

Debate between Sheep and Grain

1–11 When, upon the hill of heaven and earth, An spawned the Anuna gods, since he neither spawned nor created Grain with them, and since in the Land he neither fashioned the yarn of Uttu (*the goddess of weaving*) nor pegged out the loom for Uttu – with no Sheep appearing, there were no numerous lambs, and with no goats, there were no numerous kids, the sheep did not give birth to her twin lambs, and the goat did not give birth to her triplet kids; the Anuna, the great gods, did not even know the names Ezina-Kusu (*Grain*) or Sheep. . . .

26–36 At that time, at the place of the gods' formation, in their own home, on the Holy Mound, they created Sheep and Grain. . . . For their own well-being in the holy sheepfold, they gave them to mankind as sustenance.

43–53 Sheep being fenced in by her sheepfold, they gave her grass and herbs generously. For Grain they made her field and gave her the plough, yoke and team. Sheep standing in her sheepfold was a shepherd of the sheepfolds brimming with charm. Grain standing in her furrow was a beautiful girl radiating charm; lifting her raised head up from the field she was suffused with the bounty of heaven. Sheep and Grain had a radiant appearance.

54–64 They brought wealth to the assembly. They brought sustenance to the Land. They fulfilled the ordinances of the gods. They filled the store-rooms of the Land with stock. The barns of the Land were heavy with them. When they entered the homes of the poor who crouch in the dust they brought wealth. Both of them, wherever they directed their steps, added to the riches of the household with their weight. Where they stood, they were satisfying; where they settled, they were seemly. They gladdened the heart of An and the heart of Enlil.

65–70 They drank sweet wine, they enjoyed sweet beer. When they had drunk sweet wine and enjoyed sweet beer, they started a quarrel concerning the arable fields, they began a debate in the dining hall.

71–82 Grain called out to Sheep: "Sister, I am your better; I take precedence over you. I am the glory of the lights of the Land

83–91 "I foster neighbourliness and friendliness. I sort out quarrels started between neighbours. When I come upon a captive youth and give him his destiny,

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he forgets his despondent heart and I release his fetters and shackles. I am Ezina-Kusu (*Grain*); I am Enlil's daughter. In sheep shacks and milking pens scattered on the high plain, what can you put against me? Answer me what you can reply!"

92–101 Thereupon Sheep answered Grain: "My sister, whatever are you saying? An, king of the gods, made me descend from the holy place, my most precious place. All the yarns of Uttu, the splendour of kingship, belong to me

102–106 "The watch over the elite troops is mine. Sustenance of the workers in the field is mine: the waterskin of cool water and the sandals are mine. . . .

107–115 "In the gown, my cloth of white wool, the king rejoices on his throne. My body glistens on the flesh of the great gods. After the purification priests, the incantation priests and the bathed priests have dressed themselves in me for my holy lustration, I walk with them to my holy meal. But your harrow, ploughshare, binding and strap are tools that can be utterly destroyed. What can you put against me? Answer me what you can reply!"

116–122 Again Grain addressed Sheep: "When the beer dough has been carefully prepared in the oven, and the mash tended in the oven, Ninkasi (*the goddess of beer*) mixes them for me while your big billy-goats and rams are despatched for my banquets. . . .

123–129 "Your shepherd on the high plain eyes my produce enviously; when I am standing in the furrow in the field, my farmer chases away your herdsman with his cudgel. Even when they look out for you, from the open country to the hidden places, your fears are not removed from you: fanged (?) snakes and bandits, the creatures of the desert, want your life on the high plain. . . .

143–155 Again Sheep answered Grain:

156–168 "When you fill the trough the baker's assistant mixes you and throws you on the floor, and the baker's girl flattens you out broadly. You are put into the oven and you are taken out of the oven. When you are put on the table I am before you – you are behind me. Grain, heed yourself! You too, just like me, are meant to be eaten. At the inspection of your essence, why should it be I who come second?

169–179 Then Grain was hurt in her pride, and hastened for the verdict

180–191 Then Enki spoke to Enlil: "Father Enlil, Sheep and Grain should be sisters! They should stand together! . . . But of the two, Grain shall be the greater.

