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Christopher I. Beckwith: Empires of the Silk Road

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INTRODUCTION



Central Eurasia¹ is the vast, largely landlocked area in between Europe, the Middle East, South Asia, East Asia,² and the sub-Arctic and Arctic taiga-tundra zone. It is one of the six major constituent world areas of the Eurasian continent.

Because geographical boundaries change along with human cultural and political change, the regions included within Central Eurasia have changed over time. From High Antiquity to the Roman conquests by Julius Caesar and his successors, and again from the fall of the Roman Empire to the end of the Early Middle Ages, Central Eurasia generally included most of Europe north of the Mediterranean zone. Culturally speaking, Central Eurasia was thus a horizontal band from the Atlantic to the Pacific between the warmer peripheral regions to the south and the Arctic to the north. Its approximate limits after the Early Middle Ages (when Central Eurasia was actually at its height and reached its greatest extent) *exclude* Europe west of the Danube, the Near or Middle East (the Levant, Mesopotamia, Anatolia, western and southern Iran, and the Caucasus), South and Southeast Asia, East Asia (Japan, Korea, and China proper), and Arctic and sub-Arctic Northern Eurasia. There are of course no fixed boundaries between any of these regions or areas—all change gradually and imperceptibly into one other—but the central points of each of the peripheral regions are distinctive and clearly non-Central Eurasian. This traditional Central Eurasia has shrunk further with the Europeanization of the Slavs in the Western Steppe during the Middle Ages³ and the settlement of Manchuria and Inner Mongolia by Chinese in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

¹ On other terms for Central Eurasia, and the usage and meaning of Central Asia today, see endnote 3.

² Southeast Asia, which is not much discussed in this book, is usually treated as an extension of South Asia or East Asia, but in truth it is a subregion of its own, much as the Arabian Peninsula is. Like Western Europe and Northeast Asia (consisting of Japan and Korea in the usual usage, plus southern Manchuria in premodern times), Southeast Asia is geographically broken up by mountains, rivers, and the sea. While I do not by any means embrace geographical determinism without reserve, it is difficult not to see a great deal else in common in the historical development of these areas.

³ See Rolle (1989: 16–17).



What may be called “traditional Central Eurasia” after the Early Middle Ages thus included the temperate zone roughly between the lower Danube River region in the west and the Yalu River region in the east, and between the sub-Arctic taïga forest zone in the north⁴ and the Himalayas in the south. It included the Western (Pontic) Steppe and North Caucasus Steppe (now Ukraine and south Russia); the Central Steppe and Western Central Asia, also known together as West Turkistan (now Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Kirghizstan); Southern Central Asia (now Afghanistan and northeastern Iran); Jungharia and Eastern Central Asia or the Tarim Basin, also known together as East Turkistan (now Xinjiang); Tibet; the Eastern Steppe (now Mongolia and Inner Mongolia); and Manchuria. Of these regions, most of the Western Steppe, Inner Mongolia, and Manchuria are no longer culturally part of Central Eurasia.

Central Eurasian peoples made fundamental, crucial contributions to the formation of world civilization, to the extent that understanding Eurasian history is impossible without including the relationship between Central Eurasians and the peoples around them. A history of Central Eurasia therefore necessarily also treats to some degree the great peripheral civilizations of Eurasia—Europe, the Middle East, South Asia, and East Asia—which were once deeply involved in Central Eurasian history.

Traditional Central Eurasia was coterminous with the ancient continental internal economy and international trade system misleadingly conceptualized and labeled as the Silk Road. It has often been distinguished from the Littoral zone maritime trade network, which also existed in some sense from prehistoric times and steadily increased in importance throughout Antiquity and the Middle Ages, but the sources make no such distinction. The continental and maritime trade routes were all integral parts of what must be considered to have been a single international trade system. That system was resoundingly, overwhelmingly, oriented to the Eurasian continental economy (and its local economies) based in the great political entities of Eurasia, all of which were focused not on the sea but on Central Eurasia. The Littoral System, as a distinctive economy of major significance, developed only after the Western European establishment of regu-

⁴ This area should properly be called Northern Eurasia, but this term has unfortunately been used by some as a near-synonym for Central Eurasia.

lar open-sea trade between Europe and South, Southeast, and East Asia, as discussed in chapter 10; it became completely separate from the Silk Road only when the latter no longer existed.

