5 The Xiongnu Empire

I Introduction

The Xiongnu Empire (third century BCE to second century CE) is the earliest and longest lasting of the so-called steppe or nomadic empires witnessed in Inner Asia over the past two millennia. It extended from the Ordos to Lake Baikal and from Manchuria to eastern Kazakhstan with its heartland in Mongolia. What is known about the Xiongnu Empire relies mainly on Chinese chronicles and archaeological evidence. Because it was the first empire in the steppes, and the one that is archaeologically best documented, the Xiongnu case also plays a major role in theoretical approaches to empire formation in Inner Asia.

Historians have convincingly demonstrated that for the Xiongnu Empire circumstances of crisis, exacerbated by Qin incursions into the steppes, initiated processes of state formation through the supplanting of traditional aristocracies.¹ Historical narratives recount this development as centered around the charismatic leader Modun (r. 209–174 BCE) who killed his father and, after a coup, quickly began conquests to subdue neighboring groups. In the process, the Xiongnu crushed Chinese forces and in 198 BCE secured a treaty, called *heqin*, involving Chinese princesses and lavish gifts from the nascent Han dynasty for several generations afterward. Xiongnu expansions peaked in the early second century BCE when Modun proclaimed “all the people who draw the bow have now become one family and the northern region has been pacified.”²

The Xiongnu Empire endured difficulties when the Han appeasement policy of *heqin* failed in the middle of the second century BCE and the Han emperor Wudi began to wage war. By the end of his reign (87 BCE) the far western regions, which constituted an important economic base for the Xiongnu, were under the control of the Han. The loss of this neighboring power base exacerbated internal conflicts among Xiongnu leaders that culminated in a civil war (57–47 BCE). After the mid-first century BCE little information about the internal affairs of the Xiongnu exists in the Chinese chronicles. This has often erroneously been interpreted as a decrease in power of the steppe rulers, even though the *chanyu* Huhanye soon restored sovereignty in the steppes and ushered in an era of revived Xiongnu strength that lasted

1 Di Cosmo 1999.

2 Di Cosmo 2002, 186.

Note: This chapter is a slightly adapted version of Brosseder, U. 2016. “Xiongnu Empire.” In M. Mackenzie (ed.), *The Encyclopedia of Empire*. <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118455074.wbeoe149>. © 2016 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd. Reproduction by copyright licence number 4541910378855.

Map 1: Approximate extension of the Xiongnu Empire with sites mentioned in the text. © Peter Palm.

until the end of the first century CE.³ In 50 CE, another internal conflict between claimants for Xiongnu rulership led to large factions surrendering in the northern Chinese frontier and establishing a fledgling ‘southern’ Xiongnu polity, which eventually aided in the destruction of the ‘northern’ Xiongnu Steppe Empire at the end of the first century CE and remained there until the beginning of the third century.⁴ The combined attacks that finally brought down the Xiongnu Empire included the Han Chinese and other groups, particularly the Xianbei from the eastern flank who are claimed to be the successor empire in the Inner Asian steppes.

What we know about the Xiongnu as a historical phenomenon is based mainly on a few Chinese chronicles – the *Shiji*, *Yantie lun*, *Hanshu*, and *Hou Hanshu* – dating to between the second century BCE and the fifth century CE.⁵ These provide accounts of the Xiongnu Empire, after its establishment, when it played a major role in the geopolitics of the Qin and Han dynasties. The term ‘Xiongnu’ was mostly used by Chinese court historians to record diplomatic and military dealings with the northern steppe leaders. It described both a polity and a group of people. The label of Xiongnu does not denote a coherent entity of people with the same language or the same ethnic affiliation. Rather, it refers to numerous peoples or tribes within a political confederation and designates a political entity of groups from distinct regions, with various cultural and social regimes, across a broad territory via a formalized integrative imperial system.⁶ Because of this more sociopolitical meaning, there is no straightforward answer to the question of the origins of the phenomenon known as the Xiongnu.

II Characteristics of the Xiongnu Polity

Another field of debate is the character of the Xiongnu polity, which revolves mainly around the question whether the Xiongnu entity (depending on the criteria applied) qualifies as an early state or a super-complex chiefdom.⁷ Yet it is beyond discussion that it constitutes an empire – in the sense of a political formation that extended far beyond its original territory and integrated a variety of regions and peoples.⁸ Several models have been proposed to explain why and how a comparatively sparse society of pastoralists formed an empire in the Inner Asian steppes. Apart from general theories that emphasize climate change, an inherent militant lifestyle, or economic pressures on pastoralist societies, the most predominant model for the Xiong-

³ Miller 2014.

⁴ Miller 2015.

⁵ Di Cosmo 2002; de Crespigny 1984.

⁶ Brosseder and Miller 2011, 31.

⁷ Kradin 2011.