192–193 Dispute spoken between Sheep and Grain: Sheep is left behind and Grain comes forward – praise be to father Enki!¹

¹ The Electronic Text Corpus of Sumerian Literature, Faculty of Oriental Studies, Oxford University, Oxford, 1998. <http://etcsl.orinst.ox.ac.uk/section5/tr532.htm>

1 Introduction

For almost all people, a comfortable lifestyle requires both animal and vegetable products. While livestock and agriculture are easily combined in subsistence farming, a complex society encourages specialization. In arid and mountainous regions, concentration on livestock breeding led to the development of a separate lifestyle – pastoral nomadism – which has had an enormous impact on the history of the world. The owners of large herds can utilize lands too dry or too high to yield reliable crops by moving from one pasture to another, usually in regular migrations between known seasonal pastures. Thus they live in tents which can be moved, and their other possessions must also be easily portable. Pastoral nomadism presents a number of paradoxes. Although it is in some ways a limiting lifestyle, which discourages the development of a high civilization and centers its people outside the major cultural centers, it is a specialized economy which developed out of agriculture and involves exchange with sedentary populations. For thousands of years nomads¹ and settled agriculturalists have defined themselves against each other, each expressing distrust and disdain for the other lifestyle. Nonetheless both have continued to coexist, to trade, and to influence each other.

Although theoretically nomads could live largely from their herds, in practice many have also practiced some agriculture and have further depended on agricultural populations for many of their needs, from grain and vegetables to metal and ceramic wares. Settled societies are less fully dependent on pastoral goods, but over history nomads have offered much more to the settled than the animal products in which they specialize. Their lifestyle gave nomads several skills of great importance – and of use to their settled neighbors. The most famous nomad skill was that of war. The need to migrate required organization and survival skills which translated easily into military action, and the protection of livestock and pasture rights required the ability – and willingness – to use arms. As large sedentary states formed and

¹ Throughout this book I use the term nomad to refer to pastoral nomads only.

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developed armies, they soon sought out nomadic populations as soldiers. Pastoral nomads also have the ability to live in difficult terrain, to move long distances and to mobilize manpower. Thus, they made trade possible through areas of steppe and desert which were difficult for settled populations to access and impossible for them to control. Nomads provided both pack animals and guidance, and likewise some level of security along the routes.

For the purpose of this book, I define the Middle East as the region between the Oxus and Nile rivers, stretching in the north through Anatolia. I have omitted North Africa due to constraints of space and time but include the eastern regions of Iran and modern Afghanistan, which have been controlled by nomad dynasties through much of the Islamic period. The Middle East has had a particularly close relationship with nomadic peoples. First of all, it interacts with large nomad societies on two sides. To the north, the region borders the Eurasian steppe, a vast tract of grassland stretching from Mongolia to Hungary, which was dominated by nomads for three millennia. In the south lie the Arabian and Syrian deserts, inhabited largely by pastoralists. What has been most important in determining the role of nomads in the Middle East, however, is the topography of the region itself. This is a land fertile but arid, characterized by small areas of productive agricultural land separated by mountain ranges, deserts and plateaus. In the west, great rivers provide two regions of intensive agriculture which were the seats of the first great civilizations of the Middle East – the Nile in Egypt and the Tigris-Euphrates system in Mesopotamia. Between these areas stretches an expanse of desert and arid steppe extending from southern Arabia to the inland region of northern Syria. The Arabian and Syrian deserts are interspersed with oases and in rainy seasons can provide some pastures, but much can be considered hospitable only by the hardiest of men and animals. The northern Middle East – from Anatolia through Iran and Afghanistan – is a combination of mountain and high plateau. There are few sand deserts, but also no river systems as rich as those in the southwest. Some areas – particularly in Anatolia and Azerbaijan – can support farming without irrigation; elsewhere water is conducted from mountains and rivers into the plains through canals and underground conduits.

The regions supporting intensive agriculture are a small percentage of the total area and much land is best exploited by pastoralists or mountain peoples. In the marshy riverbeds, arid steppes and the foothills of the mountain ranges, nomads can find winter and summer pastures, while the smaller remote mountain valleys remain the seat of mountain peoples living from subsistence farming and livestock. Neither population is easy to control, and both have remained a constant and significant presence from the beginnings of written history to the present.

Nomadic Lifestyles

For this book I have adopted a broad definition of pastoral nomads, to include all populations living primarily from livestock breeding and practicing regular migration. Many populations practiced a mixed economy, sometimes living in houses or huts for part of the year and using tents only for the summer months; many also planted crops and harvested them when returning along their migration routes. Sometimes such populations are characterized as semi-nomadic. It was also not uncommon for populations to move back and forth between settled and nomad economies, as weather conditions or political unrest made a change desirable. However, I have not usually tried to distinguish among different levels of nomadism for a simple reason: the paucity of historical evidence. The sources available to us for most periods covered in this book give us almost no information on the lifestyle or economic strategy of individual groups, and therefore do not allow us to differentiate among populations according to the length of the migration, winter habitation, or degree of dependence on agriculture.

