
THE YÜEH-CHIH
AND THEIR MIGRATIONS*

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The Yüeh-chih in Gansu

The Yüeh-chih are the people who, from the latter half of the second century B.C. to the beginning of the first century A.D., occupied and ruled what is now Middle Asia and Afghanistan. They destroyed a country called Ta-hsia – usually identified with the Bactrian kingdom under the Greeks. Their original home is said to have been in the western part of Gansu Province in China, from which they migrated via the northern part of the T'ien Shan mountain range. They were forced to migrate because of the invasion of the Hsiung-nu, who became predominant in Central Asia. The Yüeh-chih settled to the north of the Amu Darya and ruled the country of Ta-hsia, which lies south of the same river. There they established five *hsi-hou* (*yabghu*) or governor-generalships. At the beginning of the first century A.D., the Kushans, one of the five *yabghu*, became powerful and took the place of the Yüeh-chih. This is an outline of the history of the Yüeh-chih. Nothing more is known about them except that the Chinese emperor Wu-ti (140–87 B.C.) of the Former Han sent Chang Ch'ien to the Yüeh-chih to negotiate a military alliance against the Hsiung-nu, but this was not concluded.

Many theories have been published about who the Yüeh-chih were. The oldest theories were based solely on the resemblance of the name of the Yüeh-chih to that of the Goths or Massagetae. But the Goths could have had nothing to do with a people in Central Asia in the second century B.C. Nor can the identification of the Yüeh-chih with the Massagetae, who lived in the plain east of the Caspian and Aral Seas in the fifth century B.C., be maintained.

The identification of the Yüeh-chih with Casia¹ is also based on the simi-

* See Map 4.

1. Egami, 1948, pp. 84 et seq., 1951, pp. 123 et seq.

larity of the names Yüeh-chih and Casia, but there is some additional positive evidence to support it. 'Casia' is the name given by the Greeks in the first century A.D. to the Kunlun mountain range in the south of the Tarim basin and to the region stretching north of it, which is famous even today for the production of jade. According to the *Book of Kuan-tzŭ*, jade was produced either in the country of the Yü-chih, who are considered to be identical with the Yüeh-chih, or in the mountains on their frontier. The *Book of Kuan-tzŭ* is some time before the third century B.C., when the Yüeh-chih dominated the greater part of Mongolia. So it is quite possible that 'Yü-chih', 'Yüeh-chih' and 'Casia' represent the same name; and that the Yüeh-chih were known to the Chinese to be associated with jade.² Presumably jade was known by the name of *casia* because it was produced in the country of the Yüeh-chih, or the Yüeh-chih were known by the name of Casia because of their jade. In a place near modern Khotan in the ancient region of Casia, jade is still called *gutscha*; and 'gutscha' is very similar to the old pronunciation of Yüeh-chih, which may have been 'zguja' or something like that. If the jade was called *casia* because of the Yüeh-chih, the country of Casia might have been the place where the Yüeh-chih originated. But the Yüeh-chih were a great horde of pastoral people, and had 100,000 or 200,000 cavalymen, according to the *Shih-chi* (Book 123), when they reached the Amu Darya. This makes it unlikely that they could have originated in a place such as Casia where the oases could only support a population of a few thousand at the time of the Han dynasty. It must also be remembered that no other nomadic people has ever risen to power in any part of the Tarim basin where Casia was situated. If the Yüeh-chih were called by the name of Casia, because of the *casia* or jade they produced, they must also have had another name of their own. What is certain, however, is that the region of Casia and other countries in the Tarim basin were under the control of the Yüeh-chih; although it is most likely that Casia was the native place of the Yüeh-chih.

Recently Yang Hsien-i⁴ has identified Chü-chih in the *Tso-chuan* under the fourteenth year of Duke Hsiang (559 B.C.) with the Yüeh-chih. There is indeed a resemblance between the two names, and there is the statement of Wu-li, the ancestor of Chü-chih, who was deported to Kua-chou, which the

2. Concerning the Yü-chih as described in the *Book of Kuan-tzŭ*, see Matsuda, 1939, and Kuwabara, 1940, pp. 8-9, 71. See also Wang, 1927, and Pelliot, 1929, p. 150. The latest publication on the *Book of Kuan-tzŭ* concerning the parts in which references are made to the Yü-chih is Ma, 1979, Vol. 1, p. 255; Vol. 2, pp. 411, 429, 460, 462, 560, 569-70. According to Professor Ma, these parts of the *Kuan-tzŭ* were compiled in its present form at various times from the beginning of the Former Han to the reign of Wang Mang, that is to say, from 200 B.C. to A.D. 12. Professor Ma also tries to establish the identity of the Yü-chih with the Yüeh-chih in his other book (Ma, 1982, pp. 476-7).
3. Reconstruction made by Haloun, 1937, p. 316. See also a new reconstruction made by Pulleyblank, 1966, p. 17.
4. Yang, 1983a, pp. 232-3. Another book of the same content was published by the same author (Yang, 1983b, pp. 232-3).

Yüeh-chih occupied in a later period. But Chü-chih is called Jung-tzū, or a barbarian of the West, in the *Tso-chuan*, and the tribe to which he belonged Ch'iang-jung, or the Ch'iang barbarians of the West. In other words, Chü-chih is not a tribal name, but a personal one. Moreover Kua-chou, to which the ancestor of Chü-chih was exiled, was not the place where he lived permanently. For these reasons, even if Chü-chih (a personal name) can represent the same sound as Yüeh-chih (a tribal name), Chü-chih cannot be regarded as identical with the Yüeh-chih.