⁸ Di Cosmo 2011.

nu Empire arose from a geographically oriented approach centered on the relations between China and the steppe. This approach projects a sharp dichotomy between two separate systems that collide in a singular frontier zone.⁹ This frontier zone is central, even ‘imperiogenetic,’ to theories of steppe dependency or coevolution that explain the formation of steppe empires. Having the centrality of the frontier in mind and based primarily on assumptions of overall deficient steppe social complexities and pastoral economies, Barfield asserts that the Xiongnu depended critically on agriculture from China and formed a secondary phenomenon or ‘shadow empire’ of China’s Qin dynasty.¹⁰

Such dependency theories have been rejected, or even transformed, by anthropologists in favor of more sophisticated models of coevolution. Although these models also project the frontier zone between China and Inner Asia as still central to formation processes of steppe empires, Turchin deems the Xiongnu Empire the result of long-lasting coevolutionary processes and codependencies on both sides of the frontier that led to the formation of contemporaneous imperial polities.¹¹ However, such polarized perspectives tend to underestimate or neglect developments within steppe societies, and historians and archaeologists alike have begun to propose alternate models that emphasize the internal dynamics of the steppes.¹²

The organization of the unified Xiongnu polity was based on a decimal structure of leadership and an appanage system of territories of the ‘left’ (east) and ‘right’ (west). Although scholars have often assumed this structure to reflect Chinese organizational logics, evidence points more to parallels westward in the Achaemenid Empire.¹³ At the top of the political order was the supreme ruler, the *chanyu*, who belonged to a ruling royal lineage, and the highest political ranks were restricted to this and only a few other secondary lineages, tied to the royal lineage by intermarriage. The uppermost ranks consisted of the 24 Great Chiefs (that is, the ‘Chiefs of Ten Thousand Cavalry’), referred to as kings and commanders, which were hereditary positions at the head of a military decimal system and were linked to particular ‘left’ and ‘right’ appanages. These were followed by several other ranks of kings, high-order generals, commanders, and officials, some of which were open to other lineages. Each of the Great Chiefs appointed his own subordinate kings and officials, and such lower level leaders within and outside of the recognized system surely represented significant social forces in the steppe polity.¹⁴ The Xiongnu sought to replicate their political and military titles at the local level to support the hierarchical structures in the center and thus incorporate the elites of conquered

⁹ Di Cosmo 2015.

¹⁰ Barfield 2001.

¹¹ Turchin 2009.

¹² Honeychurch and Amartuvshin 2006; Di Cosmo 2011.

¹³ Di Cosmo 2011, 47.

¹⁴ Miller 2014.

people.¹⁵ The elite ranks also included a group of high-ranking appointments amidst the Xiongnu nobility, which included foreigners, such as Chinese defectors, who were directly placed under the authority of the *chanyu*, indicating a personal entourage of trusted advisors for the latter.¹⁶

There has been a century-long discussion as to whether the Xiongnu can be deemed the predecessors of the European Huns of the late fourth to early fifth centuries CE. This discussion, however, frequently lacks methodological precision and recurrently conflates different notions of a people, designations of political confederations, and concepts of cultural names that should otherwise remain distinct. While the names 'Xiongnu' and 'Hun' can be linguistically correlated, the written and archaeological evidence that is drawn upon to link the two historical phenomena into a narrative of migration is far too faint to withstand scrutiny.¹⁷ The archaeological material evidence does not support a narrative that allows for linking these two phenomena.¹⁸

Apart from the narrative of empire developed via Chinese chronicles of the Xiongnu 'other,' archaeological sources form another critical primary source, independent from the written records, that holds equal potential to elucidate facets of the Xiongnu Empire. The question that firstly affects Xiongnu archaeological studies is how to establish a link between a historically attested political entity and an archaeological culture – a problem that still needs to be completely resolved for the case of the Xiongnu Empire. Researchers have yet to fully define, analyze, and agree upon the collective archaeological culture groups of Late Iron Age southern Siberia, Mongolia, and northern China, much less to distinguish all the elements of what might correlate to the Xiongnu Empire.

Since the 1990s, international investigations of archaeological remains of the Xiongnu period, especially in Mongolia, have grown rapidly. Today thousands of tombs in Mongolia, southern Siberia, and northern China have been documented. However, only a handful of cemeteries – Ivolga, Dyrestui and Burkhan Tolgoi – have been excavated sufficiently to allow for intensive analyses.¹⁹ Furthermore, as most interments were heavily disrupted in antiquity, our knowledge of these graves is quite limited. Moreover, the process of reopening tombs, which is often understood as looting, has yet to be investigated in order to more clearly discern the time frames and processes of disruption. Such studies might elucidate the nature of the grave opening in relation to issues of looting, desecration, or ritual reopening.

The most plausible corpus of archaeological remains in Late Iron Age Inner Asia to be linked to the Xiongnu phenomenon consists of a spread of sites, centered

¹⁵ Di Cosmo 2013, 34.

¹⁶ Di Cosmo 2013, 30–31.

¹⁷ De la Vaissière 2015.

¹⁸ Brosseder 2018; Pohl 2018.

