arrows. For centuries, they had been little more than gangs, making pinprick raids on the Chinese heartland. But now they suddenly became a real danger.

Though famous in China and Mongolia, few westerners know about this people. To Mongolians, they are Hunnu or simply Huns. The Chinese for Hun is Xiongnu, pronounced 'Shiung-noo'. Because Chinese written sources dominate the history of this relationship, that's how they are generally known today, though mainly to specialists.

They deserve better. They lacked many elements that are in theory essential to statehood, yet they forged the first nomadic empire – the third greatest land empire in history before the rise of modern super-states (the first and second being the Mongol empire and the medieval Muslim empire). They are the reason China reaches so far westward. They inspired one of the world's best-known monuments, the Great Wall. They were remarkably successful, lasting some three hundred years, making them the most enduring of the many successive nomadic empires. And they are possibly the ancestors of the tribe that under Attila helped destroy the Roman empire in the fifth century AD.

Finally, their emergence is evidence that opposition – in this case from China – inspires divided peoples to unify. Until recently, the explanation for the rise of the Xiongnu was based on Chinese xenophobia – that the nomads were dreadful people, the antithesis of everything civilized; that the violence was all on their side; and that China, the fount of civilization in Asia, was the innocent victim of their predatory habits. Today, many academics claim the opposite. They argue that the rise of the Xiongnu backs a great historical 'truth', an equivalent of Newton's Third Law: For every action there is an equal and opposite reaction. Let world historians argue about how generally true this may or may not be, but it seems to explain what happened around 200 BC, when Chinese force begot a counter-force on the grasslands of Inner Asia. Or, in human terms, a powerful charismatic leader on one side inspired a leader of similar qualities on the other. In this view, it was the First Emperor, China's unifier, who started the confrontation. His empire-building acted like a hammer on heated iron fragments,

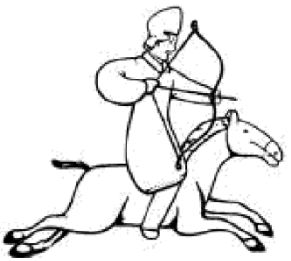
forging the nomads together for the first time. For over three centuries, the two remained in a precarious and violent balance, despite the vast 40:1 difference in population, until China proved there was no law after all, by using overwhelming force to shatter and scatter the Xiongnu.

But their way of life remained. Over the next 2,000 years, it underpinned another seventeen nomadic and semi-nomadic 'polities' – chiefdoms, super-chiefdoms, kingdoms, empires – with an average duration of 157 years.[fn2] The greatest was the Mongol empire (1206–1368), which at its height ruled all China and most of Inner Asia. Its founder, Genghis Khan, saw himself as the heir to a tradition of imperial nomadism reaching back over a thousand years to the Xiongnu. Mongolians today claim them as ancestors, with both cultural and genetic links.

This is the story of the Xiongnu: how they arose, how they affected history, how they vanished, how we know about them, and how archaeology is adding another dimension of understanding to the written sources.

I

RISE



1

MASTERING THE STEPPES

In the spring of 1913, a Russian geologist named Andrei Ballod, working for a newly established gold-mining company, was surveying among the pine-covered hills of northern Mongolia. He came across mounds that had been dug up some time in the past. Thinking these were old gold-workings, he organized a team to excavate one of them. Almost four metres down, his diggers hit a covering of wood and reeds. Underneath, they found an open space and a puzzling collection of objects – a jug, an axle-cap from a wagon wheel, bits of horse-harnesses, and some strangely shaped pieces of gold and bronze. Ballod realized this was a burial mound. The finds were obviously important, so he sent some of them to the Imperial Russian Geographical Society's East Siberian branch in Irkutsk, with a covering letter headed 'The Ancient Tombs of Unknown People'. The Russian scientists were as puzzled as Ballod, but there was nothing to be done, given the imminent chaos of the First World War and revolutions in both Russia and Mongolia.

Ballod died. His finds remained in limbo for eleven years.

Then, early in 1924, the famous Russian explorer Petr Kozlov arrived in what is today Ulaanbaatar on his way to Tibet. A

member of Ballod's team mentioned the finds to Kozlov, who despatched a colleague, Sergei Kondratiev, to check out the site. It was March and the ground frozen, but Kondratiev's workers hacked further into Ballod's mound and found a timber-lined shaft. Realizing this was a major discovery, Kozlov changed his plans – lucky for him, because he had been recalled to face charges of 'anti-Bolshevik leanings', which might have meant a death sentence. It turned out that Noyon Uul (Royal Hills) as it is now named was one huge burial site, covering almost 20 square kilometres, with 212 tumuli. A few test shafts revealed that the graves had been robbed, and had then become waterlogged and deep-frozen – which was fortunate, because everything the robbers had not taken had been deep-frozen as well.

Kozlov's team excavated eight mounds. Under coverings of rock and earth, they found sloping approaches to 2-metre-high rooms made of pine logs, carpeted with embroidered wool or felt. Inside each was a tomb of pine logs, and inside that a silk-lined coffin of larch. The construction of the rooms was superb, with silk-covered wooden beams neatly inlaid into side walls and supports set in well-made footings.

Every grave was a mess, with treasure troves of objects, some 2,000 in all (most of them now in St Petersburg), all strewn about among human and animal bones. Not a single skeleton had been left intact. Almost all the gold had been taken, but enough had been left to show that these had been wealthy people. They loved handicrafts and foreign goods: some objects suggested links with China, even Rome and Greece. Amongst other things, the graves contained patterned felt, lacquered wooden bottles, bronze pots, spoons of horn, knee-length underpants of wool and silk, bronze buckles, fur hats, jade decorations, axle-caps, golden jewellery, silver plates with yaks and deer in bas-relief, felt carpets and tapestries embroidered with male heads and animals. The men braided their hair, often using bone hairpins. In Noyon Uul, 120 braids were found, cut off and thrown on to the floors in the rituals of mourning. In the words of one Xiongnu expert, Ts. Odbaatar, 'Perhaps the braids were a symbolic way for the attendants and servants to join their master in spirit, while not having to sacrifice themselves.'[fn1]

Who were these people? When were they buried? We know now that this was the first evidence of the Xiongnu. At the time, no one had a clue. The answers came slowly, and then – after the collapse of the Soviet Union and China's post-Mao liberalization – with a rush, detailed in later chapters. But the Xiongnu did not exist in a vacuum. They were the products of a long historical process that had opened up the Asian heartland – a new way of life adopted by several major groups and many smaller ones, all sharing similar traits and all commonly treated as a single culture: the Scythians.

For 99.9 per cent of our 2.5 million years on earth, we humans were hunter-gatherers, making the best of seasonal variations, the habits of animals and nature's bounty. About 12,000 years ago, as the glaciers of the last Ice Age withdrew, warmer climates gave rise to two new ways of living. The first, from about 7500 BC onwards, was farming, which allowed for permanent settlements and larger, more complex societies. Populations rose. Villages became cities, and life became both political (from *polis*, Greek for a city-state) and civilized (from *civis,* Latin for 'citizen'). As every schoolchild used to know, early civilizations arose around the continental edges and along the great rivers of Europe, the Middle East and Asia.