According to Strabo, the Bactrian kingdom was destroyed by the invasion of four peoples: the Asioi, the Pasianoi, the Tocharoi and the Sakarauoi, all of whom came from beyond the Syr Darya. According to Pompeius Trogus, the Asiani were lords of the Tocharians and conquered the Sacaraucae. Szü-ma Ch'ien, who undoubtedly derived his information from the report of Chang Ch'ien, states that the Yüeh-chih conquered and ruled Ta-hsia. Attempts have been made in the past to reconcile the three statements by identifying the Yüeh-chih with one of four peoples, in the belief that 'Ta-hsia' meant the Graeco-Bactrian kingdom and that Szü-ma Ch'ien tells us of the conquest of that kingdom. Some scholars think that the Asioi, the Asiani and the Pasianoi are one and the same people, who are to be identified with the Yüeh-chih, 'Pasianoi' being a corruption of 'Gasianoi'. Others suggest that the Tocharoi should be identified with the Yüeh-chih because the Yüeh-chih occupied the western part of Gansu Province, which is called Thogara in the *Geography* of Ptolemy; because Tocharistan was where the Bactrian kingdom was situated; and because the Asiani, as described by Pompeius Trogus, were the ruling family of the Yüeh-chih.

It is, however, uncertain whether the country of Ta-hsia in Szü-ma Ch'ien means the Bactrian kingdom under the Greeks. According to Szü-ma Ch'ien, the country of Ta-hsia had no big or powerful king but only small chiefs in a number of cities. If the country of Ta-hsia was the Bactrian kingdom, it must have been under a king who controlled the whole of Bactria. Szü-ma Ch'ien also states that the people of Ta-hsia were skilled traders, but their soldiers were weak in warfare and disliked battle, and, for these reasons, Ta-hsia was conquered by the Yüeh-chih. These statements are not applicable to the Greek kingdom of Bactria, whose soldiers seem to have been skilful in fighting. As 'Ta-hsia' is an exact transcription of 'Tochara' (which was the central part of the Bactrian kingdom), if the Yüeh-chih were the Tocharians, the conquest of Ta-hsia by the Yüeh-chih means the conquest of the country of Tochara by the Tocharians, which seems rather strange. The evidence of Szü-ma Ch'ien shows that Ta-hsia cannot be the Bactrian kingdom, but was the country of Tochara divided into several small political units at the time of the Yüeh-chih invasion. In other words the Graeco-Bactrian kingdom had already been destroyed or divided when the Yüeh-chih arrived. Therefore, there is no need to accept the identification of the Tocharas with the Yüeh-chih.

A third group of scholars maintain that the Yüeh-chih were the Kushans. As already mentioned, the Kushans were originally one of the five *yabghu* (governorships) established by the Yüeh-chih. This view therefore holds that the other four governorships were also of the same stock. It seems convincing when the word 'Kushan' is explained as a genitive plural form of the root 'Kuša', which means 'Yüeh-chih'. But the statement in the *Han-shu* (Annals of the Former Han) about the establishment of the five tribal chiefs suggests that they were natives of Ta-hsia who were conquered by the Yüeh-chih.⁵ Moreover, if the name 'Kušan' is identical with 'Yüeh-chih', we wonder why the author of the *Han-shu* uses different Chinese characters with different sound values to represent the two names.

The Yüeh-chih and the Scythians

It seems most plausible to identify the Yüeh-chih with the Scythians – a solution that fits the situation of Central Asia in the third and second centuries B.C. better than any other theory. The name of Yüeh-chih in Archaic Chinese, 'zngi-wāt-t'ia', the barbarian prototype of which might have been *Zguja, can be considered as a transcription of the name of the Scythians. This suggestion was first made in 1935 by Haloun, who held that the Chinese knew the Tocharian people under the name of the Yüeh-chih or Scythians. It may also be proposed that the Yüeh-chih were not only called Scythians, but were Scythians themselves. According to Szü-ma Ch'ien, up to the beginning of the third century B.C., it was the Yüeh-chih and the Tung Hu, the two dominant powers in the Mongolian plain, who pressed the Hsiung-nu from the west and east respectively. At that time, the Hsiung-nu were a small community of tribes. Only when they were unified under the able leader Mao-tun could they push the Yüeh-chih further westwards and the Tung Hu eastwards. Mao-tun himself was taken as a hostage by the Yüeh-chih in his early days.

Mao-tun was inspired by the unification of China by the Emperor Ch'in Shih-huang-ti in 221 B.C.; the first blow of the Hsiung-nu against the Yüeh-chih was given about this time. It resulted in the withdrawal of the Yüeh-chih to the western part of Gansu Province. The Hsiung-nu were originally a pastoral people in the steppes north of the Yin-shan mountain range. Szü-ma Ch'ien states that the Yüeh-chih were the only people who pressed the Hsiung-nu from the west. This may mean that the Yüeh-chih were seeking to control the greater part of the Mongolian plain.

5. Kuwabara, 1940, pp. 42–6.

The Yüeh-chih Empire

About 204–200 B.C. Mao-tun conquered Mongolia and subjugated several peoples. In 176 B.C. he defeated the Yüeh-chih in the western part of Gansu Province. In his letter to the Han, Mao-tun said that the Hsiung-nu had destroyed the Yüeh-chih; and Lou-lan, Wu-sun, Hu-chieh and twenty-six other countries in the neighbourhood were subjugated to the Hsiung-nu. It is an exaggeration to say that they destroyed the Yüeh-chih, but it is clear that the Yüeh-chih were driven from the west of Gansu and probably moved from the north of the T'ien Shan mountains. What is important is that all these countries were subjugated as a result of the defeat of the Yüeh-chih, that is, they had been under the control of the Yüeh-chih up to that time.