While mobility and economic specialization create similarities among all pastoral nomads, very significant variations do exist.² Two groups have been most visible in the history of the Middle East: the Arabian and Syrian nomads in the southwestern regions, and nomads from the Eurasian steppe in the northern and eastern provinces. The Arab nomads exploit the desert and semi-desert areas of Arabia, Mesopotamia and Syria to raise sheep, goats, horses and most famously camels. In this region the scarce resource is water, and wells are a central necessity. Summer is the season in which groups congregate most closely around water sources, while in winter after the rains they disperse to make full use of seasonal pastures. Most migration takes place between areas where water is available in summer, and those that can be used only during cooler periods of greater precipitation, often at the same level. For this reason, this type of nomadism is often called horizontal nomadism. The tent used by the nomads of Syria and Arabia is usually made of woven goat hair, which allows the circulation of air in dry weather, but swells when wet and becomes a protection against rain (Fig. 1.1).

Because the needs of camels are significantly different from those of sheep and goats, most nomad groups have specialized in one or the other. Groups raising smaller livestock must remain fairly close to the edge of the desert, where sufficient pasture and above all water can be found throughout the year. Camel nomads (*a'rāb* or *badū*) – known in European languages as Bedouin – can retreat more deeply into the desert and travel

² See A. M. Khazanov, *Nomads and the Outside World*, 2nd ed. (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1994); Thomas J. Barfield, *The Nomadic Alternative* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1993).



Figure 1.1 Bedouin black tent, er-Riha, Jordan, 1898. On the way to Jericho (Er-Riha), Jordan, etc. Bedouin tent American Colony, Jerusalem. 1898. (Photo by: Sepia Times/Universal Images Group via Getty Images)

greater distances in search of pasture, since the camel requires water at most once every four days, and in cool weather with sufficient grazing can go for several weeks without drinking.³ Like sheep and goats, female camels are used for milk, which forms a major component of the Bedouin diet. Their greater mobility gave the Bedouin both freedom from settled control and enhanced military skill. As a result they held greater prestige than the nomads relying on smaller animals.

The northern regions of the Middle East, from Afghanistan to Anatolia, have been inhabited since the eleventh century largely by nomads of Turkic and Mongolian descent, originally from the Eurasian steppe. These populations differ from Arab nomads in a number of important ways. The livestock raised is usually a mix of sheep, goats and horses, sometimes with Bactrian (two-humped) camels. Sheep and goats form the economic basis of the herd, while horses and camels serve for travel, war and transport. Although horses have somewhat different grazing preferences from sheep and goats their grazing habits are complementary,

³ Khazanov, *Nomads and the Outside World*, pp. 53–56; Barfield, *The Nomadic Alternative*.

and the pasture benefits from the mix. Herds can thus be pastured in the same areas and be raised by the same group. While for desert nomads the summer is the time of greatest population concentration, for the steppe and mountain nomads the winter pasture is the more intensive, usually requiring a river valley with water and dried forage. Pasture is less dependent on the vagaries of weather and while migrations may be short or long, a given tribe will migrate spring, summer, fall and winter to the same places. Within Iran and Anatolia, tribes usually migrate vertically, with a winter pasture in a river valley and summer pasture in the mountain highlands which, unlike the lowlands, remain green through the summer. In general, nomads remain relatively stationary in winter and summer and move more frequently and for longer distances in the fall and spring migrations. This is known as vertical nomadism. In the past, the steppe nomads used tents made of heavy felt attached to a circle formed by wooden lattice work, with a hole for smoke in the center. These were heavier but also far warmer than the goat hair tents of the southwestern nomads (Figs 1.2 and 1.3). Within the Middle East, many Turkic nomads, especially in the warmer regions, have adopted the black goat hair tent.

Among both Arab and Turco-Mongolian nomads, daily tasks are apportioned by gender and women play a major role in production, enjoying a higher position than most settled women. Women set up and take down the tents, and the black goat-hair tents used now by most nomads in the Middle East were until recently woven by them. Herding is usually done by men, but in times of need women can also do this. Among camel nomads milking is done by the men; sheep and goats are usually milked by women, who also process milk products for consumption and sale. Among the Bedouin it is common for extended families to share one tent, which can be separated into public spaces for men and private ones for women, and women are sometimes veiled. Nonetheless they are not segregated and have considerable freedom of movement. Among the nomads of Iranian and Turco-Mongolian descent, the nuclear family is more common, while women are rarely veiled and enjoy both authority and freedom.

