The Central-Asian steppe has been the home of nomad tribes for centuries. Being nomads, they roamed across the plains, incidentally attacking the urbanized countries to the south, east and west.

The first to describe the life style of these tribes was a Greek researcher, Herodotus, who lived in the fifth century BCE. Although he concentrates on the tribes living in modern Ukraine, which he calls Scythians, we may extrapolate his description to people in Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan and possibly Mongolia, even though Herodotus usually calls these eastern nomads 'Sacae'. In fact, just as the Scythians and the Sacae shared the same life style, they had the same name: in their own language, which belonged to the Indo-Iranian family, they called themselves Skudat ('archers'?). The Persians rendered this name as Sakā and the Greeks as Skythai. The Chinese called them, at a later stage in history, Sai.

Tribes are, almost by definition, very loose organizations. Every now and then, new tribal coalitions came into being, and sometimes, new languages became prominent among the nomads from the Central-Asian steppe.

The oldest group we know of is usually called Indo-Iranian. (The old name 'Aryan' is no longer used.) There are no contemporary reports about their migration, but it can be reconstructed from their language. It is reasonably certain that at the beginning of the second millennium BCE, the speakers of the Proto-Indo-Iranian language moved from Ukraine to the southeast. From an archaeological point of view, their migration is attested in the change from the Yamnaya culture into the Andronovo culture.

They invaded the country that was later called Afghanistan, where they separated into an Iranian and an Indian branch. The first group settled in Aria, a name that lives on in our word 'Iran', where they settled after 1000 BCE; the second group reached the Punjab c.1500 BCE. From the second millennium on, three groups of languages can be discerned: the Indian group (Vedic, Sanskrit...), the Scythian group (in the homeland on the steppe), and the Iranian group (Gathic, Persian...). Even when, in the sixth century, the Achaemenid empire was at its most powerful and the Persians lived in comfortable towns, they still remembered their earlier, nomadic life style:

The Persian nation contains a number of tribes, and the ones which Cyrus assembled and persuaded to revolt were the Pasargadae, Maraphii, and Maspii, upon which all the other tribes are dependent. Of these, the Pasargadae are the most distinguished; they contain the clan of the Achaemenids from which spring the Perseid kings. Other tribes are the Panthialaei, Derusiae, Germanii, all of which are attached to the soil, the remainder -the Dahae, Mardi, Dropici, Sagarti, being nomadic.

[Herodotus, Histories 1.125
tr. Aubrey de Selincourt]

The second group of nomads known to have gone south is the tribe of the Cimmerians. Their name Gimirru -given to them by the Assyrians- means 'people traveling back and forth'; this name still exists in our word 'Crimea'. The Cimmerians destroyed the kingdoms of Urartu (an old name for
Armenia) and Phrygia (in Turkey) in the first quarter of the seventh century BCE; other Scythians reached Ascalon in Palestine. According to Herodotus, they ruled the northwest of Iran (which Herodotus calls Media) for twenty-eight years.

In the sixth, fifth and fourth centuries BCE, the Persians discerned several nomadic tribes on the Central-Asian steppe. As we have seem, they called them Sakâ. We know the names of these tribes from Persian royal inscriptions and can add information from Herodotus and other Greek authors.

- The Sakâ haumavargâ ('haoma-drinking Sacae') were subjected by Cyrus the Great. Herodotus calls them Amyrgian Scythians. Haoma was a trance inducing drink, made from fly agaric. This mushroom does not occur south of the river Amudar'ya (Oxus). Consequently, we may assume that these nomads lived in Uzbekistan. Herodotus informs us that they wore trousers and pointed caps; they fought as archers. He also mentions their use of the battle ax (which they calledsagaris).

- The Sakâ tigrakhaudâ ('Sacae with pointed hats') were defeated in 520/519 BCE by the Persian king Darius I the Great, who gave this tribe a new leader. One of the earlier leaders was killed, the other, named Skunkha, was taken captive and is visible on the relief at Behistun. (It is possible that Darius created a new tribe from several earlier tribes.) Herodotus calls the Sakâ tigrakhaudâ the Orthocorybantians ('pointed hat men'), and informs us that they lived in the same tax district as the Medes. This suggests that the Sakâ tigrakhaudâ lived on the banks of the ancient lower reaches of the Amudar'ya, which used to have a mouth in the Caspian Sea south of Krasnovodsk. The pointed hat is a kind of turban.

- The Apâ Sakâ ('Water Sacae') are also known as the Pausikoi, as Herodotus prefers to call them. Later authors, like Arrian of Nicomedia (in his Anabasis) and Ammianus Marcellinus (in his Roman History, 23.6.62) seems to known them as the Abian Scythians; still later, we encounter them as the Apasiaki, first east and later southwest of Lake Aral. They must be situated along the ancient lower reaches of the Amudar'ya.