Lou-lan, later called Shan-shan, is a country near Lop Nor in the eastern part of the Tarim basin. The Wu-sun were a pastoral people in the region of the River Ili and Lake Issik-köl, north of the T'ien Shan mountains. The twenty-six other countries seem to have been small states in the Tarim basin, probably including Casia mentioned above. As regards Hu-chieh, no definite identification has been made. The late T. Fujita was of the opinion that it is identical with the Uighur of a later period.⁶ According to the *Han-shu*, in the mid-first century B.C., five kings competed with each other for the leadership of the Hsiung-nu Empire, one of them named Hu-chieh-wang, or King of Hu-chieh, which lies to the west of the Hsiung-nu Empire. A few years later Chih-chih *shan-yü* became independent from the Hsiung-nu Empire, occupied the north-west part of the Mongolian plain and successfully defeated the army of the Wu-sun. Subsequently he marched northwards, subjugated the U-chieh, and, turning to the north, conquered the Ting-ling. The U-chieh are said to be identical to the Hu-chieh. Taking these statements into consideration, the Hu-chieh may be placed in what is now Dzungaria or the upper waters of the River Selenga. Fujita's view, therefore, seems to be quite close to the truth.

The dominion of the Yüeh-chih also extended as far south as the upper waters of the Yellow River. Szü-ma Ch'ien states that a small part of the Yüeh-chih, who could not follow the migration of the main horde towards the west, settled themselves in Nan-shan, the southern mountains, which separate the upper waters of the Yellow River people from the Mongolian plain.

The date of migration of the Yüeh-chih to Ta-hsia is not clearly known. The Hsiung-nu gave a third blow to the Yüeh-chih during the reign of Lao-shang *shan-yü* (c. 174–161 B.C.). But it is generally believed that the conquest of Ta-hsia was made some time between 139 and 128 B.C., that is, between the departure of Chang Ch'ien and his arrival at the court of the Yüeh-chih. So it is not certain when the small part of the Yüeh-chih settled in Nan-shan, though it is quite likely that it was in 176 B.C. when the Yüeh-chih were forced to evacuate the

6. *Tôzai Koshôshi no kenkyû, Saiiki-hsu*, 1943, pp. 61, 64.

western part of Gansu Province. In any case, it is generally understood that this small part of the Yüeh-chih asked the Ch'iang (or Tibetans on the upper waters of the Yellow River) for protection and whether they could stay with them. It may, however, be suggested that these Ch'iang people had been under the rule of the Yüeh-chih and that the small group of the Yüeh-chih who were later called the Little Yüeh-chih, to distinguish them from the Great Yüeh-chih (or Ta-Yüeh-chih) in Ta-hsia, were earlier rulers of these Ch'iang people. They never asked for protection, but actually lived with the Ch'iang who were their subjects.

When China was unified by Ch'in Shih-huang-ti, the upper waters of the Yellow River (modern Gansu Province) did not form part of the Chinese Empire, but were under the domination of the Yüeh-chih. According to the late S. Wada, the Yüeh-chih realm included the north-western Mongolian plain and the upper waters of the Yellow River.⁷

Szū-ma Ch'ien locates the original place of the Yüeh-chih between Tun-huang and Ch'i-lien, which is a mountain in the Nan-shan range. He believes that the Yüeh-chih migrated from this restricted locality into the country of Ta-hsia or Bactria (*Shih-chi*, Book 123). Further, as pointed out earlier, the Yüeh-chih need not be looked upon as a small community of people located in a small area. They ruled the greater part of the Mongolian plain, possibly Dzungaria, the north of the T'ien Shan where the Wu-sun lived, countries in the Tarim basin and the upper waters of the Yellow River. Their principal territory may have been between Tun-huang and K'ang-chü, which were two of the most important places on the so-called Silk Route, but we should not consider that this region was the only territory held by them.

The position of the Yüeh-chih as a predominant power in Central Asia, before being pressed by the Hsiung-nu, is also evident from the statement of Szū-ma Ch'ien. He records that the authority of the Yüeh-chih ruler was accepted by the countries in Central Asia. They provided free food to envoys moving through their territories, but messengers from China had to pay for their food as well as their horses. This was one of the reasons why the Emperor Wu-ti decided to send an expedition to the country of Ta-yüan (present-day Ferghana)⁸ in order to demonstrate China's military superiority over the Central Asian countries. This could also mean that the countries between the Wu-sun and Parthia had been under the sway of the Yüeh-chih until they were displaced by the Hsiung-nu.

It may be suggested that the Yüeh-chih in the third century B.C. were similar to the T'u-chüeh (Türks) of the sixth and seventh centuries A.D. in territory and power; and that the migration of the Yüeh-chih was not that of a group of people from one place to another, but a withdrawal from the eastern and northern frontiers of the Yüeh-chih Empire.

7. Wada, 1939, pp. 236-7, 1942, p. 278; see also his personal remark to the author.

8. Pulleyblank, 1966, pp. 25 et seq.

The Yüeh-chih and Pazîrik

We know that southern Siberia, Mongolia and Middle Asia were in the sphere of the so-called Scythian civilization, and it is in southern Siberia that most archaeological sites of the Scythian period have been found, chiefly in the northern part of the Altai range. The tombs at Pazîrik, excavated by Professor S. I. Rudenko, are very well known, and are dated between the fifth and third centuries B.C.⁹ The third century B.C. coincides with the date when the Yüeh-chih were at the apex of their power, before they were challenged by the Hsiung-nu. The Altai region in fact was part of the Yüeh-chih Empire, and the sites at Pazîrik should be related to the Yüeh-chih.

