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NOMADIC SOCIETY AND THE HUNGARIAN CONQUERORS' TRIBAL SOCIETY OF ORIENTAL ORIGIN

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The social structure of nomadic societies is best reflected in that of organised nomadic empires. The present article explores the closely interrelated social, economic and military activities in advanced nomadic societies. The changing status and sometimes significantly different roles of newly conquered tribes are elucidated to provide a true picture of the organising principles of the relationship between the conquerors and the conquered population. Myths of origin, religious elements, real or virtual borders and the practice of exogamy all played a decisive role in creating social stability and an efficiently functioning order on the steppe. Furthermore, the term *half-nomad* is investigated to clarify its precise meaning, clearly contrasting it with some widespread misunderstandings. It is suggested that the use of this term should be avoided in contexts when it refers to the mixture of livestock-breeding and pasture-life. In addition, the exact meaning of the term *clan* and the roles of women in nomadic societies are analysed with various mythical and historical examples. The author suggests that the general concepts of nomadic societies could and should be applied to the history of the Magyars.

Key words: nomadic society, clan.

1. Nomadic society

In the nomadic heyday of the pasture societies the nomadic way of life meant the social structure of the empire organised by nomadic rulers (Chang 1981). During the centuries of the Hungarian conquest the Hungarians got into contact first with the Hsiung-nus (Xiongnu) and the Turk Empire, then also with some other empires (e.g. Uighurs, Khirghizes, etc.) that are said to be the offsprings of the first steppe nomads, the Hsiung-nus (Xiongnu), and later also with their neighbours and contemporary tribes (Ecsedy 1991).

The main characteristics must be sought in the sphere of the most advanced structure of the nomadic way of life brought about by the organisers of the empires. They reached state unity and introduced administration in different ways and to dif-

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ferent degrees, and the framework they created was not exclusive, just dominant. Stockbreeding, the main economic activity of the period, played a decisive role in shaping the social structure of both the organisers of those societies and the populations that joined them.[1] In their military, diplomatic and other actions of "external policy" the nomadic empire appears as a "country" of a unified land and population. As regards their "inner policy", the various conquered or allied tribes were treated in the framework of a tribal society, and were generally called by their own tribal name or after their leaders. As we can judge from contemporary reports, their tribal relations were natural, according to the changing relations. At the time of conquest, the conquered tribes, peoples or groups of population were at the bottom of the hierarchy, they became "servants", i.e. they had to pay regular tribute to the conquerers, but their position did not necessarily remain as such in the long run. This type of relationship might have changed or even dissappeared if the way of life of the conquered tribe adapted to that of the conquerers. By this the objective basis of the alleged steppe "slavery" actually disappeared. It is characteristic that certain tribes or groups of tribes made wars together, especially in the case of those tribal empires which had common origin, birthplace or region etc., even if they were unified only occasionally for certain actions. In a campaign or in war the tribes might have been organised in a military order, e.g. in groups of 5 elements, but in times of peace this order was not decisive, at least not prior to the Mongolian Empire which brought about structural changes not seen before. The organisers (the leading tribes) also used the religious tradition (tängrism) to bring about unity, and they showed tolerance to the conquered community if they were not hostile. The relationships among tribes were maintained by the unified power relations, by the practically indivisible lands, and by events of everyday life, including the obligation of exogamy, and it did not matter how many of these entities belonged to this ritual unity of a common myth (totem). The unity of tribal regions also determined the frontiers of the empires, but the frontier zones – limited by the real or alleged relations, true or fictive blood-relations etc. – never coincided with the tribal borderlands, not even on the principal frontiers of the empires, and in this way they represented the basic elements of social integration as well. They stabilised the easily fragmenting hierarchy of the tribes, their spectacular historical movements leading to a changed hierarchy (namely to a new empire), especially in the case of ruling or leading tribes, by the respect of a leader and the beliefs of his people, by the military power of the tribe etc.

The myths of origin were able to unite the leading tribes and the officials of a tribe, and could also create imperial unity. Hence the traditional tribal society could rather be called a society of tribes and clans, because the tribal framework was relatively permanent, whereas the ties within it, the other relations of hierarchy, might have often changed and been expressed differently at the time of territorial expansion and economic prosperity. The everyday life of the economy was going on between settlements and pastures, i.e. within the broad tribal frameworks, thus avoiding the common conflicts. A clan remaining alone could get along, especially in time of peace

[1] On early Turkic history and early Turkic traditions see Ecsedy (1984).