But there was another world in the heartland of Eurasia that was no use to anyone – an ocean of grass stretching from the Far East to Hungary, from the northern forests of Siberia down to the deserts of western China. Gazelles and horses and wolves thrived, but not hunter-gatherers, because grassland creatures were hard to kill. Here, most large rivers, which elsewhere were the life-blood of civilizations, flow north, into Arctic wastes. Winters are cruel. Grasslands were best avoided.

But once farming had provided herds of domestic animals, farmers spread into the oases that dot the deserts and grasslands of Inner Asia. From these islands of agriculture, farmers could develop another lifestyle entirely, known as pastoral nomadism, the formal term for wandering herders. It was not an easy step, nor was there a clear division between new and old, for the evolving culture still relied on hunting, agriculture and animals.

Before those on the margins of the civilized, citified, farming world lay that universe of grass which, when they learned to use it,

would provide for food, mounts, increased populations, armies, and eventually empires. No such ends were in sight, of course, when people first dipped their toes into the sea of green. Progress out on to the grasslands must have involved countless trials, errors, dead-ends and retreats, as animals that were once prey were captured, bred, tamed, and at last ridden. Several species proved amenable: reindeer on the borderlands of Siberia and Mongolia, yaks in Tibet, camels in the semi-deserts. One in particular became the key that unlocked the wealth of the grasslands: the horse.

Horses were first domesticated around 4000 BC on the steppes north of the Black Sea. The evidence is a bit with tooth-marks and horse teeth with bit-marks. People were breeding the wildness out of these flighty creatures, reconfiguring them for tractability, strength and endurance. A knife dating from around 2000 BC, found on the upper Ob River, shows a man holding a tethered horse. A thousand more years of enforced evolution produced a creature that was still stocky, thick-necked and shaggy, still as tough as ever, but with the inbred guts to gallop to the point of collapse, even death, as happens occasionally in Mongolia's long-distance National Day races.

Horses were used to pull lightweight chariots, used in warfare, and heavy wagons, which allowed for long-distance migration. They were also ridden. That's what really opened up the grasslands. With nothing but a bit and reins, riders could herd horses, sheep, cattle, goats, camels, reindeer and yaks. Saddles helped, but were not a necessity. Iron stirrups even less so, because a rope looped round the toe does the job (the first iron stirrups probably date from the second century AD). To stay with your herds, you needed a tent – which evolved into today's warm, cool, wind-shouldering domes of felt – and a wagon or a few camels or horses to put it on. With herds and horses and the expertise to use them properly, grass became food, fuel, clothing and more – the stuff of new life.

It was still a harsh world, a second best. People on the brink of nomadism were probably pushed into it. In the borderlands of China in the second millennium BC, when Chinese civilization was well under way, farmers from the fertile but densely populated regions moved north in search of new lands. They put pressure on

marginalized local groups, who were forced to explore other ways to make a living in the even more marginal grasslands. They were also pushed by a change of climate around 1500 BC, when colder and drier conditions forced people to abandon agriculture and take up herding instead. Evidence for these changes emerged from the soil in the 1960s. The pottery was of worse quality – coarse red or brown clay fired at lower temperatures – and horse bones appeared alongside other animal remains. It seems the farmers were halfway to becoming nomads.[fn2]

Which turned out not to be quite such a marginal way of life after all. This new grassland culture received a boost when a decline in solar activity brought a further climate change around 850 BC. As the milder, damper climate spread, pastures became richer, life easier, and herds and populations grew. These new nomads had more than their horses and herds. They knew how to forge bronze and then iron for swords and arrowheads.

Why bronze? Ancient peoples had long known how to mine and extract copper, lead, gold and silver. Copper was the most widely used metal, but it is relatively soft. If it is mixed with tin (among other constituents), it becomes harder, as some genius discovered in south-eastern Europe about 4500 BC. The discovery spread across Eurasia, which is why bronze is used as the name for an age in human social development between stone and iron. By about 1600 BC, kingdoms of today's China were using it to make pots and other big ritual items, and steppe people, who had no use for heavy bronzeware, began to use it to make lightweight belt-buckles and horse decorations (on which more in Chapter 2).

Pastoral nomads were natural warriors, their skills honed by hunting, both as individuals and in groups. One tool used for hunting made a formidable weapon. This was the recurved bow, which ranks with the Roman sword and the machine-gun as a weapon that changed the nature of warfare. Who first invented it and when is much debated, but there are rock drawings of bows in Spain and Norway that are over 5,000 years old. Homer made it an object of power when he wrote about the Trojan War, which may have taken place around 1250 BC. By then it was the weapon of choice across all Europe and Asia.

This bow looked like a three-foot semicircle of nothing much. The curve is like part of a spring, turning away from the archer.

(Later designs had a flat belly and 'ears' that seem to curve in the wrong direction. We will get to these.) The elements – horn, wood, sinew, glue – were all readily available to steppe-dwellers. The trick was to combine them correctly. This must have occurred as the result of chance discoveries. A hunter breaks his basic wooden bow and discovers that a strip of deer-horn is whippy enough to make a rudimentary bow. He finds that boiled animal tendons produce a powerful glue. Perhaps he learns that glue can also be made from special bits of fish: fish-glue was a prized item of trade across Asia. A tendon pulverized with a stone reduces it to threads, which prove useful as binding. He notices that the bow, now mended with glue and sinew, actually works better. Wood has wonderful qualities, as the English longbow shows. That's fine for infantry. But smaller bows for use on horseback need more than just wood. Horn and sinew are both whippy in their own way. Horn resists compression, and forms the bow's inside face. Sinews resist extension, and are laid along the outside. Bowstrings are of gut, arrows of wood. Feathers, which both direct and spin the arrow like a rifle bullet, come from any large bird's wing or tail (they have to be from the same side of the bird, because the feathers from opposite sides are not parallel and counteract each other, slowing the arrow in flight).

Arrowheads had their own sub-technology. Bone served well enough for hunting, but warfare demanded points of metal – bronze (early) or iron (later) – with two or three fins, which would slot on to the arrow. The method for mass-producing socketed bronze arrowheads from reusable stone moulds was probably invented in (or spread to) the steppes between 1000 and 500 BC, making it possible for a rider to carry dozens of standard-sized arrows with a range of heads. To produce arrowheads, pastoral nomadic groups had smiths who knew how to work bronze and iron. Blacksmiths were crucial members of their societies, and remained so – Genghis Khan's birth-name was Temujin, given him by his father after he captured an enemy of that name, or possibly profession: it means 'blacksmith'.