It is stated in the *Sih-chi* (Book 123), that, when Chang Ch'ien was captured by the Hsiung-nu on his way to the Ta-yüeh-chih in about 129 B.C., he was told by Chün-ch'en *shan-yü*, the King of the Hsiung-nu at the time, that the Yüeh-chih were to the north of his domain and it was not possible for the Han to contact them without crossing his territory, which required his permission and approval. At that time, the authority of the *shan-yü* extended to the north of Tai and Yü-chung or, roughly speaking, the northern part of the province of Shan-hsi. Chang Ch'ien and his party were, however, captured near Lung-hsi (in Gansu Province), and it is not clear whether they were brought to the court of the *shan-yü* or to the western part of the territory of the Hsiung-nu, where the *shan-yü* happened to be staying. In any case the region of Ili, where the Yüeh-chih are usually believed to have settled at that time, lies west of the place in which the *shan-yü* is supposed to have been. But if the *shan-yü* meant the direction of the Altai mountain range, this may be more likely than the Ili region. This could be supported by another reference from the *Han-shu* (Book 52) in which is recorded the controversy between Han An-kuo who opposed the expedition against the Hsiung-nu and Wang Hui who insisted on the necessity of it. The Emperor Wu-ti accepted Wang Hui's opinion and dispatched more than 300,000 troops to Ma-i in the present province of Shan-hsi. The expedition ended in failure, and Wang Hui committed suicide in 133 B.C. According to Wang Hui, if the expedition had succeeded, the Han would have been able to subjugate the Yüeh-chih in the north. Here, the Yüeh-chih are placed to the north of the Han a few years later than the departure of Chang Ch'ien to the Yüeh-chih. These examples show that the region of the Altai range is better suited than the Ili valley as the dwelling-place of the Yüeh-chih.

The ethnic identity of the Pazîrik people is still to be established. It is not yet known if they were of the same stock as the Scythians in south Russia. But, in this connection, it may be pointed out that the so-called 'Detached Scythians' are described by Herodotus as having lived in the vicinity of the Altai region.

9. Potapov, 1953, p. 16; Kiselev, 1951, pp. 361-92, especially 391, cf. *MIA*, 1949, Vol. 9, p. 216; Rudenko, 1953, pp. 346 et seq.; cf. Rudenko, 1951, p. 90; Rice, 1957, p. 200.

Again according to Herodotus, these Detached Scythians were rebels against the Royal Scythians in south Russia, but they were of the same stock. One wonders if they were the Pazîrk people and the ancestors of the Yüeh-chih.

The Yüeh-chih and the Detached Scythians

According to Herodotus, there was a great migration of peoples in the seventh century B.C., which resulted in the occupation of south Russia by the Scythians who had originally lived further east and were pushed westwards towards the Issedones. Could not the Detached Scythians be considered as those Scythians who did not move west with their main horde? It may be proposed that the Detached Scythians built up a large empire which included a greater part of the Mongolian plain, regions to the north of the T'ien Shan range, the Tarim basin and the upper waters of the Yellow River. They were known to the Chinese as the Yüeh-chih (i.e. Scythians). A portion of them migrated into – or removed their centre to – Middle Asia, while the rest were destroyed by the Hsiung-nu or stayed in Nan-shan with the Ch'iang.

If the Yüeh-chih were Scythians, then what was the relationship between them and the four peoples who are said to have come down from beyond the Jaxartes (the present Syr Darya) to destroy the Bactrian kingdom? If the explanation given above is correct, the country of Ta-hsia, which was conquered by the Yüeh-chih, cannot have been the Bactrian kingdom, which had already been destroyed before the arrival of the Yüeh-chih. Therefore, the invasion of these four peoples must have taken place some time before the coming of the Yüeh-chih. In the third and second quarters of the second century B.C. the Greeks in Bactria were fighting with the Greeks in India as well as with the Iranians of Parthia. According to W. W. Tarn, Bactria was up to about 141 B.C. under the control of Heliocles, who is believed to be the last king of the Bactrian kingdom.¹⁰ So the invasion may have taken place in that year or some time later and it must have been before the coming of the Yüeh-chih who occupied the Sogdiana-Bactria region between 136 and 129 (or 128) B.C. Strabo tells us that the Bactrian kingdom was destroyed by the Tocharians and three other peoples, and, according to Szü-ma Ch'ien, the country which the Yüeh-chih conquered was Ta-hsia. As 'Ta-hsia' is believed to be a transcription of 'Tochara', and if these two statements are accepted, it cannot have been the Yüeh-chih who conquered the Bactrian kingdom.

10. Tarn, 1938, pp. 272–3; Narain, 1962, p. 141.

The Yüeh-chih conquest of Bactria

In the history of Central Asia, the third and second centuries B.C. constituted a period in which the nomadic peoples inhabiting its northern and north-eastern borderlands made a great impact on the course of political events. The mid-third century B.C. saw the emergence of the Graeco-Bactrian and Parthian kingdoms. It was the period when Diodotus in Bactria and Andragoras in Parthia freed themselves from Seleucid rule. In Bactria this gave rise to the Graeco-Bactrian kingdom, but events took a different course in Parthia, where the nomadic tribe of the Parni, under the leadership of Arsaces, overthrew Andragoras and laid the foundations of the Parthian kingdom (see Chapter 5). In his eastern campaign, the Seleucid ruler Antiochus III had besieged Bactra, the Graeco-Bactrian capital. The Graeco-Bactrian king, Euthydemus, offering peace on honourable terms, put forward a number of arguments that included the following (Polybius XI.34.5):

If Antiochus does not accede to my request, the situation of both parties will become insecure. Huge hordes of nomads are massed on the border, posing a threat to both of us, and should the barbarians cross the border they will undoubtedly conquer the land.

Euthydemus suitably impressed the Seleucid ruler, peace was concluded, and the border between Graeco-Bactria and the nomadic tribes remained intact. The incident is most significant because it clearly demonstrates the strong pressure exerted by the nomads on the political borders of the sedentary states in the late third century B.C.