and among peaceful neighbours, but it could not conquer or defend itself and its animals or gain new territory alone. The same holds true for the basic unit of economic relations, i.e. the large family, and also for the small family which alone was unable to survive on the steppe, and consequently it was not a real element of the structure, it is rather an abstraction from other periods and spheres. That is why we have no reason to conceive a nomadic society's structure as being built from bottom up, that is from the large families (and their compounds etc.) upwards, but instead from the tribes downwards. As social life was represented by the clans and their framework, biological relations cannot be missing from an interpretation of the tribal framework. Clans constituted the most important elements in a tribal society; so the tribes themselves did not produce a framework of the nomadic societies, as in the case of the ancestors of the Magyars, where natural circumstances, historical events faded the frontiers of the tribes, and thus only the origin of the clans can be traced. The leading clans and tribes derive the different elements of power and respect from the myth of origin, from the hierarchy beginning with the primaeval ancestor, and thus they are able to distribute the related functions and titles. The clans mediate the tradition to the new, joining members of the society, and by this the new members inherit all the achievements of the society. The results of these processes are double-faced as concerns their structures: they can be widened freely even by "servants" or "slaves" (according to the rank of the attached or conquered population), causing a comparative "overpopulation" which sometimes might have led to an explosion of the patriarchal order of the society, or sometimes to a political change, as it happened when the empire fell. This at the same time meant the end of the tribal, "imperial aspect" of the clans and their historical role. Abilities also played an important role in the community of the tribe (in China it is said: "instead of old people the brave ones are respected"),[2] and respect also served as a basis of organising capacity. Experience gathered with age mostly played a role only in this circle; otherwise the development of gerontocracy was hindered by short life and by the form of life, namely by the continual movement of the population.

2. The so-called "half-nomad way of life" and the falsity of the term

This is a widely used but ambiguous term, as it concerns only one form or phase of nomadism and thus causes misunderstanding: one can interpret it as an early and primitive phase, due to unpleasant circumstances, or – due to the same environmental reasons – a phase of reprimitivisation, giving a larger role to fields of economy other than nomadic stockbreeding. Let us not forget that gathering, fishing or hunting activities and infrequently some primitive forms of agriculture existed during the domi-

[2] See L'histoire (1961). – On the early Turkic connections with the neighbours, see Harmatta (1962); on the beginning of Turkic history, see Ecsedy (1968).

nance of nomadic livestock-breeding. However, they were practised only to a certain extent: in cases of extraordinary, unpleasant circumstances, for the survival of the community, or in order to correct the one-sidedness of nutrition etc.[3] But advantageous natural conditions not only make it possible, but also necessitate to carry on pasture-life, which leads to the changing of grazing, the changing of settlements according to the state of pastures in different seasons, sometimes seeking for a new territory with weapons, when it became an obligation of vital importance. In Inner Asia and its semi-deserts the nomadic stockbreeders who fought their fatal wars with other nomadic peoples could be called the true nomads, while the nomadic pasture-peoples of East Europe should be called "half-nomads", as for instance János Matolcsi used it (1983). This usage of the term is confirmed by the fact that the nomads had to live on mere stockbreeding only in the last centuries when the territories of pasturing became narrower and narrower (sometimes with human intervention, by exhausting the soil with agriculture and grazing, or the desiccation of territories by destroying the tubes of irrigation etc.), or in the territories of deserts where the nomads had to live without the help of agriculture. However, in order to change grazing land or gain territories of pastures with the help of weapons by invading other territories or peoples etc., the nomads of the East had no other possibility than being "true nomads". "The true nomad is but poor nomad" said Owen Lattimore, who knew their circumstances well from personal experience. Classical nomadism and its original form always involved the knowledge of complementary economic activities, first of all agriculture, learned from different neighbours or from invading nomadic empires or through trade activities. This more developed form of civilisation connected with agriculture in the neighbourhood of agricultural civilisations and in territories where agriculture was possible gives an opportunity for misunderstanding and for the false use of the term "half-nomad". It is this aspect of nomadism for which the term "nomadism on the way toward civilisation" started to be used and which thinks that "half-nomads" are only on half-way to it, including economic (cultural) or sporadically even social elements. When the conquering Magyars are characterised by this term, this later phase is applied to the Magyar society as well. Instead of this, however, new characteristics, knowledge and economic forms should be taken into consideration (namely, they were living away from the steppe only after the new conquest, a long period after the new invasion, in a different form of life, forced to live so by the new circumstances). This new way of life also meant the appearance of new forms of personal relations. Thus the term is used for the ancient forms of social relations as well as for the new forms of the old tyranny, a system of personal relations, which differs from the order of war. It is an official hierarchy, not realised yet in an ownership of land and it is "half-feudal" at the same time – as treated in Györffy's book (1958) – or it is an economic basis of this way of life as in Bartha's opinion. (This distinction of orientation is necessary for a proper use of the term.)

[3] On the history of e.g. the Karluk people, see Ecsedy (1980a).

