

History
UNFOLDING

NOMADS OF THE STEPPES



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Contents

Introduction	2
Lesson 1	Mounted Horsemen of the Steppes.....	4
Lesson 2	Steppelands.....	8
Lesson 3	The Nomadic Life.....	12
Lesson 4	The Mongol Empire.....	16
Appendix	Image Close-ups.....	21

Introduction

History's First Warriors on Horseback

Sometime after 2000 BCE, a new kind of pastoral nomadism emerged on the vast Eurasian steppes that stretch from Hungary to China. There, groups that probably had combined herding and hunting with some simple agriculture turned full-time to a nomadic life tending herds of oxen, sheep, cattle—and horses.

It was in fact the ability to master riding horses that made this nomadic life attractive. Farming was possible only in a few places on the vast, treeless grasslands of the steppes. The horse freed nomadic people to roam the plains with their herds. And it soon turned these nomadic societies into fierce warriors and conquerors. At certain times, many tribes would unite around a single leader and become a terrifying threat to settled societies, even those far advanced in terms of agricultural productivity, technology, literacy, and the other attributes of civilized life. At other times, the nomads were a transmission belt for goods and ideas from one end of the Eurasian landmass to the other. As a result, from around 1500 BCE through the Mongol conquests of the 13th century CE and beyond, the nomads of the steppes would play a far more important part in history than their numbers or general state of social advancement would seem to justify. With this set, we hope to convey something of the nature of these societies and the role they played in world history.

This set uses 12 visual displays to focus on several of the key themes in this story. Each lesson uses three visual displays to explore one broad topic. Briefly, the four lessons are as follows:

Mounted Horsemen of the Steppes

These illustrations focus on the role of the horse and horse-riding warriors in these nomadic societies. The images also call attention to the fear and loathing that influenced and sometimes distorted the way that nomads were seen by others.

Steppelands

The illustrations here highlight the stark and challenging natural setting in which these societies developed and thrived.

The Nomadic Life

This lesson looks at some aspects of nomadic ways of life, as well as the complex interactions that evolved between these societies and cultures from outside the steppes.

The Mongol Empire

The greatest of all the nomadic empires was the one constructed by Genghis Khan. This lesson examines this empire and the factors common to nomadic societies that explain both its rapid rise and its disintegration.

Using Photos, Cartoons, and Other Visuals to Teach History

Many textbooks are full of colorful visuals. However, all too often these visuals function primarily as window dressing. They make the text more entertaining, or at least more palatable. Only occasionally do the visuals in textbooks do more than offer simple pictorial reinforcement of ideas already presented in the text. In many cases, they pander to the visual orientation of the young while doing little to help young people master the challenges of the visual media that dominate their lives.

By way of contrast, our approach to using visual materials emphasizes their unique strengths as historical documents. The lessons in this booklet focus students on the visual symbols and metaphors in editorial cartoons, the dramatic qualities of certain photographs, the potential of many images to make abstract ideas more specific and concrete, the implicit biases and stereotypes in certain images, their emotional power, and their ability to invoke the spirit of a time and place. In the process, we make every effort to strengthen students' visual literacy skills in general, as well as their ability to think critically and engage in spirited but disciplined discussions.

How to Use This Booklet

The booklet is divided into four lessons, with three illustrations per lesson. Each lesson consists of the following:

A BACKGROUND INFORMATION SHEET This page provides brief summaries explaining the three illustrations on which the lesson is based and their relevance to the lesson's objectives.

DIGITAL IMAGES The booklet's PDF allows you to project the images for use in your class discussions.

DISCUSSION-ACTIVITY SHEETS

Each sheet displays one illustration. It includes a sequence of questions to help you plan an all-class discussion while using the projected images. The questions take students step by step through an analysis of the illustration. If you wish, you may reproduce these pages and hand them out. In addition to the discussion questions on the illustration itself, one or two follow-up activities are suggested. Some of these can be made into individual assignments. Others will work best as small-group or all-class activities.

