

# QIN AND HAN VS THE XIONGNU

**Directions:** Examine each document and answer the questions that follow.

## Xiongnu Nomads

The biggest external threat to both the Qin and Han Empires was invasions from nomads, most of all the **Xiongnu** who lived to the North of China. Most historians believe these were the same people known to India and Rome as the **Huns**. Examine how both Chinese empires dealt with that problem, and decide which empire's approach you think was best.

The people who lived north of China were fierce nomadic warriors. Organized into loose tribes, they often raided the frontier. The Qin army battled these groups and pushed them farther north. The army also subdued areas to the south as far as Vietnam. To strengthen security, Shi Huangdi had workers join the separate defensive walls in northern China. The united wall came to be known as the Great Wall of China. Hundreds of thousands of peasants were forced to toil on this wall for years, and many people died from the backbreaking labor. Later Chinese rulers rebuilt and extended the Great Wall to create the structure that winds across China today.

**Source:** World History: Human Legacy, Susan Elizabeth Ramírez et al., Holt

1. How did Qin Emperor Shi Huangdi try to deal with the Xiongnu? Give two examples.



When the Han took over China, they quickly realized that the Qin strategy of fighting off the Xiongnu would not work because they just could not compete with the Xiongnu's superior horses and nomadic fighting style. Han Emperor Gaozu tried a different approach.

"Gaozu develops... the tribute system... This was to court the leader of the Xiongnu by the promise of a marriage to a Chinese princess, by promises of silk, of rice, all the commodities (goods) that the Xiongnu need to sustain life... What Gaozu realized was... that most true nomads are poor nomads, and if the Chinese could control and regulate the trade, they could change raiding to trading, and therefore secure their frontier (borderland)."

**Source:** Professor Kenneth W. Harl Ph.D. from Tulane University, *Barbarian Empires of the Steppes*

2. How did Gaozu try to keep the Xiongnu from attacking China? Was this a smart strategy?

Despite the offers of **tribute** (pay offs), the raids had continued. **Emperor Wudi** decided the time had come to use force. In 133 BC he launched an aggressive military campaign against the Xiongnu, recruiting as many allies as he could. The Han military was able to weaken and push back some Xiongnu tribes.

“The Xiongnu (Huns) had defeated the king of the Yuezhi (Kushan) people and had made his skull into a drinking cup. As a result the Yuezhi . . . bore a constant grudge against the Xiongnu, though... they had been unable to find anyone to join them in an attack on their enemy. . . . When the [Han] emperor [Wudi] heard this, he decided to try to send an envoy to establish relations with the Yuezhi.”

**Source:** Sima Qian, Records of the Grand Historian

3. Why do you think Han Emperor Wudi wants to build connections with the Yuezhi (Kushans)? What do you think his plan might be?