Expertise with horses and pastures combined with archery and metallurgy came together in the mounted archer, who could load and shoot his bow at the gallop, delivering arrows in three directions, forward, to the side, and over the shoulder. Some no

doubt were ambidextrous, which gave them a 360-degree field. A demanding way of life had produced the most formidable warrior known before the age of gunpowder.

The many groups scattered over this vast region intermingled and kept apart, remained in one place and moved about, and migrated and fought and traded in a shifting kaleidoscope of cultures to which archaeologists give many names, depending on the nations they work in. They offer indirect insight into our subject, in that almost every group would be aware of precedents, and copy, adapt or reject, choosing different ways to display wealth, or worship, or bury their dead. On the last, which left the most obvious and the most enduring remnants, there were traditions by the dozen and tombs by the ten thousand – burials under great piles of rock, or in vertical graves, or circular graves, or 'slab graves' made of flat rocks stuck in the ground, or huge pits, and all varying according to the grave-goods, coffin fashions and the status of the deceased. No culture on the ocean of grass was an island.

In the early first millennium BC, pastoral nomads established themselves from the borderlands of China to the Black Sea, where they became the distant neighbours of the Greeks. They were known then and now as 'Scythians', a vague term grouping untold numbers of clans and tribes that spanned all Inner Asia. Persians and Assyrians knew them as Saka, the term still used in Kazakhstan. Scythians get their name from a mythical Greek hero called Scythes, who was one of the sons of the famously strong Hercules and the only one able to bend and string his father's bow, and therefore in Greek eyes a fitting ancestor for the Scythians.

Some Scythian groups had settlements of their own, where they produced fine works of art, especially gold ornaments. They had no writing, so, as Greek civilization rose in the seventh and sixth centuries BC, the Greeks knew about them only from peripheral contacts. The Greek historian Herodotus is the major source. In 460 BC he travelled to the Black Sea port of Olbia, then a thriving Greek frontier city on today's Ukrainian coast, now a fine archaeological site. From here, trading caravans run by Scythians set out for Central Asia and vanished into who-knew-where. Herodotus spoke only of big rivers and much pastureland, which

remained a mystery to him. As he wrote, 'I have never met anyone who claims to have actually seen it.'

The Scythians and their many sub-groups proved so successful that they built substantial kingdoms, recalled not by cities but by the tombs of their leaders. How many tombs? No one knows. Certainly tens of thousands, perhaps hundreds of thousands. They run from north of the Black Sea, across present-day southern Russia and Kazakhstan into Mongolia and southern Siberia. To my eyes they are like Braille, dots on the pages of history that reveal truths to those with the skill to read them. Many were treasure chests of possessions, presumably to sustain the rich and powerful in the afterlife, so for centuries they were literally gold mines for grave-robbers.

The contents of the tombs give a sense of the culture that was common to all on the steppes, including in due course the subjects of this book. Here is a selection of a few outstanding finds.

A new age of archaeology opened in the early eighteenth century, under Peter the Great, when Russia began her great expansion eastwards into Siberia and southwards into what is now Ukraine and the various 'stans' of Central Asia. Russian colonists and explorers could not miss the grave-mounds, which became known by the Russian term *kurgans*. Grave-robbers had not taken everything. In 1716, sixty items were given to Peter the Great, starting the ever-growing collection of Scythian gold that now fills the Gold Room in St Petersburg's Hermitage Museum.

During the second half of the nineteenth century, archaeologists opened dozens more of the Black Sea kurgans, unearthing skeletons, golden plaques, cauldrons and other grave-goods by the ton. Since then, they have opened hundreds more, in ever more remote areas. The truth about Scythia and related places and peoples is far richer, far more complex and altogether far less barbaric than Herodotus could possibly have dreamed.

'Scythia' was not like a nation-state, with a capital and a centralized government, or a land empire like Genghis Khan's, controlled from the centre. No Pony Express linked east and west. Scythia was a collection of cultures, spanning all Central and Inner Asia, unified by a few main traits: funeral mounds, horses, weaponry and a love of the so-called 'Animal Style' of art, made up of convoluted creatures, part real, part mythological. Every

Scythian tribe and culture would have known, traded with, intermarried with and fought with its neighbours, slowly spreading ideas and customs. A few sources in literate cultures suggest that there were many Scythian languages. Herodotus was told that Black Sea Scythians who traded across all Inner Asia needed seven lots of interpreters along the way. Trans-continental links were strong: Black Sea gold came from the Altai Mountains of western Mongolia; amber in western Mongolia came from the Baltic.

Scythian sub-groups organized prodigious grave-sites, often burying vast amounts of wealth. In southern Siberia, for instance, the Minusinsk Hollow is prime pastureland some 200 kilometres across. It and its surrounding territory have some 30,000 kurgans acquired over 1,000 years (*c.*750 BC – AD 500). The biggest, the Great Salbyk Kurgan (fourth century BC), is surrounded by twenty-three gigantic stones, weighing up to 40 tonnes, each cut and hauled from a quarry 60 kilometres away.

Tuva, 200 kilometres to the south-east, is the heartland from which the Scythians originally came, and has the earliest evidence for Scythian ways. The objects were in two immense kurgans, known as Arzhan 1 and 2, after the nearby village in the valley of the Uyuk River. This is a fine, gentle pasture, with not much snow in winter – a rarity in these austere regions, and a focus for Scythian nomads for many centuries as they migrated between summer pastures in the mountains and winter pastures along the Uyuk. The valley – an arrowhead of grass, 50 kilometres long and 30 wide at its base – has some 300 burial mounds, so many in such a small area that locals call it the Valley of the Kings.

The Scythians of the so-called Uyuk Culture were not just simple nomads, surviving off their herds. They ate freshwater fish, grew millet, built log cabins and made stone tombs with domed roofs. They mined for copper and iron, which demanded specialist miners, tools and good knowledge of the geology. Stone pillars carved with spirals, rosettes and circles suggest they worshipped the sun. They believed in an afterlife, and made sure their leaders were well prepared for it, preserving their bodies wherever they died and bringing them back to ancestral cemeteries for burial. They worked metals into animal shapes, like curled-up snow

leopards and birds of prey, which were admired (perhaps) for their strength, agility and vigilance.

The Valley of the Kings: Arzhan 1 alone would justify the title. Its start date was around 750 BC, about the time Homer was writing the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, making it the oldest known kurgan. Once, it was a huge platform, 110 metres across, with a surrounding wall and a 4-metre-high dome. Almost all kurgans are of wood and earth; this one was covered in stones, which turned it into a giant refrigerator. Over the years, looters mined it, locals used it for their July celebrations, and in the 1960s bulldozers ground across it as part of the Soviet-era campaign to turn steppes into farmland. Even so, when archaeologists arrived in 1971, they found wonders: a wheel-shaped complex of seventy interlocking wooden chambers made from 6,000 larches. A central space held two coffins containing a chief and his wife. Round the tomb were eight hollowed-out logs holding the bones of retainers, killed to accompany their master and mistress into the next world. Nearby lay the remains of six horses, richly decorated with gold.