The cultural-geographical area of Central Eurasia must be distinguished from the Central Eurasian *peoples* and from Central Eurasian *languages*, all of which have been variously defined. While the topic of this book is the history of Central Eurasia, it is really about the Central Eurasian peoples. It therefore includes the history of Central Eurasians who left their homeland for one of the other regions, carrying with them their Central Eurasian languages and the Central Eurasian Culture Complex (on which see the prologue). To some extent, the history of Eurasia as a whole from its beginnings to the present day can be viewed as the successive movements of Central Eurasians and Central Eurasian cultures into the periphery and of peripheral peoples and their cultures into Central Eurasia.

Modern scholars have done much to correct some of the earlier misconceptions about Central Eurasia and Central Eurasians, and they have added significantly to the store of data concerning the area and its peoples. Unfortunately, the corrections that have been made have not been adopted by most historians, and very many fundamental points have not been noticed, let alone corrected. In particular, the general view of Central Eurasians and their role in the history of Eurasia, even in studies by Central Eurasianists, contains a significant number of unrecognized cultural misperceptions and biases. Some of them are recent, but others are inherited from the Renaissance, and still others—especially the idea of the *barbarian*—go back to Antiquity. The following is only a brief summary of some of the main points, which are discussed in detail in the epilogue.

Most modern historians have implicitly accepted the largely negative views about Central Eurasians expressed in peripheral peoples' historical and other literary sources without taking into serious consideration the positive views about Central Eurasians expressed in the very same peripheral culture sources, not to speak of the views held by Central Eurasians about the peripheral peoples. Although works by peripheral peoples provide more or less our only surviving record of many Central Eurasians until well into the Middle Ages, when sources in local Central Eurasian languages began to be written, most works by peripheral peoples are not by any means as one-sided as historians have generally made them out to be. The antipathy felt by Central

Eurasians for the peripheral peoples is noted by historians and travelers from the periphery as well as by the Central Eurasians themselves in cases where sources in their languages are preserved—for example, by the Scythians for the Greeks and Persians, by the Hsiung-nu for the Chinese, and by the Turks for both the Chinese and the Greeks. The sensationalistic descriptions by Herodotus and other early historians should long ago have been corrected through the positive evaluations given by Greeks, Chinese, and others living among Central Eurasians as well as by the substantial amount of neutral, purely descriptive information provided by travelers and the same early writers themselves.

The received view of premodern Central Eurasia is almost exclusively a stereotype based on a misconstruing of only one segment of Central Eurasian society: the peoples of the steppe zone who have been widely believed to be “pure” nomads, distinct and isolated from settled Central Eurasians. Leaving aside the very serious problem that, ethnolinguistically speaking, the nomads cannot be clearly distinguished historically or archaeologically from urbanite and agriculturalist Central Eurasians,⁵ it is important to recognize and understand the stereotypes and misconceptions that fill the modern view of the Central Eurasian nomads:⁶

- The Central Eurasian nomads were warlike—fierce and cruel natural warriors—due to their harsh environment and difficult way of life. This natural ability was much aided by their skills in horseback riding and hunting with bow and arrow, which were easily translated into military skills.
- The Central Eurasian nomads’ life-style left them poor, because their production was insufficient for their needs. They therefore robbed the rich peripheral agricultural peoples to get what they needed or wanted. This “needy nomad” theory is related to the “extortion and booty” model and “greedy barbarian” model of Central Eurasian relations with the peripheral states.

⁵ It is also necessary to abandon the idea that the urban Sogdians were “natural merchants,” despite the sources’ fondness for saying so. Recent scholarship (Grenet 2005; cf. Moribe 2005 and de la Vaissière 2005a) reveals that the Sogdians were as much warriors as anyone else in Central Eurasia.

⁶ Aspects of all of these points have been criticized astutely by one or another contemporary scholar, but the ideas persist and most of them call for a great deal more criticism.

- Because Central Eurasians were natural warriors—and, as nomads, constantly moving—they were hard to defeat. They were a permanent military threat to the peripheral peoples, whom they regularly attacked and defeated. Central Eurasians thus dominated Eurasia militarily down to early modern times.

