

Student Handout 4 - Descriptions of Nomadic Peoples in the Written Record

Document 1: Pastoralism in China, 100 BC/BCE

A first-century B.C.E. Chinese historian described the Xiongnu, a large **pastoral** nomadic group, in the following way:

The Xiongnu live in the Northern Barbarian lands and wander, following their herds, moving from place to place. . . searching for water and pastures. They have no cities, no permanent dwellings and no cultivated fields. . . . Their children ride on the backs of sheep and shoot [arrows] at birds and rats. . . . According to their custom, during times of peace they follow their herds and hunt animals and birds to sustain life; in crisis everyone uses their unique tactics for an attack and invasion. . . . When it is profitable they advance; when it is unprofitable they withdraw, never being ashamed of retreat. . . . From their rulers on down everyone eats meat, wears animal hides and puts on felt and furs.

Document 2: Mesopotamia, From a poet's tale of the marriage between the Goddess Innana and the God Damuzi (2nd Millennium BC/BCE)

The man of my heart works the hoe.
The farmer! He is the man of my heart!
He gathers the grain in great heaps. . . .
The shepherd! I will not marry the shepherd!
His clothes are coarse; his wool is rough.
I will marry the farmer.

Document 3: During the second millennia BC/BCE, a pastoral group from Inner-Eurasia (see Map II), invaded the Indus River Valley. They brought with them a language known as *Sanskrit* part of a larger language family known as Indo-European, the same language family that English and other European languages developed from. They also brought with them prayers and hymns priests would chant before battle. After they had settled down and developed their own form of writing, these hymns were written down in a book called the *Rigveda*.

1. His face is like a thundercloud, when the armored warrior goes into the lap of battles.
Conquer with an unwounded body; let the power of the armor keep you safe. [He is calling for protection by the metal and leather armor he wears and by the sacred power of the hymn.]
2. With the bow let us win cows, with the bow let us win the contest and violent battles with the bow.
The bow ruins the enemies' pleasure.
3. She [the bow] comes all the way up to your ear like a woman who wishes to say something, embracing her dear friend; humming like a woman, the bowstring stretched tight on the bow carriers you safely across in the battle. . . .
4. These two who go forward like a woman going to an encounter hold the arrow in their lap as a mother holds a son. Let the two bow-tips, working together, pierce our enemies and scatter our foes.
5. Standing in the chariot, the skillful charioteer drives his prize-winning horses forward wherever he wishes to go. Praise the power of the reins: the guides follow the mind that is behind them.
6. Neighing violently, the horses with their showering hoofs outstrip everyone with their chariots. Trampling down the foes with the tips of their hoofs, they destroy their enemies without veering away. . . .
7. Her [the arrow's] robe is an eagle, and her tooth is a deer; bound with cows, she flies as she is sent forward. Let the arrows give us shelter wherever men run together and run separately. [The arrow is robed with eagle feathers, tipped with deer-horn and bound with leather thongs.]
8. Spare us, O weapon flying true to its mark; let our body be stone. . . .

9. He beats them on the back and strikes them on the haunches. O whip the horses, drive forward into battle the horses who sense what is ahead. . . .
10. Whoever would harm us, whether it be one of our own people, or a stranger, or someone from far away, let all the gods ruin him. My inner armor is prayer.

Source: http://worldhistoryforusall.sdsu.edu/units/three/landscape/03_landscape4.pdf

Document 4:

“Pastoral Nomadic groups thought of themselves as blood brothers, committed to live and die for their tribe. Their society was patriarchal, and men owned the herds. These cowboys of the ancient world loved riding and racing horses, hunting, wrestling, and archery.

Warfare was even more important for pastoral nomads than it had been for earlier pastoralists because of rising population and more competition for grazing land. Nomads had to be ready to fight at a moment’s notice.”

—Jean Elliott Johnson and Donald James Johnson (2000) *The Human Drama*, p. 85.