No expense had been spared: grave-goods included sables, four-colour woollen clothes for the retainers, horse-trappings of bronze and gold in the shapes of snow-leopards and boars, even a golden, coiled panther in the Animal Style that would have been familiar to a Scythian on the Black Sea. In the surrounding chambers were another 160 horse skeletons, plus numerous daggers, arrowheads, a torc (a semi-circular sheet of gold worn around the neck), gold earrings with turquoise inlays, and pendants.

Arzhan 2, made about a century after Arzhan 1, proved even more remarkable, both for its contents, and for the fact that it had been largely untouched. The builders had got smart, as the German and Russian excavation team discovered when they dug it up in 2000–2004. The two central pits were mock graves, which had fooled would-be looters. The main burial was 20 metres off-centre. The archaeologists and their hundred workers found not only the royal couple, but also sixteen murdered attendants, and a trove of treasure: 9,300 objects, of which 5,700 were gold, weighing 20 kilograms, a record for a Siberian grave. The 'king' – that's a guess – aged fifty to fifty-five, wore a golden torc and a jacket decorated with 2,500 small panther figurines, all gold, trousers sewn with golden beads, and gold-cuffed boots. On a belt was a gold-

encrusted double-edged dagger. The woman, twenty years younger, wore a red cloak also covered with 2,500 panther figurines in gold. She had an iron dagger with a gilded hilt, a golden comb, and a wooden ladle with a golden handle. Her headdress was a gold pointed cap, decorated with two gold horses, a panther and a bird of prey. The two were buried together, suggesting the woman – wife or concubine – was killed to keep her man company in the afterlife. Nearby were thousands of beads, 431 of them made of amber, traded all the way across Eurasia from the Baltic.

The Arzhan tombs were for royalty. For rank-and-file warriors, there's more information 100 kilometres to the south-west. The cemetery, Aymyrlyg, stretches for 10 kilometres along a tributary of the Yenisei. This is a landscape of rolling hills and high pastures, with mountains lining the horizon, and a foreground now under water, drowned by a reservoir created by a vast hydroelectric dam further down the Yenisei. Here, the Scythians and their descendants had made an ancestral cemetery, burying some 800 bodies mainly in the third and second centuries BC. Buried with the bodies were weapons, Animal Style artefacts, tools, pins, combs, mirrors, belts with bronze buckles, and horse-fittings, all the things commonly found in Scythian tombs.

The bones from 600 individuals, collected between 1968 and 1984 from 200 graves and taken to St Petersburg before the reservoir's waters rose, are an encyclopedia of the pains, diseases and injuries suffered by ordinary Scythians. With the fast-developing sciences of bioarchaeology and palaeopathology, scholars can read stories in the remains. Skulls look more European than Mongoloid. Furrows and pits in the teeth, lesions in eye sockets, and the microstructure of bones give clues to diseases, diet, climate change and plant cover. Causes of death are catalogued in bone: murders, domestic violence, executions, ritual sacrifices, battles, accidents. Battleaxe injuries predominate during the early period and sword wounds are more common later.

Eileen Murphy, of Queen's University, Belfast, has made an extensive study of these bones in St Petersburg. She analysed over 3,000 of them. A few skulls show signs of scalping, a few others of being cut open, possibly to remove the brain, 'an aggressive post-

combat activity that was part of a war-ritual'. Beyond this, as Murphy says, 'The Aymyrlyg excavations enable us to gain real insight into the lives and lifestyles of the "ordinary" members of these semi-nomadic societies.'[fn3]

Horse-based cultures are hard on everyone. People fell off horses all the time, mostly without damage; but the healed injuries show that if you fell off you had a 1–2 per cent chance of breaking a bone, though the men were twice as likely as women to break something. Fair enough, you would think, in a horse-riding community. But women had it worse in other ways, as their lower backs reveal. They had more than their fair share of hairline fractures in the lumbar region, a condition known as spondylolysis, sometimes called 'clay-shoveller's fracture'. Some 5 per cent have the condition in modern populations; Scythian women suffered over twice that. As Murphy points out, this 'suggests that ... the women did not spend all their time sitting around in wagons but that they were also engaged in heavy physical labour'.

This tough life was also a violent one. A few of the injuries – bashed-in skulls, facial fractures – seem to have been the result of assaults within the group. Others were war injuries, notably arrow wounds, sword wounds and holes in the skull from battleaxes. There were twenty of those, sixteen of them with no signs of healing: they were death blows. Most victims of course were men, but two were women. Children too were victims, presumably killed when their camps or wagons were attacked. Several of the women had damaged left arm-bones, as if they had held up that arm to ward off blows.

Some bones tell dramatic stories. One woman, between thirty-five and forty-five years of age, had a wound in the thigh, and then lost her head to a single blow from an 'extremely sharp' sword. The attack came from behind, perhaps from horseback. She didn't have a chance. Nor apparently did her assailant. 'The angle of the sword chop ... indicates that the blow had probably been struck from left to right, with the aggressor positioned posterior to the victim. The skull had been buried with the cadaver, and evidently the head had not been carried away as a trophy.' Perhaps, Murphy speculates, the head was left attached by a strand of flesh, and the

attacker had no time to finish the job; or perhaps someone stepped in and dealt with the attacker.

Now come 1,500 kilometres south-west of Tuva, to the mountains east of the Kazakh principal city (not the capital – that's Astana), Almaty. From the northern slopes of the Tian Shan flow rivers that have turned temperate valleys into fine pastures, which now make farmland. Kazakhstan has kurgans by the thousand, about forty of which lie in a pretty valley near a lake called Issyk (Esik in Kazakh, and nothing to do with the huge freshwater lake of Issyk Kul, over the border with Kyrgyzstan to the south).

In the summer of 1969, a farmer ploughing a field near a 6-metre-high kurgan noticed something glinting in the newly turned dark earth behind him. He got down, kicked the soil and found a small piece of patterned gold. Amazingly, he did not pocket his find, but reported it. The Kazakh Institute sent a team to investigate, led by the renowned Soviet archaeologist Kemal Akishev. He was already honoured nationally both for his work and as a fighter in the Second World War. He became the much-revered father of Kazakhstan archaeology, and remained so until his death in 2003, aged seventy-nine.

The kurgan near where the farmer found the plaque was one of those astonishing rareties, an unrobbed tomb. Actually, the central tomb had been robbed, but the robbers had missed a side grave. In it, under piles of dirt, lay a crushed skeleton, quite a small one. Surrounding the bones was treasure.