Euthydemus' warning was to prove no hollow utterance, for events soon occurred which led to the downfall of the Graeco-Bactrian kingdom and altered the entire political situation in Central Asia. These were triggered off by the conflict of two nomadic tribes, the Hsiung-nu and the Yüeh-chih. It is clear from Chinese sources that the Hsiung-nu ruler Mao-tun (206–174 B.C.) attacked the Yüeh-chih tribe, whose leader was killed in battle. The Yüeh-chih were forced to retreat westwards. The Hsiung-nu pursued them and the son of the Yüeh-chih leader was also killed in an encounter with them.¹¹ The movement of the Yüeh-chih set off a whole series of displacements of nomadic peoples in Central Asia. One such 'secondary' displacement caused by the movement of the Yüeh-chih is mentioned in Chinese sources. They moved into the Ili basin, from where they drove off the Sai (Archaic Chinese *Sai*) people; but the Yüeh-chih were in turn attacked by the Wu-sun and compelled to resume their westward migration.¹² The diversity of peoples involved in these migrations is also

11. Bichurin, 1950, Vol. II, pp. 147, 151.

12. Narain, 1962, pp. 133–5.

confirmed by ancient writers. The movement of the Yüeh-chih finally came to a halt in Bactria. Although the political events and migrations that led up to the nomadic conquest of Bactria remained unknown to Greek and Roman writers, the fact itself did not escape their attention. It is very significant that the classical writers in question mention the participation of several peoples in the conquest of Bactria. Describing the situation in the nomadic zone of Central Asia, Strabo enumerates the tribes that 'took Bactria from the Greeks': the Asioi, the Pasianoï, the Tocharoi and the Sacarauoi (Strabo XI.8.2). A little later he mentions the Sakai in connection with the conquest of Bactria (XI.8.4). In connection with this event, Pompeius Trogus (Trog. Comp., *Prolog.* XLI) speaks of the Scythian tribes of the Sacaraucae and the Asiani and subsequently (XLII) of the Asiani – 'kings of the Tochari' – and the Sacaraucae. Scholars have taken great pains to correlate Chinese and Greek ethnic names and determine the role of the various peoples in these movements. What remains apparently in dispute is identification of the Chinese Sai with the Greek Sakai and the Indian Sakas. More problematic, though highly plausible, is the identification of the Yüeh-chih with the Tochari.

During the eighties of the second century B.C. the migration of the Yüeh-chih eventually displaced the Saka tribes of the eastern part of Central Asia. They migrated south and crossed the Pamirs, having touched on eastern Bactria. This stage in the migration of the Sakas was apparently completed in the early first century B.C.

The Yüeh-chih proper, having drawn into their orbit a number of other nomadic peoples, passed through Ferghana (Ta-yüan) and reached the borders of Bactria. The completion of the first stage of their migration is recorded in the Chinese sources.¹³ Chang Ch'ien, who had been sent by the Chinese to persuade the Yüeh-chih to join China in attacking the Hsiung-nu, stayed among them for some time during the period 130–125 B.C. The situation he recorded¹⁴ was that the Great Yüeh-chih lived a nomadic life, ranging over the area immediately north of the Oxus river, while the country south of the Oxus (southern Bactria) was subordinated to the Great Yüeh-chih but retained its political autonomy, divided into a large number of city-states each with its own ruler. It can thus be supposed that at the time northern Bactria and Sogdiana were fully under the control of the Yüeh-chih while in southern Bactria towns persisted under the supreme suzerainty of the nomads.

The nomads and Parthia

Almost simultaneously the nomads began migrating westwards from Bactria and came into conflict with the Parthians. This clash sprang from a particular

13. Davidovich, 1976, pp. 56 et seq.

14. Bichurin, 1950, Vol. II, p. 151; Pulleyblank, 1968; Zürcher, 1968.

event. The Parthian king Phraates hired some nomads (Justin calls them Scythians) to do battle with the Seleucid king, Antiochus VII Sidetes. They arrived late when the Parthians had already routed the Seleucid forces and King Phraates refused to pay them the agreed sum. In retaliation, the nomads devastated the eastern half of Parthia. Phraates marched against them, with an army that included Greek soldiers who had been taken prisoner by the Parthians. In the heat of the battle against the nomads in 128 B.C., the Greeks went over to the enemy, the Parthian army was annihilated and Phraates was killed (Justin XLII.1.5). The nomad detachments then left Parthian territory. The new king, Artabanus (Phraates' uncle), tried to mount an offensive against them. It came to nothing, and in a battle with the Tochari (here Justin gives a precise ethnic name instead of his previous vague 'Scythians'), Artabanus was mortally wounded (Justin XLII.2.2), dying in 124 or 123 B.C.¹⁵ His son Mithradates II succeeded to the Parthian throne and put a final stop to the nomad incursions. He waged many valiant wars against his neighbours and joined many peoples to the Parthian kingdom. He also several times vanquished the Scythians and avenged the wrongs done to his forebears (Justin, XLII.2.4–5).

By the turn of the first century B.C. the Saka tribes had settled in Gandhāra and the Great Yüeh-chih in northern Bactria. South Bactria, though still under the authority of minor Greek rulers, was also under the control of the Saka tribes; and on the eastern borders of Parthia (Margiana, Aria and Drangiana) military operations were under way against them. Subsequent political developments involved a Parthian offensive to the east. This is the historical context that must be borne in mind for a proper understanding of Strabo's report that the Parthians also 'seized part of Bactria, having driven away the Scythians' (Strabo XI.9.2). The course of those wars is attested by three unique series of Parthian coins with the Greek inscription 'ΚΑΤΑ ΣΤΡΑΤΕΙΑ' (On campaign) and the name of three regions: Aria, Margiana and Traxiana. The dating of these coins has been disputed for many years. The most plausible view, however, seems to be that of David Sellwood, who attributes them to the seventies of the first century B.C. and to the mint of an unknown Parthian ruler.¹⁶ It is reasonable to suppose that as a result of these campaigns, the Parthians gained control of Aria (Herat oasis), Margiana (Merv oasis) and possibly the area of Mashhad. Sellwood thinks that this was the region called Traxiana. The further conquests of the Parthians in the east are attested in Isidore of Charax's *Mansiones Parthicae*. After 'Areia' and the 'Anauōn chōra' (part of Aria), the author names the Parthian possessions Zarangiane, 'Sakastane Sakōn Skythōn' (Sakastan of the Saka Scythians) and Arachosia (Kandahar

15. Debevoise, 1938, p. 38.

16. Sellwood, 1980, pp. 97 et seq.

region).¹⁷ In modern works it is thought that as a result of these military operations the Parthians halted the nomads, brought them under control and settled them on the land. After these events Drangiana was called Segistan, modern Sistan. The Sakas seem to have retained some form of their political organization under Parthian sovereignty while beyond the confines of Parthia there were some minor nomad possessions dependent on the Parthians; there is, for instance, numismatic evidence for a ruler Sapadbises.¹⁸ Such was the situation of the advance of the nomads in the western zone at the turn of the Christian era.