Despite some comments found in historical sources that appear to support these ideas, careful reading of the same sources flatly contradicts them. The falseness of these views is also demonstrated by simple examination of uncontested historical fact. They are ultimately all direct descendants, little changed, of the constituent elements of the ancient Graeco-Roman idea, or fantasy, of the *barbarian*. Pastoral nomadic Central Eurasians were no more “natural warriors” than urban Central Eurasians were “natural merchants,” or agricultural Central Eurasians were “natural farmers.” Both nomad-founded states and those founded by sedentary peoples were complex societies. Although most people in the nomad sector of the former type of state were typically skilled at riding and hunting—a fact that never failed to impress non-nomadic peoples, who comment on it repeatedly—the far more populous and rich peripheral sedentary societies included very many people who were professional soldiers trained exclusively for war. This gave them the advantage over Central Eurasians in most conflicts.

The nomads also were not poor. To be precise, some nomads were rich, some were poor, and most were somewhere in between, just as in any other culture zone, but the rank-and-file nomads were much better off in every way than their counterparts in the peripheral agricultural regions, who were slaves or treated little better than slaves. The nomads did want very much to trade with their neighbors, whoever they were, and generally reacted violently when they were met with violence or contempt, as one might expect most people anywhere to do. The biggest myth of all—that Central Eurasians were an unusually serious military threat to the peripheral states—is pure fiction. In short, neither Central Eurasia nor Central Eurasian history has anything to do with the fantasy of the *barbarian* or the modern covert version of it discussed at length in the epilogue.

Central Eurasian history concerns many different peoples who practiced several different ways of life. Each Central Eurasian culture consisted of countless individuals, each of whom had a distinct personality, just as in the

rest of the world. Central Eurasians were strong and weak, enlightened and depraved, and everything in between, exactly like people of any other area or culture. Practically everything one can say about Central Eurasians, as people, can be said about every other people in Eurasia. It is necessary to at least *attempt* to be neutral in writing history.

But what about the *barbarians*? If the historical record actually tells us Central Eurasians were not *barbarians*, what were they? They were dynamic, creative people. Central Eurasia was the home of the Indo-Europeans, who expanded across Eurasia from sea to sea and established the foundations of what has become world civilization. Central Asia in the Middle Ages was the economic, cultural, and intellectual center of the world, and Central Asians are responsible for essential elements of modern science, technology, and the arts. The historical record unambiguously shows that Central Eurasians were people who fought against overwhelming—indeed, hopeless—odds, defending their homelands, their families, and their way of life from relentless encroachment and ruthless invasion by the peripheral peoples of Eurasia. The Central Eurasians lost almost everything, eventually, but they fought the good fight. This book is thus ultimately about the continent-wide struggle between the Central Eurasians and the peripheral peoples,⁷ leading to the victory of the latter, the destruction of the Central Eurasian states, and the reduction of Central Eurasian peoples to extreme poverty and near extinction before their miraculous rebirth, in the nick of time, at the end of the twentieth century.

One may still wish to ask, was not the history of Central Eurasia, dominated by states founded by nomadic or partly nomadic people, unique in its tendencies and outcomes? No. The struggle of the vastly outnumbered nations of Central Eurasia against the inexorable expansion of their peripheral neighbors was paralleled by that of the American Indian nations against the Europeans and their ex-colonial clients, the European-American states, who pursued a policy of overt or covert genocide in most countries of the Americas. In North America, the Indians fought to save their lands, their nations, and their families, but they lost. Their fields of corn were burned, their families were massacred, and the few survivors were transported by force to

⁷ The dichotomy was not by any means always in operation everywhere. Some important exceptions are discussed by Di Cosmo (2002a) and others. The point is that, over the long duration of Eurasian history, the inexorable trend was the reduction of Central Eurasian territory and the Central Eurasian peoples' loss of power, wealth, and, in countless cases, life.

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desert lands where they were left to die. Up until a few decades ago, the Indians were condemned by the unjust, genocidal victors as “savages.” Finally, when they had almost disappeared, some among the victor peoples had a twinge of conscience and realized that the historical treatment of the Indians was exactly the reverse of the truth. Recognition of the struggles of the Central Eurasian peoples against the more than two-millennia-long mistreatment by their peripheral neighbors is long overdue. The warriors of Central Eurasia were not *barbarians*. They were heroes, and the epics of their peoples sing their undying fame.