Overnight a thief made off with some of the gold, but what remained was the most remarkable of all Saka finds. Other than the skeleton, the fifth-century BC burial contained: a jacket decorated with 2,400 arrow-shaped gold plaques edged with more gold plaques in the shape of stylized lions; a belt with thirteen golden deer-heads and three of moose and deer with griffin heads; a golden neck-torc with snow-leopard clasps; a gold-bound whip handle; a silver cup engraved with an unidentified script; a dagger and a metre-long sword, the blades embossed with gold animals and in gold-encrusted scabbards; there were earrings, beads, a gilded bronze mirror, and beaters for churning milk into *kumiss* (mildly fermented mare's milk); and to cap it all, literally, a

towering 63-centimetre headdress made of a cone of wood covered with felt.

The skull was too damaged to tell the sex of its owner, but the sword and dagger seemed to leave no doubt. Akishev called the find the Golden Man, fitted him with leather trousers and put him on display. He was adopted as the new nation's symbol when Kazakhstan emerged from the ruins of the Soviet Union in the 1990s.

A Golden *Man*: that was the assumption. Fair enough, at the time. But there were things that didn't quite fit, and they began to bother the American archaeologist Jeannine Davis-Kimball, who had worked on the find: the size of the skeleton, the high hat, the earrings and beads, kumiss-beaters. Her conclusion: the Golden Man was not a man after all. 'This person was actually a young woman ... a high-ranking warrior priestess.'[fn4] The truth will probably never be known, because the bones mysteriously vanished around the time it became possible to determine sex from DNA. Kazakhstan's strong man, Nursultan Nazarbayev, had declared himself a big fan. It really wouldn't do to have an ancestral king suddenly turn into a queen. The figure, restored, copied, and constantly reproduced in tourist posters, is likely to remain a flat-chested, trousered youth.

Four hundred kilometres south-west of Tuva and 1,000 metres higher in the Altai Mountains, Mongolia, China, Russia and Kazakhstan very nearly meet. Two thousand five hundred years ago, the local Scythians had no frontiers except their own gorges and pine forests, which locked them into their neighbourhood. They lived in tents and log cabins. Wagons were useless. They used only horses for transport, trapping, hunting and raiding. They lived, fought, died here, and were buried in ancestral cemeteries, where their bodies and possessions remained deep-frozen until discovered by modern archaeologists.

Russians were first on the scene. Sergei Rudenko, arriving in 1924, came up-stream from a long finger lake, Lake Teletskoye, turned left along the Great Ulugan River and found himself in a dry valley called Pazyryk by locals, which is the name given to the people he found and their culture. A long-gone glacier had carved it into a U-shape, which many generations of Scythians had turned

into a cemetery. There were fourteen mounds, five of them large, all deep-frozen log chambers. They dated from the fifth to the mid-third centuries BC, with the most recent research placing the five main ones in a sixty-year period, *c*.300–240 BC. The men wore leather caps with ear-flaps, the women had headdresses up to 90 centimetres high, even higher than the golden person of Issyk. Of the many remaining artefacts – horse-fittings, leather cut-outs, wall hangings, carpets, saddle-blankets – the most surprising is a beautifully made carriage, which when reconstructed has four wheels, each 1.6 metres across, with thirty-four delicate spokes. It was designed for four horses, which had been buried nearby. In these steep-sided valleys, it was entirely useless, and obviously not Scythian. One explanation, suggested by a find of silk in the same grave, is that it had brought a bride from China, and been buried along with her to carry her into the next world.

Another surprise was that some of the people buried here had been tattooed. One man, known as the tattooed chieftain, had animals and bits of animals – legs, tails and bodies of horses, birds, snakes, rams, deer, some sort of winged monster – writhing along both his arms, while a fish lay the length of his shin, flanked by four mountain rams. A lion or griffin with a huge curly tail stood by itself over his heart. These gorgeous designs were probably of soot, pricked into the skin with a needle.

Beside him lay a woman in her forties. As infrared analysis revealed in 2003, she too had been tattooed, with a twisted stag on one shoulder and a contorted mountain sheep on the other. In another mound (No. 5), a woman aged fifty and a man of fifty-five also had tattoos. The woman's arms and hands were covered with intricate, well-planned designs of two striped tigers and a polka-dotted snow leopard attacking two deer with vast sets of antlers.

All of which provides a context for the most dramatic of Pazyryk finds. Two hundred kilometres to the south and 500 metres higher brings us to the drier and harsher Ukok Plateau, almost on the Chinese border. It is a place of waving grass, meandering streams and scattered lakes. Sharp, snowy mountains enclose the horizon in every direction. There's not a tree in sight. Summers range from bitter to blistering; winters are brutal. But 2,500 years ago, it was much less grim – a popular place for semi-nomadic Scythians of

the Pazyryk culture, because summer pastures were rich and in winter winds kept it clear of snow.

Here in 1990 the Russian archaeologist Natalya Polosmak, from the Institute of Archaeology and Ethnography in Novosibirsk, started researching the mounds on the plateau. In May 1993, after a late spring, their truck dumped Polosmak and her team by a mound right next to the barbed-wire fence that marked Russia's edge. Beyond was 8 kilometres of no man's land, then the Chinese border. Spring sunshine freed the lakes and dotted the grass with snowdrops and edelweiss.

Working with a team of six, it took two weeks to remove the cap of rock and earth, dig through a looted grave and reach the original one, untouched, unrobbed. Inside was a block of ice. Once unfrozen, the contents emerged – harnesses, parts of saddles, a table on which had been placed a meal of fatty mutton, frozen after it had started to rot, which now, after 2,000 years, gave off a foul odour in the spring sunshine. Six horses appeared, with the hole of the executioner's pick clear in their foreheads. They still had their last meal in their stomachs: their deaths and burial had been in spring. At last, the retreating ice fell away from a curved larchwood casket. After the removal of four 6-inch bronze nails, the lid came up, revealing nothing but more ice. Melting the ice took many days. It was July, and hot. Every day, team members poured on buckets of hot water, and carted away the meltwater. Mosquitoes pestered. The six dead horses stank. Polosmak's impatience grew.

At last, on Monday 19 July, a jawbone appeared through the ice, then some sable fur. Polosmak peeled back the fur, to see not bone but flesh, a shoulder and the 'brilliant blue tattoo of a magnificent griffin-like creature'.[fn5] The body, slowly emerging from the ice, was a mummy, in excellent condition, with much of the skin intact, the brain removed, the muscles scraped away, the rest embalmed with a mix of herbs, grasses and wool. The tattoos were of a distorted mythological animal: a deer, its rear twisted in the Scythian Animal Style, with a griffin's beak and antlers sprouting either griffins' heads or flowers, a shape repeated on the animal's back. Further down the arm was a snow leopard with an extended tail and a head (if it was a head) attacking or consuming a sheep's body with legs at both ends. Next day, a headdress emerged, one-

third the length of the coffin. Only then did Polosmak realize this was a woman, aged about twenty-five, the one who would soon be called the Ice Maiden, or the Ukok Princess. The sable fur came away in bits, revealing a long and flowing robe, a striped woollen skirt and a yellow top of silk.

