DICKSON ASIA LECTURE 1962

Because we print our maps with the north at the top, and because the general trend of the Great Wall of China is from west to east, we have always tended to arrange our ideas about the relations between the Chinese and the nomadic barbarians of Inner Asia in a geographical stratification from south to north: China itself; then the defended frontier of the Great Wall; then the adjacent frontier zone, usually an administered zone when China was strong, represented in recent centuries by Inner Mongolia; then the zone of maximum aridity, least touched by the climate of Siberia from the north and that of China from the south, which we call the Gobi Desert but which the Mongols think of, rather, as a series of 'gobis', each with its own name; then Outer Mongolia, land of the richest pastures; and finally the forests of Siberia.

From very early times, however, an east–west distribution of tribes, and east–west political and military movement, have been as important as this north–south geographical stratification. In the second and first centuries B.C., when China under the first Han dynasty resembled the contemporary Roman Empire in certain ways, the power of the Hsiungnu or early Huns was north of the Ordos loop of the Yellow River, in Inner and Outer Mongolia. West of them were the Yueh-chih, an Indo-European people—the tribe which, in the vast migrations of Indo-European-speaking peoples, drove farthest to the east. On the other side of the Hsiungnu, in what is today eastern Mongolia (Outer and Inner), were the Tung Hu. It is still being argued whether the Hsiungnu were ‘proto-Turks’ and the Tung Hu ‘proto-Mongols’, or perhaps ‘proto-Tungus’. No clear answer is yet possible, but we do know that the Chinese always used ‘Hu’ as a term for northern pastoral nomads who fought on horseback. As a general term, Hu included the Hsiungnu; in fact, the Hsiungnu were ‘the’ Hu. Since Tung Hu means Eastern Hu, we can deduce that they seemed to the Chinese like enough to the Hsiungnu to be covered by the same general term, but different enough to require an adjective setting them apart as ‘easterners’. More important than the ethnic differentiation among Yueh-chih, Hsiungnu and Tung Hu, however, is the fact that the Hsiungnu had to drive away the Yueh-chih on their west and break the Tung Hu on their east before they could muster their full strength against China.

A few centuries later, when China was under the T'ang dynasty (618–906)—the same era in which Muhammad initiated the Arab conquests that struck eastward through the
Iranian world and beyond, and westward to Morocco and Spain, and Charlemagne conquered the Saxons and set on foot the eastward movement of the Germans against the Slavs—the geographical distribution of peoples in Mongolia becomes clearer. More than half of the country, as far east as the Tuula River on which Ulan Bator (Ulaanbaatar) stands, was held by Turks. The tribal subdivisions of the Turks are confusing enough, but east of the Turkish realm the confusion is even more obscure. The tribal name ‘Mongol’ already appears, but designates only a minor group, not an important people. In the general area of what later became Eastern Mongolia and Manchuria it is as yet impossible to distinguish precisely which tribes should be called ‘Mongol’ and which ‘Tungusic’.

As a guide to barbarian history in this age, differences of an economic character are more reliable than tribal names. In the west, in the Chinese Turkistan (Sinkiang) and Soviet Turkistan of today, people in the major oases were still speaking Indo-European languages. Their irrigated, intensive agriculture supported urban concentrations which were small in area—because the oases, being surrounded by desert or very arid steppe, could not be expanded—but high in cultural attainment. Influenced by these oases-in-the-desert, the Turks—Turks of the Orhon, Uighurs and others—created a mixed economy and society of oases-in-the-steppe. On such rivers as the Orhon, Selenge and Tuula (space being limited, it is enough to mention here that there were similar developments westward through Inner Asia), they established patches of irrigated and rainfall agriculture. It is impossible to say how much of the cultivation was done by Turks who had formerly been herdsmen, how much by captives who had been made slaves or serfs, how much by immigrants from the Turkistan oases and China who found life a little easier under barbarian overlords than under their own landlords.

It is possible, however, to discern some of the consequences. There was enough agriculture to induce rulers of Turkish domains to maintain fixed headquarters, and to reduce the tribal component of the new, mixed society from the status of followers to the status of subjects, but not enough to make the pastoral economy entirely subordinate to agriculture. There were also military consequences. In a pastoral society which has only a limited supply of grain, obtained by trade or, in some regions, from occasional catch-crops, the livestock are pastured entirely on the open steppe, with no prepared hay or other supplementary feed, even in winter. Horses bred under these conditions are extremely hardy, but cannot be ridden day after day. Moreover the horses are stunted in size by winter hardship in the years while they are still growing. The classic cavalry of nomads therefore consists of light-armed men, with plenty of remounts.

With their patches of relatively rich agriculture the medieval Turks of the northern river valleys of Mongolia were able to introduce a modification. The light nomad cavalry continued to be used, but the nobles, with headquarters in the cultivated land, were able to select good-looking colts, stall-feed them, and so produce much bigger, stronger horses. Riding these they were able to wear heavy defensive armour and to make themselves a new kind of ‘knightly’ military élite. (The heavy cavalry of the Parthians, the cataphracts, were a development of the same kind, under similar conditions. The term ‘cataphract’ being Greek it is, incongruously but not surprisingly, of naval origin; it means ‘bulwarked’.)

The existence of these ‘special’ horses, the ‘chargers’ of individual champions, is attested both by grave-finds and in the famous runic inscriptions of the Orhon Turks, where the battle-chargers are named and their fate recorded if they fell in battle. This