The Question of Tribes

The most common social and political unit of organization among pastoral nomads is the tribe, a political and territorial unit often expressed in kinship idiom and requiring little formal administrative structure. Livestock is owned by individual households, and these have usually organized themselves along kinship lines in camping groups which share



Figure 1.2 Nomad encampment with yurts, from the Diwan of Sultan Ahmad Jalayir, ca. 1400. Ink, color and gold on paper. Freer Gallery of Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, DC: Purchase – Charles Lang Freer Endowment, F1932.34, verso.



Figure 1.3 Setting up a Kazakh yurt, Altai Mountains, China, 1987.
Courtesy of Thomas Barfield, Boston University.

resources and migrate together. The higher level of organization, dealing with the defense and distribution of pasture, is provided by the tribe. Tribes will usually include several thousand people, and may unite into confederacies, or break up into smaller entities. Although the tribal system is in many ways antithetical to a centralized bureaucratic state, the two systems have coexisted over millennia, and their relationship will be one of the concerns of this book.

There is considerable controversy over the use and meaning of the terms, “tribe” and “tribal,” which have been tarnished in part by an implied connection with societies considered primitive and with an earlier stage in the development of political organization. Thus it is necessary to explain why and how I use the word tribe. In early scholarship, up into the twentieth century, tribes were usually seen as large kinship groups, defined by common descent from an ancestor in the fairly distant past. More recently, scholars have recognized the changing composition of tribes over time; unrelated groups may join a successful leader and members may desert for another tribe in times of stress or weak leadership. Individuals may also join as the client of a tribal member, accepting subordinate status. Actual kinship therefore has been seen as important primarily in the smallest divisions within the tribe – camping collectives

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and limited descent groups accepting collective responsibility for avenging their fellow members. At a higher level, kinship is often claimed but may well be fictive; as new groups join an existing tribe, a real or presumed ancestor can be grafted onto the tribal genealogy. Thus, the tribe is seen as a political grouping, providing a corporate identity, the possibility of collective action and access to pasture for its members. The chief of the tribe provides leadership in the mediation of disputes, the management of seasonal migrations, mobilization for the protection or acquisition of pastures, and for warfare. Tribal society also provides a basis for law and a means of keeping order through mediation among tribal leaders, and through the practice of collective responsibility to avenge harm done to a member. Despite the importance of tribal structure, we need to recognize that nomadism and tribalism are not synonymous; it is quite possible for nomad societies to exist without tribal structure, or to change back and forth between tribal and non-tribal structures. Such a change can occur at times of conquest when nomad rulers create decimally organized armies and move into conquered territories, a phenomenon which will be discussed in this book.⁴

Recently the anthropologist David Sneath, working on Mongolian nomads, has proposed that the concept of tribe should be abandoned for nomad societies – at least for steppe societies – and instead we should recognize named groups formerly seen as tribes as being aristocratic lineages. This reinterpretation is accompanied by a return to the earlier definition of tribes as actual kinship groups, and of tribal societies as egalitarian. In this model, the state is also redefined, as an entity not requiring or even necessarily aspiring to any form of centralization. Sneath suggests that steppe societies were usually stratified, and state-like processes were distributed through a number of authorities.⁵ I have not adopted Sneath's model in this book for several reasons. First of all, in my own work on steppe societies in the pre-modern period I see evidence of named corporate groups with hereditary membership and leadership in which it is clear that not all members are aristocrats. Another problem

⁴ The literature on tribes is too vast to survey here. For a review of the controversies concerning the definition and discussion of tribes, see for instance, Richard Tapper, *Frontier Nomads of Iran: A Political and Social History of the Shahsevan* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), pp. 5–24; Jeffrey Szuchman, "Integrating Approaches to Nomads, Tribes, and the State in the Ancient Near East," in *Nomads, Tribes, and the State in the Ancient Near East: Cross-Disciplinary Perspectives*, ed., Jeffrey Szuchman, Oriental Institute Seminars # 5 (Chicago, IL: Oriental Institute of Chicago, 2009), pp. 4–5.

⁵ David Sneath, *The Headless State: Aristocratic Orders, Kinship Society, and Misrepresentations of Nomadic Inner Asia* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2007).