Her looks were important to her. The bag next to her left hip held more than a mirror; it was a cosmetics bag, with a face brush made from horsehair, and a fragment of an 'eyeliner pencil' made of vivianite,[fn6] a form of iron phosphate which adds a deep blue-green colour to skin. There was some vivianite powder as well, apparently to be applied to the face.

The final surprise, which only emerged when the Ice Maiden was examined close up in Polosmak's Novosibirsk laboratory, was that her head had been completely shaved. She was bald. Her hair was not *her* hair – it was a wig, made with two layers of female hair woven under felt, with a wooden deer covered with gold foil pinned to the front. From the top of the wig rose a spike of felt, 68.5 centimetres long, with a sliver of wood as a core to keep it up. On it were fifteen birds made of leather, each smaller than the last. The device was familiar to archaeologists from Animal Style art in other Scythian graves. It was what they call the Tree of Life, the shamanic symbol of health and status, which was also present on the Golden Man or Woman of Issyk.

There followed a tidal wave of publicity, which inspired much nationalist fervour from the government of the new Altai Republic. They declared Ukok a protected territory, and objected bitterly to the removal of 'their' princess. Since 2012, when the museum in the capital Gorno Altaisk was given the proper facilities, the Ice Maiden has been back in her homeland, resting in air-conditioned peace.

Shaquille O'Neal, who shortened his name to Shaq. With a little linguistic licence, my translator, Zhang Ziyang, called himself 'Mr Shark'.

On the way in through the displays, the coronet, of course, had pride of place, well lit and glittering in its glass case. I was thrilled to see this gorgeous object up close. Gold braid forms a circle that links a horse and a goat on opposite sides. Perhaps they symbolize the wealth of the herding community. A braided semicircle accentuates the forehead section, with a pair of tiger heads on either side, looming like a threat above the horse and goat motifs. On the separate little skullcap is a golden eagle with a head of green turquoise. The eagle's head was attached to the body with gold wires, so that it swayed as the wearer moved. The skullcap itself is divided into four embossed sections, each of which – you have to look closely, because it's hard to see the markings – contains a stylized wolf intertwined with a goat or ram. Dating probably from the late Warring States period (403–221 BC), it must surely have proclaimed its owner to be ruler of these grasslands. Nearby the figure of an imperious nomad chief showed how it would have looked in life.

So it was a bit of a let-down when Mr Shark said: 'It's good, isn't? For a replica.'

'*What?*'

'Yes. It's perfect in every way. But the real one is in the museum in Hohhot.' That's Inner Mongolia's capital.

It seemed unfair on the Bronze Museum, since the coronet has become the symbol of Ordos. But Hohhot had it long before the Bronze Museum was built, so no doubt it will stay there.

We moved on to the bronzes. Usually only a few centimetres across, they are typically belt-buckles, but also include tops of tent poles, decorations for horse-harnesses, knives, daggers with decorated handles, arrowheads, bronze mirrors, hooks for hanging things in tents, and buttons. Two intriguing little objects seem to be a pair of weights that were attached to ropes, which were swung and thrown to entangle the legs of fleeing animals – a trick that no other Asian group adopted, but which is widely used in South America.

Belts were important to nomads, signifying status, power, adulthood and identity. In *The Secret History of the Mongols*,[fn4] the

only Mongolian source for the rise of Genghis Khan, Genghis's mother asserts her status by putting on her high hat and belt. When Genghis renews his vows of friendship with his blood-brother (*anda*) Jamukha, he gives him a golden belt. When Genghis punishes his brother Khasar, he seizes his belt.

The designs reveal a fascination with animals – horses, sheep, deer, birds. Some finds have an eagle fighting a tiger for a goat, monsters of various sorts, dogs, and warriors killing captives, any of which may have a face-to-face double. They liked their belt-buckles made of mirror images. Sometimes the maker included an odd mythological creature with a beak-like nose, which seems to have been unique to Ordos. (Other Inner Asian groups liked griffins – half-eagle, half-man – and winged lions, but that fashion did not spread to Ordos.) A favourite motif was the tiger – as the golden coronet showed – often shown eating a sheep or carrying a deer over its shoulder. There were no tigers in north China. The nearest ones were in the forests of eastern Siberia. It seems that to have a tiger on one's belt-buckle was a statement of status and power.

The buckles and plaques could also be used as gifts, which made them a sort of currency to assert equality of status (you see similar behaviour at English middle-class dinner parties today. Guests bring chocolates, wine or flowers as 'house gifts' which may cost more than their meal). Some were in the form of horse-decorations, which were usually discs attached to the reins and bridles. Wagons, too, were decorated, for example with little triangles set around the edges of wheels.

Most of the bronzes come from graves, not just in Ordos but from hundreds of graves scattered across north China and Inner Asia. Some have even been found in Iran. Specialists try to make sense of the stylistic variants, tracking the trade routes and dating them within their 1,000-year span, between about 800 BC and AD 200, which overlaps the Xiongnu empire. In fact, one cemetery dating from the sixth to the fifth century BC, found in 1979 in Maoqinggou (Liangcheng County, Inner Mongolia, just east of Hohhot), is described by some scholars as the cradle of Xiongnu culture because its contents suggest that the people who used it were changing from farmers to nomads. It had seventy-nine graves, all simple pits, with 229 bronze plaques, fairly evenly distributed between men and women (though elsewhere belt-

plaques were mostly used by men). It is tempting to use the motifs – dragons, griffins and other Animal Style images – as evidence for clan or tribal connections. But that's not possible, because the plaques were made and traded too widely. In a system that suggests modern parallels, many were made for the Chinese market, with Chinese characters on them – 'Chinese styles of execution with steppe iconography', as the American scholar Bryan Miller puts it.[fn5]

Graves were often destroyed by bad weather, as Wang Shun's discovery of the golden coronet showed. In addition, the bronzes were made to be worn and attached to horses and wagons, and must have often been dropped. A century ago in Ordos, these items could be found lying about in the sand. Locals gathered them by the bucketful and sold them for a pittance. No one took much notice of them. In fact, only a few people, mostly foreigners, were interested in Chinese art and antiquities, which made the early twentieth century a golden age for foreign collectors. Explorers – Aurel Stein from Great Britain, Petr Kozlov from Russia and others – acquired vast quantities of manuscripts for practically nothing. As Mr Shark said ruefully, 'Some people might call this robbery.'

