

Research on the Scythian's Political Structure and How They Keep Members of the Group Adhesive

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ABSTRACT. *This research focuses on the social structure of the Scythians, and how they utilize such a political structure to maintain a relatively stable society. Since they were a group of nomadic people living at the surrounding areas of ancient China, a stable agricultural society, there were a lot of attraction to them that might drive them to join the agricultural society. The special political structure and traditions the Scythians had thus help the group to keep its member adhesive. Their military style life, a reward system, the banquet at the end of year, as well as their burial and local religious belief and xenophobia all contributed to the formation of a stable nomadic society.*

KEYWORDS: *Nomadic group, Militarized society, Reward system, Tradition*

1. Introduction

1.1 historical background

The Scythians were a group of nomadic-pastoralists who started to live on the Pontic-Caspian Steppe region around the second half of eighth century B.C.E. Divided by the Ural Mountains from the eastern steppe, the population of the Pontic Caspian Steppe experienced a completely different development from that of the eastern steppe. Although both steppes adopted the usage of horses, nomadic groups from the Pontic-Caspian Steppe utilized horses far more frequently than did people from areas such as the Tian Shan Mountain range. For those nomadic tribes living in the eastern steppe, they had plenty of forage for their herds both during winter and summer thanks to the wide range of pastures at the foot of the mountains and altitudes between 2000 and 3000 meters. The Scythians, who started to show their presence in the eighth century B.C.E, represented another type of lifestyle. Change in seasons always came along with a change in forage resources, as well as other daily life supplies such as meat. In order to maintain a good quality of life, the Scythians needed to move across the vast steppe frequently in response to the change of season. Thus, horses became an important means of transportation. As a result, horseback riding became popular among the Scythians. Their strong cavalry troops clearly signal their advanced skills in this activity. Another feature of the Scythians is their trade connection with the Greeks. The Greeks as a sedentary society had numerous features that attracted the nomadic Scythians. As an agricultural society, Greeks, especially the elites among them, had a constant source of income. They also enjoyed the advantage of having a comfortable dwelling that ensured their lifestyle and represented their status. Although joining Greek culture might be an attractive option, there could be little chance for an alien to become someone with a great reputation within the Greek society. While in their own tribes, status came with hard work that only their enemies' skulls could measure a Scythian's status, and such status could vary annually. Despite this relative instability, however, Scythian elites were still willing to stay within their group due to their special reward system, strong religious beliefs, exclusive traditions, as well as a common ceremony practiced upon the king's death.

1.2 Research History

Through Herodotus's depiction of Scythian society, a highly militarized society can be deduced. It is said that the Scythians "have[ing] neither cities nor forts, and carry[ing] their dwellings with them wherever they go". This group of people is also described as being trained to shoot on horseback. It was also described in the writing that the Scythians learnt horse-back riding since a young age. All these skills were trained to develop Scythian kids into warriors. These descriptions indicate that the Scythians embrace a militarized social and political structure. Another aspect of the Scythians society is their agri-pastoralist lifestyle. The Scythians lived in not just one location. One subdivision of the Scythians lived "above the trading-port of the Borysthenites", and it is an agriculture-based economy that they depend on. Another group who lived "eastward of the Husbandmen" is

completely different from the previous ones that they “neither plough nor sow” but wander. It is important to note another feature of the Scythians society, that it contains enormous number of slaves. These slaves were captured during the war. Those slaves are one of the major commodities being trade between Greek and the Scythians. As a sedentary society, Greek city states had a large demand for a labor force who could work in the fields for agricultural production. Thus, the abundance of slaves from the Scythians lay the foundation for a slave market in the Black Sea region, mainly selling to the Greek city states. The constant interaction between an agricultural society such as Greece’s could be supposed to draw some of the Scythian elites to flee their nomadic way of living and join the Greeks, but such events rarely happened in the Scythians society, because the Scythian leaders used four ways to keep their elites in the group.

2. A Reward System

The first method is the use of a reward system. The Scythians have a tradition of making their enemies’ skulls into cups. Those cups will be passed around on a banquet or when a stranger is visiting the tribe. The cups tell the visitors about the owner’s bravery, but at the same time, they also remind the owner about his or her natural duty, which is to be a warrior. Although the elites may lay around almost the whole year enjoying the wines imported from Greek and a stable, luxury way of life, it is important to set a constant reminder that tells them who they truly are, that they are different from the Greeks. Besides evoking the pride, the skull cups can also create embarrassment that tell the Scythians what their true job is. The Scythians would gather together at a set place and hold up banquets. This ceremony is a special one since a skull cup with wine in it is passed around, and everyone who had killed enemy in the past year all have the right to drink from it. This is a reward, as well as a punishment. As an exotic good, wine is always unreachable for most of the Scythians, but as long as they killed an enemy, they would have the right to enjoy a sip of it. This prize becomes their motivation in battles that encourage them to work hard as warriors, therefore, successfully maintain the nature of being a Scythian. For those ones who killed no enemy, however, this prize is a harsh punishment. When people around them are all enjoying the precious wine, the only thing they can do is just sitting. This is a huge shame on them. In order to avoid the same embarrassment in the next year, these Scythians would also work their best to perform the job as a warrior. As a result, no matter what position the individual plays in the Scythians society, as long as this annual event is held, individuals will always be reminded of their true job.