*Nomads of the Steppes***OBJECTIVE**

1. Students will better understand how the steppe nomads' ability to tame horses and mount them for combat made them such a feared and powerful force in history.

Mounted Horsemen of the Steppes

Use the background information on this page to help your students better understand the three illustrations making up this lesson. The questions and activities presented in the rest of the lesson can be used to help students clarify meanings and debate important issues.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION**Illustration 1**

This small Scythian gold bottle of the fourth century BCE shows a warrior pulling the tooth of a comrade. It is a bit of evidence in a great mystery. The Scythians and other nomadic peoples roamed the grasslands of the Eurasian steppe for centuries. They were fierce warriors, the first to fully master the horse as a weapon of war. This made them terrifying to more technically advanced settled societies near them. Yet the mystery is that this bottle could easily have been made by a Greek goldsmith. Greek and Scythian potters, jewelers, sculptors, and smiths mutually encountered and influenced one another in Black Sea settlements and elsewhere near the Scythian homelands in today's Ukraine. Scythian interactions with the settled civilizations near them took many forms. Warfare between them was common enough, but trade and cultural sharing were also ongoing aspects of the relationship.

Illustrations 2A & 2B

Scores of nomadic societies roamed the Eurasian steppes from the Danube basin and Hungary in Europe, to Mongolia and Manchuria in the east. A nomadic society known as the Xiongnu, for example, threatened China throughout the Han Dynasty (221 BCE to 220 CE). In the fifth century CE, what was probably a breakaway group from the Xiongnu crossed the steppes to terrorize ancient Rome. They are known to history as the Huns. The illustrations here, both from a later time, depict the Huns' leader, Attila. They may not be reliable evidence of what Attila looked like, but they do suggest the terror he evoked.

Illustration 3

There was more to the nomads of the steppe than pillage. Yet the fact remains they were among the most ruthless warriors in history. This illustration again suggests the depth of fear they evoked. It shows Duke Henry II of Silesia being slain by the Mongols at Wahlstadt in Poland in 1241. The Mongol tactics involved swift attack, planned retreats, and coordinated deception. Both sides fought on horses, but the heavily armored European knights had to get in close to use lance and sword. Swiftly galloping Mongols could use bow and arrow with amazing accuracy at more than 300 yards. At Wahlstadt, Henry died in defeat along with 25,000 of his men.

Lesson 1—Mounted Horsemen of the Steppes

Illustration 1



The Granger Collection, New York

Discussing the Illustration

1. What you see here is small Scythian gold bottle from the third or fourth century BCE. In one of its scenes here, a warrior is helping a comrade. Can you guess how he is helping that other warrior?
2. The Scythians were one of many groups of pastoral nomads who have roamed the Eurasian steppes. What are pastoral nomads? What is a steppe?
3. The Scythians lived on steppelands north of the Black Sea. For centuries, the Eurasian steppe was home to dozens of sizable nomadic tribes or peoples, all at the same time. Can you explain how?
4. What sorts of things do you think this bottle can teach or suggest about the Scythians and their way of life?
5. These fierce Scythian warriors were probably the first to fully master the horse as a weapon of war. This made them terrifying even to the more technically advanced settled societies near them. Why do you suppose this made them so terrifying?

Follow-up Activities

1. Objects like the gold bottle shown here can be found in a collection of Scythian artifacts at the Hermitage Museum in St. Petersburg, Russia. Learn more about this collection by contacting the Hermitage Museum. One way to do this is by going to its Web site:
<http://www.hermitagemuseum.org/>
From there, search their collections to find the one on the Scythians. Use what you learn there in a brief report to the class on what this collection contains and what can be learned from it about the Scythians.
2. **Small-group activity:** The nomadic warriors of the steppe were the first to tame the horse and learn to ride it. How did they do this? What other uses did they make of the horse? One source that can help you find out is *The First Horsemen*, by Frank Trippett (Time-Life Books, 1974). Use this book and other sources to help you create a colorful bulletin-board display on the role of the horse among the nomads of the Eurasian steppes.