Among the collectors was the remarkable Isabel Ingram. Isabel was the daughter of an American missionary who had good connections with Puyi, the boy-emperor who had been allowed to stay on in the Forbidden City when China became a republic in 1911. At the age of twenty, Isabel graduated from the US, returned to Beijing and became tutor to Puyi's new wife, the sixteen-year-old, missionary-educated, English-speaking Wanrong. A picture of them together shows them looking sweetly beautiful and delicate as porcelain. They enjoyed their similarities, and even swopped clothes to look alike. In her position as royal tutor, Isabel met many visiting scholars and officials. One of them was Horace Jayne, Curator of Oriental Art at the Philadelphia Museum of Art. Another was her future husband, William Mayer, military attaché at the US embassy. In 1924, the emperor and Wanrong were expelled from the palace, Isabel's role as tutor ended and she got a job back in the USA in the Philadelphia Museum. When her boss became director of the Pennsylvania University Museum, she followed, and began to publish scholarly articles on Chinese art. In 1930, she married William Mayer in Beijing, and the two began buying art. Although

few people were interested in the bronzes – they did not even have a collective name – there was huge international interest in Scythian art, and she recognized that the Ordos artefacts shared motifs with Scythian ones. Criss-crossing north China and haunting antique shops, she and her husband gathered over 500 'Scythian' bronzes and other items, most of which they sold to the Pennsylvania Museum in 1941.

As experts came to recognize the value of these finds, Europe and the USA built their collections, buying them in small numbers wherever they could. The objects were not just found in Ordos and were made of gold, silver and tin as well as bronze, but from the 1950s they have been referred to as the Ordos Bronzes. Those found locally are now stored in the Ordos Bronze Museum. 'We have a collection of about ten thousand,' said Mr Wang. 'People still find them today.'

'What would one sell for?' I answered my own question online later. Bronzes rarely come up for auction. When they do, they go for £500 and up. In 2015, a bronze of the sixth or fifth century BC sold for 123,000 euros.

'Nothing,' said Mr Wang. 'It is illegal to sell them.'

Which makes one wonder where the sellers got theirs.

Who made them? No one knows. There are no accounts of their manufacture. A few carbon-14 dates suggest that the business was flourishing in 500 BC, which means it must have arisen considerably earlier, when pastoral nomadism and mounted archery began to mature as a way of life. That idea is supported by a reference in about 661 BC to two grassland tribes in what is now Inner Mongolia named Rong and Di, who had a reputation for violence. An adviser to the north-eastern border state of Zhao, Guan Zhong, noted that 'The Di and Rong are like wolves, and can never be satisfied.' Chinese historians often referred to them as *hu*, but this was no more than a generalized term for 'barbarians'. They could have become a real threat, for a coordinated attack by an army of mounted archers could work on infantry like a chainsaw on a tree-trunk. What it took was a leader with a vision. That was what the Rong and Di lacked. The problem for a would-be conqueror was that nomads were famously independent. They were more likely to vanish back to their herds in a cloud of dust

rather than do as they were told. Still, there was a threat to be countered.

The first written evidence that a new way of life had emerged survives from Zhao. In 307 BC, a Zhao king named Wu Ling, overcoming opposition from his more conventional uncle, 'decreed that the entire kingdom should adopt the *hu* attire, training his subjects to ride and shoot arrows from horseback'.[fn6] The kit included a long slit coat for ease of riding (the forerunner of trousers) and no floppy Chinese-style sleeves that might interfere with archery on horseback. It worked. Zhao defended itself from nomadic raiders because it was half-nomad itself, and as a result built a powerful kingdom that lasted almost a century.

No one recorded any further details of the Di and Rong. Sima Qian – a historian of the second century BC who will appear often in this book – also mentions them along with a further ten tribes of 'barbarians': 'These nomadic tribes settled in the riparian valleys and mountainous pastures; each had its respective chieftain and was to each its own.'[fn7] But from the second half of the fourth century BC, all of them were, it seems, in the process of being conquered, or absorbed, or in some way coming together to create a single tribe: the Xiongnu.

What this new group called themselves in their unwritten language is unknown, but other cultures suggest their name. In 313 BC, a trader from Sogdia (in today's Uzbekistan and neighbouring countries) abandoned some letters – that is, strips of bamboo that were used to write on – in a tower near Dunhuang. One of the letters complains bitterly of the destruction caused by people the writer calls the *Xwn*, Hun. That is the core of their name in both Mongol and Chinese. In the Latin script versions of both languages, they are often simply 'Huns', implying that they were the ancestors of Attila's people who helped bring down the Roman empire in the fifth century AD – a controversial idea to which we will return in the final chapter.

The most common name reflects Chinese usage. To represent foreign names, Chinese chooses syllables that sound vaguely like the original. Since each syllable has many written signs, Chinese commonly selects a character that suggests something suitable. 'Hun' in Chinese is represented by the sign that is transliterated in today's pinyin system as *xiōng*. The sign means 'terrible, horrible,

centre stage. Tumen became infatuated with a new young wife with whom he had a second son, and decided to replace Modun as his heir with his newborn. What was to be done with Modun? A solution was to hand. To guarantee their security and as a sign of submission, minor tribes often sent princes as hostages to dominant tribes. So Tumen sent Modun off to the Yuezhi, a move that must have left him seething with resentment against his father.

Was this true? It's credible, in part at least. The name Tumen means nothing in Chinese, but in Mongolian and Turkic languages it means 'Ten Thousand', the equivalent of the Chinese *wàn*, with the difference that in Mongol and Turkic it is both a military unit and a common name. There are lots of Tumens in Mongolia today (one being the eminent archaeologist Dashtseveg Tumen). The Tumen River marks North Korea's frontier with Russia.

But only in part credible, for the whole story of Tumen and his son is just too good to be totally true. As Nikolai Kradin (of the Russian Academy of Sciences, Far Eastern Branch, Vladivostok) points out,[fn12] 'historical events and elements of fantasy are mixed'. It is as if the origins of Xiongnu power had already been turned into an epic by bards, and then told to Sima Qian. Is it really credible that a plot to murder Tumen should unfold in public? That it involves the killing of both a beloved wife and a beloved horse? That events unfold in threes? That a man who murders his way to the throne should be a hero? Perhaps Tumen – Ten Thousand – is no more than a symbolic character, an Everyman from whom Modun seizes power.

You will see what I mean in Chapter 5, when Modun takes over in dramatic circumstances, and makes the Xiongnu powerful enough to found the first nomadic empire. But that was in response to events unfolding to the south and east, in what would soon become the heart of a unified China.

the states that would merge as China were at eternal war with each other (hence the name of the age, the Warring States, 480–221 BC). Might is right (he argued), power the only virtue. Human beings are idle, greedy, cowardly, treacherous, foolish, shifty, so Confucius's idea that they respond well to good treatment is simply naïve. The only way to rule is to entice, terrify, reward and punish. This is not arbitrary, but based on the stern rule of law, applied to everyone without distinction, an agenda from which it gets its name: Legalism. The ruler's task is firstly to devise the law, then record it, then ensure that it is applied impartially through officials utterly subservient to the state's institutions.

Wei's prime minister, Gongshu Cuo, was so awed by Shang's abilities that he feared what might happen if the young man took his ideas to a rival king. Sima Qian tells the story. When the prime minister was on his deathbed, he advised the king to keep Shang's loyalty by making him the next prime minister. If not, he said, 'be sure to have him killed. Don't allow him to leave the state!' Claiming that Gongshu was 'quite out of his mind', the king dismissed both ideas, with the result that Gongshu had feared. Shang, unrewarded and very much alive, turned to the neighbouring state of Qin, the state that was emerging as the strongest of the seven warring rivals.