¹⁹ Brosseder and Miller 2011a.

mostly in Mongolia, which share similar mortuary expressions as well as numerous artifacts across a wide expanse of territories (map 1).²⁰ Progress has recently been made in chronological refinements of this material, allowing us to see a temporal sequence highlighting changes over time – distinctions that are crucial for comparing and combining historical and archaeological narratives. During the second century BCE, a new style of burials appeared in the Mongolian steppes. They are discerned by the large rings or small clusters of stones on the ground surface which demarcate their interments. During the late second to early first centuries BCE, a broad adherence to a group of open-work animal-style belt plaques indicates intense interregional elite communications. The appearance of a homogeneous style of weaponry, namely the massive use of the compound bow with bone strengtheners and large iron arrowheads, as well as a homogeneous assemblage of pottery, points to similar interregional connectivities. Differences in status and/or rank can be observed within these burials and assemblages, but by the late first century BCE (and up through the first century CE) monumental terrace tombs containing overwhelmingly ostentatious burial assemblages with numerous exotic goods were erected in the steppes.²¹ As indicated by the exotica, predominantly from China but also from Central Asia and even further west, these elites participated in far-reaching networks.²² Through the internal redistribution of goods, some of the exotica were acquired also by lower ranks indicating a wealth-based or prestige goods economy.²³ The contexts of the transfer are diverse. Those objects manufactured in the Han imperial workshops probably arrived in the bundle of tribute payments from the Han emperor to the Xiongnu *chanyu*. In times of annual tribute payments, not only a great variety of goods including (special) foodstuffs but also large quantities were transferred to the north. Marriage alliances also brought goods to the Xiongnu courts. Prominently featured in the written records are raiding excursions from the Xiongnu, while border markets were mentioned and constitute yet another way of exchanging goods.

Beyond studies of mortuary arenas, the field of settlement studies for the Xiongnu is still relatively underdeveloped. Aside from pastoral campsites, identified by small scatters of debris, archaeologists have also unearthed settlements of semi-subterranean houses with evidence for some agriculture subsistence and craft production, such as bone working.²⁴ Several walled sites with platforms have also been

²⁰ Brosseder and Miller 2011b.

²¹ Brosseder 2009. Polos'mak and Bogdanov 2016. The most prominent places are Noyon uul and Gol mod (map 1).

²² Miller and Brosseder 2017; Brosseder and Miller 2018.

²³ Di Cosmo 1999; Brosseder 2015.

²⁴ Ivolga is still the most intensively studied site (Davydova 1995), followed by Durenly in the Transbaikalia area (Davydova and Miniaev, 2003). While there are numerous, yet under-researched settlements, known from Transbaikalia only one larger settlement site, Boroo Gol, which has been investigated, is known from northern Mongolia (Ramseyer 2013). This only reflects the lack of modern research devoted to that area.

found, though their function is not yet fully understood, more systematic investigation has been conducted at Gua Dov, Terelzhiin Dörvölzhin, and Kherlen Bars.²⁵ Because of their architectural layout (a rectangular space enclosed by a rampart), the presence of foreign-inspired architectural elements, and the lack of normal settlement debris, they probably held a central position in society (ritually, economically, politically, and/or socially) on a par with the terrace tombs. In addition, as information on artisans and local production sites is scarce, the economic sectors of Xiongnu society are still poorly understood. Debates on import versus local steppe production of goods and materials are therefore hindered. Yet evidence that aids in the debunking of dependency theories has begun to surface in Xiongnu archaeology, including evidence for local uses of foreign techniques as well as local sources of gold and local sites of intense iron smelting.²⁶

Some scholars have attempted to match the historically documented political system of center, left, and right territories to cores and peripheries in distributions of archaeological remains. Yet such correlations, especially with heavy emphases on a handful of elite cemeteries and a dearth of settlement data, remain problematic conjecture at best. Moreover, both the historical and archaeological records point to more complex strata of local elites,²⁷ and scholars have yet to elucidate the manners in which they were integrated into the wider polity. Distinctions of ‘cultural cores,’ ‘frontiers,’ and the mechanisms of greater or lesser integration of these territories into a political entity, while simultaneously acknowledging regional, cultural, social, and economic diversity, still need to be empirically addressed. Although material expressions of political participation, as well as cultural, social, and economic integration, may highlight different cores and frontiers, we should be wary of outlining precise boundaries of a polity according to an archaeological culture. Instead, it may be more promising to consider varying degrees of interaction and integration within the empire.²⁸

Turning again to chronological delineations, radiocarbon dating efforts have shown that some graves in the northern steppes, while appearing very similar to those of the Xiongnu period, date to the second and even third centuries CE, well after the formal collapse of the historically documented Xiongnu Empire. It is in this period that Chinese chronicles have suggested the Xianbei formally ruled over large portions of the steppes that had previously been under Xiongnu control. Recent archaeological research in Mongolia points to a much greater regional (and other?) diversity in mortuary practices in comparison to the previous Xiongnu period. However, this supposition raises numerous questions. In addition to issues of the sometimes problematic correlations between historical polities and archaeologi-

²⁵ Miller et al. 2019.

²⁶ Miller and Brosseder 2013; Sasada and Amartuvshin 2014.

²⁷ Miller 2014.

²⁸ Miller 2015.

cal cultures, it highlights problems surrounding our understanding of the nature of the collapse of polities.

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