

# Sima Qian on Barbarians

## I2

### THE WORLD BEYOND CHINA

*From early times the Chinese had traded, negotiated, and fought with neighboring peoples. As the Han dynasty consolidated its power, the emperors looked for ways to strengthen their border defenses and extend the territory under their control. Emperor Wu (r. 140–87 B.C.) in particular pursued expansionist policies; he asserted control over the southeast down to Northern Vietnam, set up colonies in Korea, and waged several campaigns against the Xiongnu tribes who had established a strong confederation along China's north and northwest borders. He sent the explorer-diplomat Zhang Qian far into Inner Asia to look for possible allies against the Xiongnu, and while he did not succeed in finding allies he did bring back new knowledge of the societies of central and west Asia.*

*Below are Sima Qian's (ca. 145–ca. 90 B.C.) descriptions of some of the peoples beyond China proper in his monumental history of China from earliest times to his own day. From it we can see the cultural traits that Chinese saw as distinguishing them from other peoples and their particular concern with traits that made some such people formidable military opponents. A fine stylist and gifted raconteur, Sima Qian was also a serious student of history who carefully mined court documents and attempted to separate his opinions from what he took as the facts. His composite history, with annals, biographies, treatises, and tables, proved extremely influential, setting the model for the later histories of each dynasty.*

#### THE SOUTHWESTERN BARBARIANS

Among the dozens of chieftains of the southwestern barbarians, Yelang is the greatest. To the west of his tribe live the Mimo; of the dozens of chiefs, the greatest is Dian. Of the dozens of chiefs north of Dian, the most important is Qiongnu. All of these peoples wear their hair tied up in mallet-

shaped hairknots, cultivate the land, and live in towns. Beyond them to the west, east of Tongshi and north to Yeyu, are the Sui and Kunming who braid their hair and move about following their flocks, without permanent settlements or chiefs. Their territory extends several thousand *li* in each direction. Northeast of the Sui are several dozen chieftains, the most important of whom are Xi

and Zuodu. Northeast of Zuo are several dozen chiefs, the greatest of whom are Ran and Mang. Their customs vary, some settling on the land, others moving about. They live west of Shu [i.e., Sichuan]. Northeast of Ran and Mang are several dozen chieftains, of whom the Baima are the most important. All of these tribes are Di. They constitute the barbarians living outside China's borders to the southwest of Ba and Shu.

#### DAYUAN

Dayuan is southwest of the Xiongnu, about ten thousand *li* directly west of the Han. Their customs are to stay in one place, cultivate the land, and grow rice and wheat. They make wine from grapes. They have many fine horses. These horses sweat blood, perhaps being descended from Heavenly horses. They have city walls and houses. With some seventy or more cities of various sizes, their population is probably several hundred thousand. Their soldiers use bows and spears, shooting while on horseback.

#### THE XIONGNU

The Xiongnu are descended from the rulers of the Xia dynasty. . . . They live among the northern barbarians, moving to follow their flocks. They primarily raise horses, oxen, and sheep, but also keep unusual animals like camels, asses, mules, and wild horses. They move about in search of water and grass, having no cities, permanent dwellings, or agriculture. Still, they divide their territory into regions. They have no written language, so make oral agreements. Little boys are able to ride sheep and shoot birds and mice with bows and arrows. When they are somewhat older they shoot foxes and rabbits for food. Thus all the men can shoot and serve as cavalry.

It is the custom of the Xiongnu to support themselves in ordinary times by following their flocks and hunting, but in times of hardship they take up arms to raid. This would appear to be

their nature. Bows and arrows are the weapons they use for distant targets; swords and spears the ones they use at close range. When it is to their advantage, they advance; when not they retreat, as they see no shame in retreat. Concern for propriety or duty does not inhibit their pursuit of advantage. Everyone, from the ruler on down, eats meat and dresses in leather or felt. The strongest eat the best food; the old eat the leftovers. They honor the young and strong and despise the old and weak. A man whose father has died marries his stepmother; a man whose brother has died marries his brother's wife. They only have personal names, no family names or polite names, and observe no name taboos. . . .

Over a thousand years elapsed from the time of [their founder] Shunwei to Modun. Sometimes they expanded, sometimes they shrunk; they split up and scattered. Thus it is impossible to give an orderly genealogy for them. Under Modun the Xiongnu reached their apogee, subjugating all the other northern barbarians and coming into conflict with China to the south. Their political organization since that time can be described as follows. The top leaders are the left and right wise kings, Luli kings, generals, commandants, administrators, and Gudu lords. . . . These leaders have under them from a few thousand to ten thousand horsemen. There are twenty-four chiefs altogether, each titled a "ten thousand horsemen." All of the major offices are hereditary. The three clans of the Huyan, Lan, and later the Xubu are the nobility. . . .

Each year in the first month all the chiefs, large and small, assemble at the Shanyu's court to make sacrifices. In the fifth month there is a great assembly at Long Fort, where they make sacrifices to their ancestors, to heaven and earth, and to gods and spirits. In the fall, when the horses are fat, there is a major assembly at Dai Forest, where the people and animals are assessed and counted.

According to their laws, anyone who draws his sword a foot is killed. Those who commit robbery have their property confiscated. For minor offenses people are flogged and for major ones executed. No one stays in jail awaiting sentence more

than ten days, and there are never more than a few prisoners in the whole country.

Every morning the Shanyu leaves the camp and bows to the sun as it rises; in the evening he bows to the moon. At a feast, the honored seat is the one to the left or the one facing north. They favor the days *wu* and *ji* in the ten-day week. In seeing off the dead, they use inner and outer coffins, gold and silver ornaments, and clothes and furs, but do not construct mounds or plant trees over the grave or put on mourning garments. Sometimes up to several hundred or several thousand favored subordinates or concubines follow their master in death.

In making decisions, the Xiongnu take note of the stars and moon; when the moon is full, they

attack; when it wanes they retreat. In battles, those who decapitate an enemy are given a cup of wine and whatever booty they have seized. Captives are made into slaves. Consequently, when they fight, they all compete for profit. They are good at setting up decoys to deceive the enemy. When they see the enemy, eager for booty, they swoop down like a flock of birds. If surrounded or defeated, they break like tiles or scatter like mist. Anyone who is able to bring back the body of someone who died in battle gets all of the dead man's property.

*Translated by Patricia Ebrey*