

Reuven Amitai & Michal Biran (eds.),

Nomads as Agents of Cultural Change. The Mongols and Their Eurasian Predecessors,

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Eurasian studies have long made the point that the Eurasian peoples and cultures were central to world history in terms of global interactions ranging from economic and technological exchanges to cultural and linguistic influences. This edited volume could not have a better title to convey this basic message of the field that permeates all the chapters of the book. Grew out of a conference organized in 2006 and hosted by the Institute of Advanced Studies at the Hebrew University in Jerusalem, the bulk of the book concentrates on the Mongol empire of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. But, it still covers a long period from the first millennium BCE to the sixteenth century. The book brings together scholars from various disciplines including history, archaeology, and anthropology; yet, it displays a conscious intellectual coherence, which is most welcome in an edited book. All the contributors question the prevalent stereotypes about Eurasian nomadic societies and make a genuine effort to go beyond the national boundaries, which is actually the principal contribution of this volume to the field. Among the many prejudices about the nomads addressed in the book one can highlight the following: warlike nature of nomads, cultural stagnancy in Eurasia, nomads as minor actors in world history and nomads as passive recipients in the interactions with their urban neighbors.

The volume embodies eleven essays –excluding the introduction- that focus on various geographical regions ranging from modern day China to Russia and the Middle East. The editors enhanced the quality of the volume by including a general bibliography, an index as well as notes on dates and transliterations to make the book user-friendly. Unfortunately, they did not provide a list of maps and figures despite the rich visual content particularly in the second and fourth chapters. There are 5 maps (figures 1.1, 2.3, 4.1, 4.2 and 5.1 –mislabeled as 6.1) as well as 13 B&W pictures and hand drawings of archaeological findings (2.1 - 2.2, 2.4 - 2.7, 4.3 - 4.9).

Chapters 2-5 are devoted to pre-Mongol era of Eurasia. One of the oldest zones of interaction between the steppe and the sown had taken place in the northern zone of present-day China. Gideon Shelach-Lavi brings to light the early phases of these decisive mid- and long-range encounters by analyzing the spread of raw goods, finished goods and finally cultural norms such as oracle bone divination (Chapter 2: “Steppe Land Interactions and Their Effects on Chinese Cultures during the Second and Early First Millennia BCE”). Anatoly M. Khazanov draws our attention to the opposite end of the steppes and explains the development of nomadic political culture –based on the ruler’s function as the redistributor of wealth among his supportive military aristocracy (*comitatus*)– as a result of the Scythians’ encounter with the peoples of the Mediterranean and East Europe (Chapter 3: “The Scythians and Their Neighbors”). William Honeychurch propounds the hypothesis that the Xiongnu had been instrumental on marketing Chinese luxury items in the Western parts of Eurasia along with the political meanings the nomads attached to these materials; he bases his arguments on the recent burial excavations and artifact analyses (Chapter 4: “From Steppe Roads to Silk Roads: Inner Asian Nomads and Early Interregional Exchange”). Obviously, all these three chapters portray the nomadic cultures and the steppes as the driving force of cross-cultural exchanges rather than neutral transmitters between the sedentary civilizations on both ends of Eurasia in ancient times. İsenbike Togan, on the other hand, shifts our attention to medieval times and the development of Chinese historiography and taxonomy on nomadic Turks on the example of conflicting usages of Chinese *bu* (tribe; Turkic *bod*; pl., *bodun*) and *buluo* (tribe segments; “böyük” in Turkish) in the chronicles of Tang China; Bilge Qaghan admonished these highly volatile *buluos* that were without kinship ties and often in search of new chiefs in the Orkhon Inscriptions for moving to Chinese borders. In so doing, nevertheless, he called them *bodun* which actually reflects the dynamic changes in nomadic political terminology (Chapter 5: “The Use of Sociopolitical Terminology for Nomads: an Excursion into the Term *Buluo* in Tang China”).

Chapters 6-12 all deal with the question of how the Mongols influenced the subject peoples and the neighbors in non-military matters. The reader may start this section of the volume by reading the last chapter by David Morgan which outlines the recent trends in Mongol historiography, namely, the rise of cultural history (Chapter 12: “Mongol Historiography since 1985: The Rise of Cultural History”). Mongols’ role should not be reduced to the provider of *pax mongolica*

necessary for exchange of goods and transfer of military technology between sedentary civilizations. Relying on their own norms and priorities, they actually had a dominant role on the nature and volume of exchanges in various spheres including science, art and historiography as well. Thomas Allsen argues that military deployment, displacement of defeated peoples, and efforts at repopulation produced a series of consequences such as demographic changes, military and political repercussions, and ethnic and religious transformations. Mongol policy of population movements had resulted in the formation of new identities both in the settled and nomadic communities throughout Eurasia; an unintended consequence of this was the spread of Islam under Mongol rule (Chapter 6: “Population Movements in Mongol Eurasia”). Michal Biran traces the impact of such policies on the steppe people of Kitans, who either lost their ethnic identity or former influence in future nomadic polities (Chapter 7: “The Mongols and Nomadic Identity: The Case of the Kitans in China”). Morris Rossabi links up with the previous chapters when he points out that the Mongol policy of moving artists around led to a diffusion of motifs and technologies (Chapter 9: “The Mongol Empire and Its Impact on the Arts of China”). He searches for Mongol legacy in the elite culture of China. A reexamination of Chinese porcelains, paintings, and textiles reveals that the Mongol sponsorship exempted artisans from several taxes and created agencies to promote their production, while the Mongol elites consumed and preserved this artistic production. Therefore, he concludes that the Mongol Yuan dynasty sponsored the development of arts in China contrary to the common view.

George Lane’s article is one of the contributions that rather focus on Iran under Mongol rule (Chapter 8: “Persian Notables and the Families Who Underpinned the Ilkhanate”). Mongol’s incorporation of western Asia into the new world order was a brutal episode of history of Iran. However, Lane argues that this incorporation was not a one-sided process; to the contrary, many local notables, native bureaucrats, and segments of scholars actually supported the Mongol rule. The Mongol court on the move (*ordu*) was essential in the creation of the ‘new Mongols’, who entrenched the Mongol imperial culture based on cultural fertilization in Iran.

Reuven Amitai contends that the Mongols influenced not only the subject peoples but also their neighbors. Mamluk Syria was also interacted by the Mongol foe –the Ilkhanate (Chapter 10: “The Impact of the Mongols on the History

of Syria: Politics, Society, and Culture”). Mongol influence on the Mamluks is evident in different ways including centralization, militarization, increased mobility due to the influx of nomads, and reinvigoration of Islamic solidarity in the form of *jihad*. For him, the Mamluk conquest of Syria was a direct result of the Mongol aggression in the region. A similar observation is possible for the case of the Muscovites. Although conquered, their realms experienced the Mongol rule in an indirect way. Thus, the Mongol impact on the Muscovite political culture has been contested bitterly by Russianists since the Age of Pushkin. István Vásáry dwells on this debate with a view to re-emphasize the Mongol legacy on Russia (Chapter 11: “The Tatar Factor in the Formation of Muscovy’s Political Culture”). This chapter offers a good historiographical analysis of this long debate, covering all the contested fields of Mongol legacy ranging from ideology to more practical matters of taxation in the history of Russia.

All the contributions in this volume agree that nomads were active participants in Eurasian encounters throughout history and these encounters should not be reduced to military matters. This is a praiseworthy approach. But, the book deserves attention from non-Mongolists for a different, and more practical, reason as well. The Mongols ruled most part of the Old World for centuries. Therefore, the book conveys a good sense of world history from pre-Mongol times up until the end of the 16th century.

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