Further east, in the central regions of Bactria, the situation is described in the Chinese chronicle, the *Han-shu*. It was already markedly different from that recorded by Chang Ch'ien.¹⁹ The whole of southern Bactria had already been occupied by the Yüeh-chih, so that now the Great Yüeh-chih bordered on the south with the land of Chi-pin. The supreme leader of the Great Yüeh-chih had his residence in a town north of the Oxus river. The entire territory dependent on the Great Yüeh-chih was divided into five *hsi-hou*. The state of the Great Yüeh-chih represented a confederacy of five tribes. These were the five former territories for nomadism which had been transformed into five minor vassal states dependent on the central authority personified by the King of the Great Yüeh-chih. At the same time, it must be remembered that the state that had been formed was still very unstable and loose-knit.

Archaeological remains of the nomads in northern Bactria

In northern Bactria the burial places investigated by Mandel'shtam at Tulkhar, Aruktau and Kokkum²⁰ are thought to be those of nomads who conquered Bactria. Material from the graves indicates that tribes of various origins took part in the conquest. Very significantly, the material culture suggests northern links, in particular with the Sarmatian tribes. This is borne out by evidence from nomadic graves in the Zerafshan valley in Sogdian territory.²¹

A very important point, deduced mainly from nomadic graves in Bactria, is that the graves are situated on the edge of the valleys and do not encroach on the irrigated and tilled areas. The very plausible suggestion has been made that the nomadic conquest left no havoc in its wake because the nomads did not destroy the irrigation systems and did not take up irrigated land for grazing. We

17. Sarianidi and Koshelenko, 1982, pp. 307 et seq.; Masson and Romodin, 1964, pp. 135 et seq.

18. Sarianidi and Koshelenko, 1982, pp. 310 et seq.

19. Davidovich, 1976, pp. 60 et seq.; Zürcher, 1968, pp. 367 et seq.

20. Mandel'shtam, 1966, 1975.

21. Obel'chenko, 1974.

can safely surmise that having moved into the conquered territories, they took over land not used by farmers, and preferred to exploit the subjugated population, leaving the existing economic structure intact.

A close link is to be noted between the nomads and the settled oases. The vast majority of ceramic vessels found in the nomad graves were made in craft workshops and came to the nomads from the oases. We do not of course know how this happened; perhaps the nomads received the manufactured items (including pottery) as tribute exacted from the farmers or acquired them through barter. The fact remains that very close ties existed between the nomads and the farmers.

The sensational discoveries of the Russian-Afghan expedition (led by V. I. Sarianidi) at the necropolis of the ancient town of Tillya-tepe in northern Afghanistan²² have shed light on the upper social stratum in the period when state-like formations, headed by the descendants of leaders of the nomadic tribes, emerged in the conquered territories. The coins from Tillya-tepe enable it to be fairly accurately dated between the second half of the first century B.C. and the first half of the first century A.D.²³ Six excavated graves yielded some 20,000 objects made of precious metal (Fig. 1). The huge riches that accompanied the dead contrast with the more than modest sepulchral structures. It is particularly significant that there is no mark over the graves indicating a burial site. Sarianidi assumes that these were secret burials.

Archaeological evidence from the Pamirs and its comparison with other material confirm the evidence of written sources that in migrating to India the Sakas did pass through this mountain region. Another important point is the sharp decline in the population in the Pamirs in the subsequent period, doubtless due to the fact that the bulk of the population moved south.²⁴ Excavations at Ay Khanum have shown that the fall of the Graeco-Bactrian city was indeed the result of the nomadic conquest; the population that settled on its ruins was very different culturally from its predecessors. There is unfortunately very little archaeological material from the more southerly parts of the region to throw light on nomadic migration.

Indian historical tradition is of no help, since it merely brushes over these events.²⁵ There is also insufficient material to throw light on the history of the cities and inhabited rural localities in the region during this 'dark age'. No doubt a number of cities such as Ay Khanum perished in the course of the nomadic conquest. But it is equally clear that the nomads did not make a special effort to wreck the irrigation systems and the towns and villages. So far as we

22. Sarianidi, 1984.

23. Sarianidi and Koshelenko, 1982.

24. Litvinsky, 1972.

25. Sharma, 1980; Serditikh, 1983, pp. 84–8.

can judge, the nomads sought to exploit rather than destroy the existing economic structure.

Material from northern Bactria indicates that the nomadic conquest was soon followed by fresh material prosperity and, in particular, urban development. On archaeological evidence from the Surkhan Darya valley, V. M. Masson concluded that the rapid rise in the number of settlements there began in the first century B.C.²⁶ Yüeh-chih times saw the rise of what was later to become the major centre of Dalverzin-tepe,²⁷ as well as many smaller centres such as Zar-tepe. Furthermore, significant reconstruction operations at the ancient town site of Khalchayan²⁸ can be ascribed to the Yüeh-chih period; the renowned Sistan sanctuary of Kuh-i Khwaja also seem to have been rebuilt.²⁹ The most revealing material regarding the history of the Central Asian city in those 'dark ages' has been obtained, however, in the course of archaeological exploration at Taxila.³⁰



FIG. 1. Gold necklace. Tillya-tepe. (Courtesy of V. Sarianidi.)