3. The "clan"

In societies living in tribal organisations, the "clan" is the basic principal entity of the society of kinship, creating an order of family within the main rule and determining relations to the livestock-breeding of the steppes and their peoples (Ecsedy 1980a). Indirectly, this is expressed by legends, in the West e.g. by that of the Amazons while in the East by those of countries ruled by women and named "Women-country" in the Chinese sources, even if the rule and filiation of the women in question were contradictory within the tribes, kingdoms etc., and even if a local curiosity often played a role in the birth of these legends. Women got into new relations by their marriage, although by way of exogamy they usually remained connected with their original clans or tribes, and that is why they used certain weapons, if they had learnt it before their marriage. At the worst, they were deputies in their new family or clan, and they fought instead of their new family-heads, namely the men. Their influence increased in economic life and in military activity as well. Their prominent position is shown by the fact that after the death of their husband the younger (male) members of their family married them in order to include them into their families (the Chinese sources say: "the sons and younger brothers marry those among their mothers who were born later than their mothers"). The authority and the respect, as well as frequently the title and rank of the head of the family (head of the clan) were inherited by the male members of the family, first of all by their sons, in a few cases by the younger brother of the father (head of the family). There were various communities that got their names in this way in the literature, from the Scottish clan, based on traditional blood kinship to the Chinese lineage (one family name, but more than a thousand members), or to the real *gens*, where every relation was based on or strengthened by the ownership of land. In between there were a whole series of communities of different degrees of relationship (like the Russian *rod*s, at least according to some experts of the Russian language). However, women's role is not mentioned, and that is why the matriarchate we dealt with earlier must be taken as an obsolete or non-existent system of relationship. The data referring to a matriarchal community are just curiosities, including the legends about the Amazons, where the Greeks misunderstood the role of women who learnt the use of weapons. In some special cases, in poor regions – for instance, among Sino-Tibetans – matrilineal filiation has survived until modern times, which is also manifested in some modern Eurasian writings. In these cases we can speak about a changed role in the societies of hunters, but it does not change the whole society, because the men have had the leading role and more social activity, for at least three generations, in guaranteeing survival on the steppe. This is the model of a community based more or less on patriarchal and patrilocal social relations. This is reflected both in the written sources and in the terms describing them; marriages here are considered to have more connection with political matters than in other communities, or at other peoples. Besides Chinese historiography and some extraordinary cases (e.g. in regions of Sino-Tibetan peoples) the leading role of women can also be found in Eurasian regions of the steppe, but it does not change the system of the division of la-

bour. The most important roles of society belonged to men: namely in hunting, in agriculture or in big livestock breeding and first of all in war.

Based on our knowledge deriving from excavated cemeteries, at least three generations are needed to be able to clarify the hierarchy in a society of stock-breeders of nomadic peoples. Communities ruled by a patriarchal or at least patrilineal, patrilocal society of relatives are so important that we have written sources describing these relations. Exceptions are mentioned only in connection with marriage relations or some local communities living and grazing together with the relatives of women brought "from outside". "Foreign relations" played a role in alliance or in conflicts in economic–political, that is, in power relations, and in these cases women had a "patriarchal" role in the community, in respect of wealth and military power in the clan. The above rights belonged to women through the privileges of men, as the women in question were active as heads of clans, in both their "outside" and their "inner" relations. Even when a unit had an extraordinary power or authority, as big as giving a leading role in the *tribe*, the women had a leading role similar to the male heads of tribes. The size of the clans – i.e. their "horizontal" size – was "strengthened" by the memory of the "ancestors" repeated over and over again both in rites and in folklore, sometimes only for justifying the rule of the offspring. The myths of origin, considered to be a means of justification of the "originality" of the person vested with power of a ruling historical community, often speak of the "heavenly" element of the family tree – characteristically enough, in the leading clan only – and of birth (rebirth) in connection with supernatural elements, namely the totem-animal and its mate, or the mother-ancestor (like Emese in Hungarian history and the Oriental relations of the bird Turul)[4]. The exogamy of the clans, especially when the regional advantages of production and power made it possible to provide a tribal or even an imperial "stately" unity or system of connections through the existing relations, increased the importance of "external" relations, and led to the incorporation of additional population. (The widows – when the voluntary service of accompanying the dead was over – remained in the clans of the brothers of the dead husband, and as the wife of other clan members, beside their children.) The written sources usually do not distinguish between the expanding clans of augmenting respect and the leading clans, nor among the tribes led by them. The settlement of the clan is considered to be the residence of the ruler, a centre for developing local unity, but without limiting the relations and the patriarchal acceptance of the organisation by defining a place of cult or rank. This character is maintained even when there is a possibility of organising a state – the way of life being more and more distant, giving way to separatism of small communities –, also at the time of the conquest of land in the new area.

[4] Cf. Ecsedy (1980b); on another Turkic tribe, the Karluk, see Ecsedy (1980a).

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