Nuclear Regions and Peripheries, Central Asia

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of the basin. The use of iron was not widespread and bronze seemed still the metal of common use.

In the sixth century B.C. the Persians of the Achaemenid Empire expanded their domains into Central Asia and during the next two centuries under imperial rule we find that iron is fully in use and irrigation is greatly extended, especially the underground canals called ‘karez’ in Central Asia and ‘qanat’ on the Iranian plateau. Settlements have grown into towns with different quarters and craftsmen. The potter’s wheel was by this time in full operation everywhere, and objects of both use and decoration become more sophisticated.

The confrontation between nomads and settled folk is in full force with a difference between China and Central Asia. In the former the demarcation line was a long frontier between the steppe and the sown in north China, but in the oases of Central Asia the nomads surrounded the settlements. Clearly there had to be a modus vivendi between the two in Central Asia whereas in China, and to a lesser degree on the Iranian plateau, there was a sharp line demarcation and a confrontation between nomads and settled people. Thus, in Central Asia each oasis state became a nucleus for the peripheral nomadic tribes or organizations, which almost always became confederacies of tribes under charismatic leaders.

Trade at first flourished between the oases and the nomads, but when the large states in India, Iran and China began to seek luxury objects long distance trade began to emerge in the 3d-2nd centuries B.C.

In the eastern part of Central Asia both Chinese and Indian traders came to the oases of the Tarim Basin mostly seeking commodities from each other’s lands available in the half-way stations of the oases, but also local products such as jade from Khotan early became a luxury object in China. Spices from India were especially important in the trade to China and Indian influences were particularly strong early in the southern part of the Tarim Basin as we know from the documents in Prakrit tongues found in ancient sites but dating from the early centuries of our era.

In the west, however, we can trace the founding of colonies by merchants and presumably settlers going from Bactria to the north and east at the beginning of our period, but then those in the north, the Sogdians and Choresmians dominated trade and founded colonies themselves, the former farther north and east and the latter to the northwest. Bactria on both sides of the Oxus (Amu Darya) was called a land of a thousand cities by the Greeks who settled there after the conquests of Alexander the Great and it was and remained the principal center or nucleus of wealth and influence for western Central Asia in the pre-Christian period. The land was rich and productive and Bactria was strategically located on trade routes.
The religions of Central Asia, as far as we can determine from archaeology, Herodotus and other sources, were predominantly types of shamanism both on the steppes and in the oases. Polytheism was the prevalent belief everywhere, each area or land having its own deities and countless local spirits and demons. Zoroaster's reform of the ancient Indo-Iranian religion as found in the Indian Vedas and the Younger Avesta may have found adherents in Central Asia but there is no evidence that his beliefs were widespread at the beginning of our period although in time they must have enjoyed a much wider acceptance.

When we turn to the seventh century A.D. much has changed both in east and west. Sogdian merchants and trading colonies are everywhere-in the area of present Kazakhstan, in most of the oases of Xinjiang, in Mongolia, the Ordos and inside of China. Choresmians have established similar colonies on the Volga River and the eastern shores of the Black Sea. The Silk Route with many ranches is in full operation. From the time of the Han dynasty the Chinese dominated the politics of Xinjiang and even extended their influence to the west in Ferghana and elsewhere. The cultural but not political influence of Sasanian Iran competes favorably with Chinese culture. The center of western Turkestan is Samarkand in Sogdiana, but there is never a large state or empire of the oasis states, for Samarkand, Bukhara, Chach (Tashkent) are large oases and each has its own administration and bureaucracy. Indian influence in Central Asia has declined and China and Iran are the two nuclear regions of trade and culture for the peripheral areas of Central Asia. But Sogdiana, Kucha, Turfan and Khotan are minor nuclear lands in relation to the nomads who now are not only powerful but are the political opponents of Iran and China in Central Asia. More often the oases states submit to control by the nomads than to rule by China. Fear of China was strong in the oases of Xinjiang. The simple art and architecture of the early period has changed into symbolic religious art. Universal organized religions such as Buddhism, Christianity and even Judaism have adherents all over Central Asia and their art is distinctive. The hierarchical state Zoroastrianism of Sasanian Iran did not hold sway in Central Asia but local forms of Zoroastrianism were popular and the shamanism of the steppe folk had become more sophisticated. The main change in Central Asia, however, was the rise to power on the steppes of the Altaic speaking peoples, especially the Turks and Mongols and their expansion. At the end of the 3d century they began to move from Mongolia to the west and, of course, to China in the south. By the 7th century Turkish rulers are found all over Central Asia and in what is today Afghanistan. The Turkification of all of Central Asia proceeded apace. Although the Turks in their homeland forests in the Altai mountains probably had learned horse riding from the Iranian Sakas, they and the Mongols became the horse riding nomads par excellence, and they dominated the entire steppes from Hungary to China.
Furthermore, they brought the art of confederation and the creation of steppe empires to its climax. The early Turkic empires of the sixth and seventh centuries were forerunners of the Mongol world empire, and ideals of steppe rule—nomadic military organization and tactics, charismatic leaders and tribal allegiances, all had an impact both in the oases of Central Asia and on China and Iran. In the latter it became a dogma that only Turks could rule, while in China the Mongols and then the Manchus also left their marks in history but much less than in the west.