26. Masson, 1974; Masson, 1976.

27. *Dal'verzintepa*, 1978.

28. Pugachenkova, 1966.

29. Gullini, 1964.

30. Marshall, 1951; Il'in, 1958.

The 'dark ages'

The scarcity of sources makes it hard to trace political and social development in the countries of Central Asia during the so-called dark ages. It is clear from what has been said earlier that the states that were formed in the period of nomadic conquest were insufficiently stable, their frontiers were constantly changing, and some states were emerging as others declined. There was no clear-cut structure within the states. One reason for this was the character of statehood that emerged as a result of the nomadic conquests. The best-known instance was the state of the Yüeh-chih, which was divided into five *hsi-hou* (*yabghu*). It can be assumed that this division into five possessions represented a division of the territories for the nomadism of the five tribes that took part in the conquest of Bactria. It may be supposed that the situation was similar in other regions conquered by the nomads.

Another factor that weakened these new emergent states was the frequent co-existence of two political structures – an old one retained from earlier times and a new superimposed nomad structure. One example of this was the situation in Bactria during the first stage of the Yüeh-chih conquest, when the territories north of the Oxus were under the direct rule of the Great Yüeh-chih, while southern Bactria was divided between a number of minor rulers of individual cities.

An important role in the political structure of the new states was played by satraps, an institution inherited from the Achaemenids. However, at this time many satraps, while nominally plenipotentiaries of the central government, were in fact almost or fully independent rulers who founded dynasties of their own, and the title 'satrap' or 'great satrap' was often the mark of an independent ruler. The nomadic conquest clearly had an effect on the development of social relations in the countries of the region.

A number of Indian works describing the calamities which befell the country in the 'Kali Age' include among these disasters the disruptions of the established social order, the flight and liberation of slaves, the increased wealth of the Śudras and the general weakening of caste (*varṇa*) stability. It is perhaps significant that the texts concerning these changes are usually set in the context of foreign conquest – Greek, Saka, Parthian and Kushan.³¹

Despite political instability, economic relations in the Saka-Parthian period developed very successfully. Busy sea-routes were opened up between Egypt and India, the first direct contacts between Egypt and India dating back to the late second century B.C. (apparently between 120 and 115). In about 100 B.C., Hippalus discovered the mechanism of the monsoon winds, and thereby made it possible for ships to sail regularly to and from the shores of India (*Periplus* 57). Trade between Egypt and India was most actively developed in the late

31. Yadava, 1978/79.

first century B.C. When in the twenties of the first century B.C. Strabo journeyed in Egypt, he 'learnt that some 120 ships complete the voyage from the Straits of Hormuz to India' (Strabo II.5.12). He also observed in that connection that 'great fleets now set off as far as India' (Strabo XVII.1.13) and, further, that 'present-day merchants sailing from Egypt via the Nile and the Arabian Gulf to India . . . have been going as far as the Ganges' (Strabo XV.1.4). In the first century A.D. knowledge of the coasts of India and the ability to use the monsoon winds had attained such a standard that many new Indian peoples and cities were discovered, trading links were established with them, and ships from the ports of southern Arabia and the Horn of Africa went to particular ports of India with particular goods (Pliny, *Nat. Hist.* VI.101–6).³² Large vessels carried a detachment of armed guards (Pliny, *Nat. Hist.* VI.101; Philostratus, *Life of Apollonius of Tyana* III.31.1 c.). This was clearly why the rulers of Indian states permitted merchant ships to moor only in particular places (*Periplus* 52) and introduced a number of other limitations (Philostratus, *Life of Apollonius of Tyana* III.35.1 c.). The Indian trade yielded huge profits for the merchants from Egypt since the goods were resold a hundred times dearer (Pliny, *Nat. Hist.* VI.101). The overall trade balance was negative for the Romans, who ruled Egypt from 30 B.C. Pliny wrote: 'India annually swallows up from our state no less than 55 million sesterces' (Pliny, *Nat. Hist.* VI.101). In the second half of the first century A.D. Indians were fairly frequent visitors to Egypt. On one occasion in the theatre of Alexandria in Egypt some time in the period A.D. 71–75, Dio Chrysostomus said (*Ad Alexandr.* 40):

I see before me here not only Hellenes, Italics and even people from Hither Syria, Libya, Cilicia and distant Ethiopians and Arabs, but also Bactrians, Scythians, Persians and a number of Indians, all of whom customarily come together and form the audience here with you.

In the territory of India the Roman trading station at Arikamedu³³ was well known; and in Egyptian territory, in the 'White Haven', Indian ceramics and fragments of pottery with Tamil inscriptions in Brāhmī script have been found.³⁴

Overland caravan trade was actively developed during this period. The 'royal way' passed through Parthian territory, starting from Zeugma on the Euphrates. It is described by Isidore of Charax. Cutting across Mesopotamia and passing through the territory of Iran it reached Merv. From there it turned south and led on through Aria, Drangiana and Segistan to Arachosia (in the Kandahar region), then through Ghazni to the Indian subcontinent. Another