- The tribe that Herodotus calls 'Massagetes' must have been called something like Māh-Sakâ in Persian, which means 'Moon Sacae'. This is a bit confusing, because it is known that the Massagetes venerated only one god, the Sun. The Massagetes were responsible for the death of the Persian king Cyrus the Great (in December 530). From Herodotus' description, it is clear that they lived along the Syrdar'ya (Jaxartes).

- The nomad tribe known as Dahâ, which means 'robbers', is mentioned for the first time in the Daiva inscription of Xerxes; he must have subjected them. Herodotus calls the Dai a Persian nomad tribe (above), but they can not have lived in Persia proper, because they are mentioned in the Anabasis of Arrian as living along the lower reaches of the Syrdar'ya. In the days of the Macedonian king Alexander the Great, they were famous for their mounted archers. It is possible that this tribe desintegrated after the fall of the Achaemenid empire; one of the tribes that came into being was that of the Parni, who went south in the third century BCE and founded the Parthian empire.

- The Sakâ paradrâyâ ('Sacae across the sea') were living in Ukraine. These are the nomads that the Greeks called Scythians. In (514 or) 513 BCE, king Darius launched a disastrous campaign against the Sakâ paradrâyâ. Herodotus gives a long description of their way of life and discerns many tribes in the neighborhood.
  - The Royal Scythians lived in the southern part of Ukraine, immediately north of the Greek towns.
The Scythian-Farmers seem to be identical with the archaeological culture known as Chernoles, which has been identified with the Iron Age Slavs.

Probably, we may identify the Neuri with the Milograd culture, the archaeological remains of which have been found on the confluence of the rivers Dnepr and Pripyat, north of modern Kiev. They may be the ancestors of the Balts.

Herodotus' story about the Man-eaters received some confirmation with the excavation of human remains that were gnawed at by human jaws; these excavations were along the river Sula, to the southeast of Kiev.

The Argippaeans are sometimes identified with the ancestors of the Calmucs.

The Issedones may be identical to the Wu-sun who (according to Chinese texts) lived on the shore of Lake Balchash.

The Sauromatae are mentioned by Herodotus as the descendants of Scythian fathers and Amazon mothers. Of course, this is a legend, but the tribe did exist and was to move to the west after 130 BCE. In the process, they assimilated the Royal Scythians (above). In the late first century BCE, the Sarmatian coalition consisted of four tribes:

- The Iazyges, which had once lived on the shores of the Sea of Azov, were now living on the northern bank of the Danube. They were to move to what is now eastern Hungary, where they settled in c.50 CE. They were defeated by the Roman emperor Marcus Aurelius (in 175).
- The Urgi lived on the banks of the Dnepr, south of Kiev.
- The Royal Scythians were still living in the south of Ukraine and had become the most important Sarmatian tribe. They and the Urgi became known as the Sarmati. The Romans seem to have accepted their settlement in Hungary, but the situation was sometimes tense. The Sarmati were, for example, responsible for the destruction of the Twenty-first legion Rapax in 92.
- The Roxolani initially lived between the Don and the Dnepr but settled on the lower reaches of the Danube, where the Iazyges had been living before they migrated to Hungary.

The steppe nomads frequently attacked the urbanized regions to the east, south or west. Usually, this created great havoc, but after some time, they went back to their homeland. However, it was necessary for the attacked states to defend themselves. The Indians thought that they did not need walls because they were protected by the Himalayas; c.110 BCE, the valley of the Indus was run over. The Chinese built the 'Wall of ten thousand miles' to protect themselves. The rulers of the Achaemenid empire, from Cyrus the Great to Alexander the Great, may have built walls as well. These walls are mentioned in the eighteenth sura of the Quran and in medieval legend, and may be identified with known archaeological remains in Golestan (Iran). It is certain, however, that both Cyrus and Alexander built garrison towns along the river Syrdar'ya or Jaxartes; our sources call them Cyreschata and Alexandria Eschatê.

Nomadism continued to exist into the first and second millennium CE. Several tribes may be mentioned. The Alani - whose language lives on in modern Ossetian - are known from the first century CE; they lived in modern Kazakhstan. Later, they moved to the west, being pushed forward by the Huns, which are known from Chinese texts as the Xiung-nu. Later tribal
formations were the Avars, the Chasars, the Bulgars, the Turks, the Magyars, the Cumans, the Tatars, the Mongols and the Cossacks.

Literature

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