

Steppe

Man and steppe

Peoples of the steppe: the Yis

Ancient and legendary dynasties have given origin to the peoples who now live in Russia, Mongolia, China, etc. Only a few ethnic groups remain in the steppe regions where they still follow their old lifestyles.

The Yis live in south-western China, in the Yunnan, Sichuan, Guizhou and Guangxi provinces and are now approximately 6.5 millions. Their lands do not allow them to settle permanently: the Yis are nomads who set up their own wandering villages, especially around the oases or lakes the region is dotted with.

The focus of tribe's life is the tent. Called yurt, it is shaped like a round dome. Its straight walls are made of branch frames kept together by leather straps. Since they are nomads, the whole yurt can be dismantled and taken away. When dismantled (it takes about two hours), the yurt may be loaded onto three camels or four horses. When in a new camp, the yurt may be mounted in three hours by two people. It is strong and can withstand strong winds and even a tiger on the roof.

The yurt is not the only important thing in nomadic life. The horsemen of the steppes are shepherds and hunters, and horses are of crucial importance, not only for riding. Horse milk, in the form of curds, powder, fermented or plain, is important fare, along with horsemeat. In addition, horse hides are used to make leather boots, bags, bowls, packs; they are used in war and are the measure of part of a man's wealth.

Horses are not the only animals reared by tribes. Sheep, cows and oxen are also common all over the steppe. Camels are mainly used near the driest regions.

The life of each Yi tribe hinges around the chieftain, named khahan. In general, he wields influence only within his own tribe, but, under exceptional circumstances, he may bring many tribes together by conquest and diplomacy. Other tribes may spontaneously join under his rule, either out of friendship or fear, into a powerful nation of warriors and horsemen.

The Scythians

Eurasian steppes and north-American prairies were inhabited by fascinating and legendary people and were the scene of important historical events.

In the 8th century b.C., a group of Indo-Iranian nomadic tribes got into eastern Europe and settled between the mountain range of the Carpathians and the river Dnepr. Herodotus, the historian, described them as skilful horsemen, fierce warriors and rich shepherds. The Greeks called them Scythians, and Scythia was the region between the Danube and the Don that these tribes militarily controlled. They traded with Greece, to which they sold salted fish, honey and furs.

The Mongols of Genghis Khan

In the early 12th century, many Turkish-Mongolian nomadic tribes, similar in language, culture and lifestyle, used to live in the steppe plateau of Central Asia. These groups had gathered into small tribes, mostly composed of one family, armed and determined to defend their pastures and cattle. The tribes were headed by the most powerful clans, who decided when and where to pitch camp or pasture their cattle and who to fight. The weakest families still had authority and kept possession of their animals, but had to pay a tribute to the ruling clan. Nomadic life did not make the tribes completely self-sufficient, so they often raided and forayed the rich neighbouring regions of China. China, to defend itself militarily and politically, skilfully took advantage of the disagreements existing among different chieftains, granting some tribes honorific titles and food supplies in return for watching over its boundaries.

Later on, through the intense trades of Chinese and Muslim merchants, the Mongolian economy remarkably developed. The Mongols adopted paper money as a medium of exchange whose value was ensured by the Great Khan. The paper they used was made from mulberry bark, the bills were black and bore the emperor's seal. If a bill was damaged, the

owner could change it at the imperial mint, paying three per cent of its face value for the service. In addition, they built hotels, markets, borders posts and many roads in the Mongolian territory.

The legendary Gengis Khan

The exact date of birth of Temujin (Genghis Khan's true name) is not known. According to Persian sources, he was born in 1155, and in 1162, 1167 or 1176 according to others. In 1206, Temujin, for his political and military skills, was appointed head of all Mongols with the title of Genghis Khan. From then on, his armies invaded the north of China and entered Peking. In 1215, the Mongolian empire stretched to Tibet and Turkestan. In a few decades, the Mongols invaded Afghanistan, went round the Caspian, the Russian plains and settled in Baghdad, the historical Arabic capital, killing the last caliph. When Genghis Khan died in 1227, the Mongolian empire was disintegrated by conflicts among its successors. China invaded Mongolia and set fire to the capital of the empire, but could not completely rule over its territory.

The ferocious Hunnish

The Huns were nomadic people of Turkish-Mongolian origins. Legends portray these people as fierce horsemen grouped into huge armies and armed with horn bows, bone arrows, snares and nets. In fact, the Huns seem to have been composed of a myriad small gangs, which were as ready to join forces as to fight each other. Once again, as the legend goes, the Huns spent their lives on horseback and used to wear the hides of wild animals until rotten.

The most famous Hunnish warrior is certainly Attila, who was elected king of the Huns in 443 and who, for his legendary ferocity, was named "the scourge of God". During his rule, Attila subdued many Germanic peoples and built up such a military power as to charge tributes to eastern and western empires.

American Indians

The Europeans gave the name of "Indians" to native Americans because in discovering the Americas Christopher Columbus thought he had reached the Far East, then called the "East Indies". When the first Europeans arrived, Indians were perhaps more than 5 millions, gathered in a high number of tribes. Many of them were nomadic hunters, although they also grew crops, especially maize. Bison were the favourite preys of many Indian tribes. Between the Mississippi and the Rocky Mountains lived the Comanche, the Arapaho, the Cheyenne, the Blackfoot and the Sioux, who were bison hunters. East, along the Great Lakes, lived the Algonquin and the Huron, good at fishing and hunting. The Creek, Cherokee and Seminole, settled between the Appalachians and the peninsula of Florida, were farmers. In the south-west lived the Apache, the Hopi and the Navaho, who lived in permanent villages and were engaged in farming. The Indian civilisation was based on a complex culture, with values that were very different from those of European cultures. The community side of social life was attached a lot of importance and was strengthened by rites and dances. Indians did not have private property and the land was everyone's.

In the second half of the nineteenth century, the white settlers began to move into the plains, to exterminate bison and take possession of the land. Many Indian tribes, for instance the Sioux, strongly opposed to the settlement of those who deprived them of their land and bison, their most important means of support.

Frightening wars broke out. The white prevailed, with their modern weapons, such as guns, cannons and repeating rifles. In the late nineteenth century, the Indians of the United States and Canada both risked disappearing.

Today, one half of Indians live in reservations and the rest in small villages of the west, often in degraded social conditions. In the last century, native Americans have got their act together and have engaged in struggles to claim some of their civil rights.

Mines in the steppe

As well as the extraction of hydrocarbons, the steppe contains many other underground bodies: copper, molybdenum, phosphor, gold (4,632 kg in Mongolia alone) as well as limestone and dolomite.

In addition, these lands are rich in underground fields of bismuth, cadmium and thallium, which are essential for electronics.

Mines have always been the main means of support for many people, who have built their settlements right against the extraction areas.

Industry and crafts

Industry is still in its infancy and is almost essentially based on wool, leather (leather clothes and shoes), cashmere, meat and dairy products. Heavy industry is based on the electric sector, mineral and forest products and building materials. Crafts, as well as covering the same activities, boast a centuries-old tradition in silver and semiprecious stone working.