32. Berzina, 1982, pp. 31 et seq.

33. Wheeler et al., 1946.

34. Whitcomb and Johnson, 1980.

important branch of the highway ran from Merv to Amul on the Oxus and then to Samarkand, where it merged with the Silk Route from the oases of Tarim basin. The Chinese sought to establish permanent trade links with Parthia as early as the second century B.C. The official Chinese annals contain an account by Chang Ch'ien of his visit to Parthia,³⁵ from where he brought vines and alfalfa seeds to China. From the late second century B.C. the Silk Route functioned more or less regularly, passing through Central Asia and playing an important part in its economic ties. The Parthians protected trade along the route, deriving considerable profit from the payment of taxes, and did everything they could to prevent direct links between China and Rome since their intermediary role was extremely profitable.³⁶ The Parthians also carried on maritime trading with India via the Persian Gulf ports, notably Spasinu-Charax. There were north-south caravan routes from Bactria to India; and many routes via the Hindu Kush linked the northern and southern parts of Central Asia. Central Asia was thus provided with a network of maritime and overland routes, both international and local, which ensured the development of international and local trade. Control over the trade routes procured financial resources for the state treasury, and could be used as a political weapon. Thus, the Parthian government tried to ensure that caravans from Palmyra (a major centre of the caravan trade) went not to Seleucia on the Tigris, a city hardly notable for loyalty to the Arsacids, but to the cities more closely connected with the central authority, such as Ctesiphon, Vologaesocerta and Spasinu-Charax.³⁷

The expansion of international and domestic trade was obtained by means of a developed system of monetary circulation. Coins of many dynasties circulated in Central Asia and, with growing international trade and political upheavals, were often to be found far from the place of minting. Much of the money in circulation was accounted for by coins issued by the early Graeco-Bactrian kings. Minted from high-standard silver in accordance with the Attic system of weights and issued in large quantities, they remained in circulation for a number of centuries. Another major part of the total amount of money in circulation was constituted by the so-called Indo-Greek coins issued by the Graeco-Bactrian kings who had conquered part of India. Beginning with Demetrius, a number of these kings had possessions both north and south of the Hindu Kush, and some ruled solely in the territory of the Indian subcontinent. These coins usually followed the Old Indian system of weights. One side of the coin carried a Greek legend and usually a typically Greek portrait; the other side bore a reverse type with a Kharoṣṭhī legend. Also in circulation were coins of the last Graeco-Bactrian and Indo-Greek kings, issued when the bulk of the region was already under nomad control.

35. D'yakonov, 1961, p. 204.

36. Colledge, 1967, p. 80.

37. Koshelenko, 1971.

Very soon after reaching the settled oases of the region, the rulers of the nascent nomad states began issuing their own coinage. This was often dictated not by economic necessity but by the desire to proclaim to the world a new independent state. The first local coins in the region north of the Oxus were various types of imitations of Seleucid and Graeco-Bactrian coins.³⁸ We know of coins modelled on the Seleucid drachms portraying Alexander (place of minting unknown); imitations of Antiochus I drachms (in the Zerafshan valley); imitations of tetradrachms of the Graeco-Bactrian king Euthydemus (western part of the Zerafshan valley); imitations of the tetradrachms of the Graeco-Bactrian king Eucratides (in Chorasmia or the middle valley of the Jaxartes); imitations of the obol of Eucratides (in the Kafirnigan basin); silver and subsequently bronze imitations of the tetradrachms and drachms of Heliocles. These stages in the development of coinage in that part of the region correspond to the second and first centuries B.C.

Subsequently coins of another type began to be minted on behalf of the new authorities. One of the most striking examples of these new coins are those of Heraus, who was evidently one of the predecessors of the Great Kushan kings. In Sogdiana, coins began to be minted in the first century A.D. depicting, on the reverse, a standing archer and, on the obverse, the profile of a king with the name '*Aštam*'.

The period of the 'dark ages' was one of the most fruitful in the development of Central Asian art, when the previously rather isolated artistic schools came into close mutual contact. As the Greeks from Bactria campaigned and settled in India, they became familiar with Indian art but they also brought with them forms of their known and customary art. In Bactria there was evidently little interaction between Greek and local art before the nomadic conquest. Greek art was that of the conquerors and was alien to the bulk of the population, who maintained their own traditions. Neither, on the other hand, did local art have any significant effect on the art of the Greeks. The nomadic invasion abruptly changed the situation. The social barriers dividing the world of the Greeks from that of the Bactrians were swept away, there being then no longer anything to prevent contact between the two artistic traditions. The nomads also brought with them their art, which spread in their wake in Bactria, Sogdiana and the Indian subcontinent. As the power of the Indo-Parthian rulers extended, so the Parthian art forms that had already taken shape at this time began to affect the artistic life of many parts of Central Asia. In a word, the 'dark ages' constituted a time of intense interaction between many trends in art.

This is most clearly seen in the works of decorative and applied art, found in the excavations of the Tillya-tepe necropolis.³⁹ Among mass items brought to

38. Zeimal, 1978.

39. Sarianidi, 1984.

light, a number of distinct trends are clearly evident. The first thing that strikes the eye is the large quantity of works of clearly nomadic origin (scenes of animals seizing their prey are vigorous and expressive). There is undoubtedly a very close similarity between these works and those from the burial mounds of the Altai mountains. The genetic link between this category of work and the 'Siberian animal style' is beyond doubt. Another trend is represented by typically Greek objects connected with Hellenistic art traditions. Chinese items or items displaying Chinese influence occur in small quantities. Some works of art clearly reflect ancient Bactrian traditions in which Parthian influence makes itself felt. Finally, there are specimens representing a synthesis of various traditions.

In the case of Bactria, the best-known relic of monumental art of the period of the 'dark ages' is to be found at Khalchayan.⁴⁰ Pugachenkova regards the building in Khalchayan as a palace. A more plausible view, however, is that the palace in Khalchayan represents a temple of deified ancestors. The opinion is sometimes expressed that the Khalchayan palace must date from Kushan times, but this can hardly be so. The palace clearly dates from the 'dark ages' though the exact point has not yet been determined.⁴¹ What arouses the greatest interest in Khalchayan is the relief compositions, including depictions of representatives of the local dynasty and a carved frieze of Dionysian character. The carving is in clay and has been thought to represent the dynasty of Heraus, but this is hard to accept when the possessions of Heraus very probably lay south of the Oxus.

40. Pugachenkova, 1966, 1971.

41. Koshelenko, 1974.