His move to Qin was welcomed by its ruler, Duke Xiao, who seized on Shang's grim policies. In the words of his follower Han Fei: 'Lord Shang taught Duke Xiao of Qin how to organize the people into groups of five or ten families that would spy on each other ... anyone who failed to report criminal activity would be chopped in two at the waist.' In addition, the duke had three aims: to ensure a professional army; to provide farm-labourers who supplied its food; and to uphold the Law, applied to everyone, except of course the duke himself, for he personified the Law and was above it. For Shang, nothing must rival the prince's laws, not even the cries of the people: 'A weak people means a strong state,' he wrote. 'A strong state means a weak people.'

Shang was not popular. When Duke Xiao died, Shang didn't last long. He was caught, 'tied to two chariots and torn apart'.[fn1]

But his policies worked. Qin expanded, spreading southwards into Sichuan, then eastwards into neighbouring Zhou. War

followed war, and death piled on death, as Qin turned itself into the hardest of the hard.

Shang's spirit lived on in Han Fei, who set out the Legalist agenda with brilliance. Here are four pieces of his extremely scary advice on how rulers should behave:

- 'It is said: "So still he seems to dwell nowhere at all; so empty no one can seek him out." The enlightened ruler reposes in non-action above, and below his ministers tremble with fear.'
- 'This is the way of the enlightened ruler: Where there are accomplishments, the ruler takes credit for their worth; where there are errors, the ministers are held responsible for the blame; hence the ruler's name never suffers.'
- 'Be empty, still, and idle, and from your place of darkness observe the defects of others. See but do not appear to see; listen but do not seem to listen; know but do not let it be known that you know.'
- 'This is the way to listen to the words of others: be silent as though in a drunken stupor. Say to yourself: Lips! Teeth! Do not be the first to move ... Let others say their piece – I will gain knowledge thereby.'

The scene is set for the entry of the First Emperor, the man who would confront the 'barbarians' of Ordos and the other northern grasslands, and turn them from rivals into an existential menace. His story, like many in history, mixes character and events entirely at random, yet leads to an end that seems inevitable, in this case unity.

The story starts, as it often does with dictators, in a deep sense of insecurity rooted in childhood.

Our main source is Sima Qian, Grand Historian of Han, writing a century after the events he describes.[fn2] As he tells it, the story opens in the next-door state, Zhao, with a rich and ambitious merchant named Lü Buwei meeting a minor Qin prince, Zichu, the son of a junior concubine of the heir to the Qin throne. Zichu, it seems, is never going to amount to much. He is not in line for succession – indeed, there is no line, because the crown prince's official wife, of whom Zichu is very fond, is barren. One of twenty

sons by various concubines, Zichu has been sent off to become a hostage in the Zhao court, a common diplomatic ploy to prove Qin's good intentions. But being low in the pecking order, Zichu lives frugally, without a retinue or carriages, and with no future, until Lü spots in him a chance of advancement.

Lü is a novelty in the changing society of the time. Merchants had previously been despised by Confucians as under-educated parasites. But in these Legalistic times, merchants were on the rise. Smart, self-serving, unscrupulous, Lü invites the prince into a back room, and proposes a scheme to lever him on to the Qin throne. The prince has nothing to lose, and agrees.

Lü gives the prince some cash to hire himself a band of followers and buys some 'rare objects, trinkets and toys', which he takes to the Qin capital, Xianyang. He strikes up an acquaintance with an intermediary and has his purchases delivered to the wife of the crown prince along with a message about how much Zichu adores her. Since she has no son, he says, she will have no one to look after her when the emperor dies. She had better find a stepson, who will therefore be the crown prince's heir, and second in line to the throne. Eventually, when 'the one whom you call son becomes king, you need never fear any loss of position'. The one she should choose is, of course, Zichu. So it happens. Zichu becomes the crown prince's heir, and Lü becomes his tutor.

Now comes a dramatic incident that may or may not be true. Lü has a very beautiful girlfriend. She becomes pregnant. Zichu sees her, falls in love, and asks for her. Lü, whose whole future is now tied to Zichu, swallows his outrage and hands the poor girl over. In 259 BC, she has a son, named Zheng – the future First Emperor.

In 251 BC, after a couple of royal deaths, Zichu becomes king, the girlfriend his queen, and Lü his prime minister. Five years later Zichu dies, leaving thirteen-year-old Zheng to succeed, under the control of his all-powerful patron.

Lü and the beautiful queen, his former mistress, continue their relationship, but Lü, afraid of discovery, hatches another plot even more complicated and lurid than the previous one. In Sima Qian's words:

> The queen dowager did not cease her wanton behaviour. Lü Buwei began to fear that, if her conduct were ever brought to

The story starts in 214 BC, seven years after unification and thirty-two years after the First Emperor came to the throne. He was becoming obsessed by the possibility of achieving immortality. Work on his tomb, which had been going on for thirty years, increased. But the First Emperor was also interested in not dying. One of the officers sent to discover the secrets of immortality returned 'claiming that it had come to him from gods and spirits' that 'Qin will be destroyed by Hu' – that is, the barbarians of Ordos.

At this – as Sima Qian says in Chapter 88 of his *Shi Ji* (*Historical Records*), the English title of which is *Records of the Grand Historian* – the emperor ordered General Meng Tian to respond. Meng Tian, son of a famous father and brother of one of the emperor's closest advisers, was the greatest general of his day. He was told to 'lead a force of 300,000 men and advance north, expelling the Rong and Di barbarians and taking control of the region south of the bend of the Yellow River'. The Rong and Di were two of several sub-groups coming together to become part of the Xiongnu. In another section, Sima Qian says that 'Meng Tian's might struck terror into the Xiongnu people' (with results that will become clear in the next chapter).

This was going to be a long operation. In his history *Zizhi Tongjian* (*The Mirror of Good Government*), Sima Guang adds to Sima Qian's account, saying that Meng Tian 'made successive assaults against the Xiongnu tribes, recovering the territories south of the (Yellow) River ... the armies of the frontier were engaged in a protracted war that lasted for more than a decade', after which 'they held sway in the lands of the Xiongnu'. By that time, Meng Tian was dead, in circumstances we will get to later.

Why this massive invasion? There were several possible reasons. Supposedly, it was to counter the threat of the mounted archers, who would (according to the prophecy that fed the First Emperor's paranoia) bring destruction to Qin. In fact, the idea that they were much of a threat to the whole Qin empire, with its massed armies and ranks of crossbowmen, is ridiculous. They were, however, a constant menace on the borders, and had to be dealt with. That fitted well with the emperor's domestic needs and imperialist ambition. Firstly, armies must be used. Idleness breeds boredom, a decline in morale, insubordination, perhaps even revolution. So, secondly, the First Emperor gave them huge and challenging tasks