3. Funeral of the King

Besides the periodic banquet that gathered the Scythians together and reminded them of their nature jobs, another ceremony also functioned in a similar way -- the funeral of the king. Upon the king’s death, his body would be handled carefully. The Scythians would clean the inside of his corpse and filled it with “chopped cypress, frankincense, parsley-seed and anise-seed”; then the body of the king would be carried by a wagon through “all the different tribes”. Although these two steps were simple, they were significant to the cohesion of the Scythians society. As a nomadic-pastoralist community, the Scythian society was not made up by one single group, and tribes remained a relatively far distance from each other. Such loose structure thus led to the need of a corporate ceremony that required the participation of every single Scythian, such as the funeral of their king. By participating in this sacred ritual, the Scythians were reminded of their true leader. The Scythians elite might enjoy a luxury and stable life through most of the year, but at the end, they were still components of a society. A boundary was drawn secretly by the conduct of this ceremony, separating the Scythians from Greeks through the aspect of their nature. With the emphasis of the dramatic difference between the essence of Greeks and themselves, the Scythian society was more likely to unite as a group.

4. Continuation of the Funeral

This line of separation would vanish with the passage of time without any doubt, so it was important to set a reminder in the following year that stressed the distinction again. The purpose for the procession of funeral the next year was therefore clarified. The Scythians were gathered together again and reminded of their passed king. One year from the funeral, “fifty of the best of the late king’s attendants” would be brought to the king’s tomb and killed. They would be tied to the fifty “most beautiful horses”. The sacrifice of accompanies and horses to the dead king reminded the Scythians again about who they were. While horses were being sacrificed, it was an indication of the importance of this animal since it could become the oblation only if it was valuable. Horses supported the Scythians to hunt and herd in a wide range. They also enabled them to kill enemies more bravely. Remembering their responsibility as warriors, the Scythians stayed together as a whole and be connected by the same duty they share.

5. Role of Religion

Religion also played a big role in maintaining the social solidarity of the Scythians. Just as they did for the funeral of their king, they also sacrificed horses in religious practices. No other societies would value horses more than the Scythians do. Horses were essential to the Scythians' military strategy, and were their secret of winning the battle. Their tactic used in battles such as cavalry would lose all its advantage and function without the help of horses. Aside from its military importance, the horse was also useful in the Scythians' daily life. Horses had enormous mobility, and the invention of horseback riding, which utilized this characteristic, enabled the Scythians to obtain a massive amount of pasture and gain a larger range of hunting ground. Owning an excessive size of grassland would enable greater agricultural production and provide them more land to pasture their animals, while being able to hunt further guarantees a more reliable source of food. The horse was so essential to Scythian society, that without its support, the Scythians would struggle to survive. Yet, horses were still being used to sacrifice to the God the "most commonly". Such behavior reminded the Scythians the significant role horses play in their life, whether in battles or in ordinary life, when a religious ceremony was held, and recalled their nature as being soldiers who were supposed to ride on horseback and fight vigorously against their enemies.

6. Religious Sacrifice

In addition to horses, slaves captured from wars were also being sacrificed for religious purpose. Out of one hundred prisoners, one of them would be sacrificed during the ritual. His or her blood would be poured upon the scimitar, which is a symbol of the god Ares. As it was mentioned in *History of Herodotus*, the skulls of enemies that the Scythians slaughter were often made into cups that signal their status. How valuable the slaves were to the Scythian society is therefore evident. From a religious perspective, sacrificing these slaves showed the Scythians' extraordinary respect for their god, Ares. However, on the other hand, simply showing the Scythians slaves captured during wars could remind them about their responsibilities as individuals who dedicate their lives in battles. Even though Greeks also sacrificed to their believed god, what the Scythians used indicated their difference between the Greeks. Horses, which were essential elements to their daily life, and slaves captured during wars that represented their way of life gave the Scythians a completely different identity than those of Greeks, therefore, establishing an invisible boundary between the Scythians and Greeks, therefore preventing members of the society from leaving.

7. Xenophobia

Last but not least, xenophobia also contributed to the unity of Scythian society. As described in Herodotus, a king of the Scythians, Scylas, who had been to Greek before, brought some of the religious practices back to the Scythian society, and continued to practice them. As a result, when the elites found out about this fact, they organized an army and executed him even though he was a king. Such hostility towards outside cultures created an unstated tradition that prohibits the Scythians from adapting to a peaceful and relatively stable lifestyle of sedentary societies. The depiction from *Herodotus* also indicates another feature of this tradition. Even though Scylas was the king of the Scythians, the man with the highest prestige and status, Scythian elites still made the firm decision to execute him solely because of his practice of Greek religion. The case of Scylas would then be set as a warning to the rest of the society signaling the rule of keeping away from foreign cultures and the taboo of practicing them. Whenever a similar event occurred, it would remind the Scythians about the religion and culture they were supposed to practice, thus forcing them to adhere to the rules of Scythian society.

8. Conclusion

While it might seem that a nomadic society such as the Scythians' might find itself attracted to the luxurious life of those sedentary societies like that of the Greeks, such was not the case. The stability and cohesion of the society was maintained through three major ways: a reward system, religious beliefs, and an exclusive tradition towards outside culture. All these ways contained a similarity, that is: they all reminded the Scythians of their nature as warriors instead of elites of a sedentary society who lay around and give orders to their subjects. This reluctance to forsake cultural values was also seen in another nomadic group from East Steppe, the Xiongnu. The regular contact with Han culture may have lured some of the Xiongnu into China for a more stable life, but other cultural factors prevented them from abandoning their traditional way of life wholesale.

References

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