

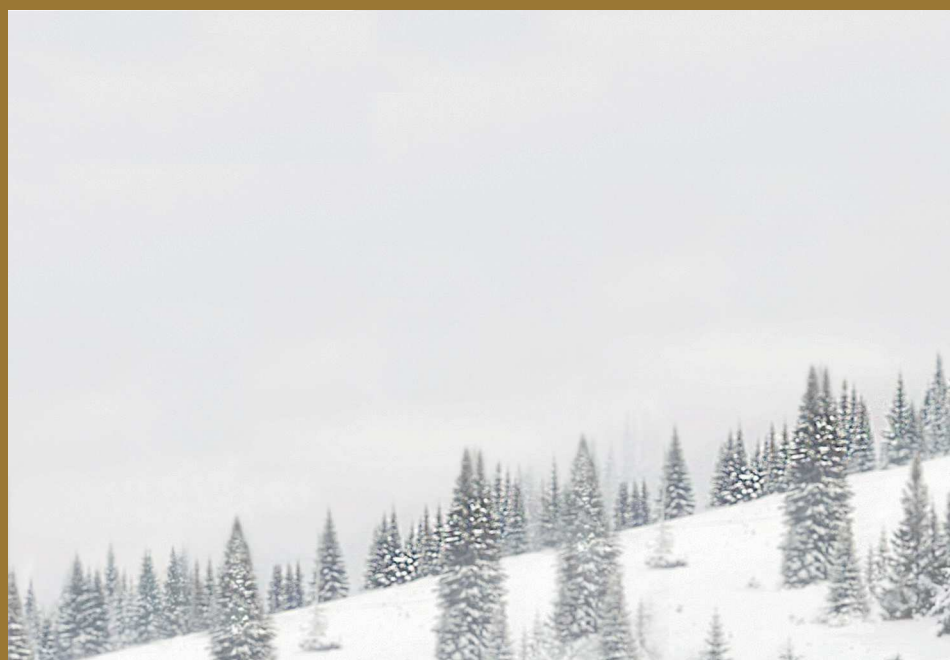
Evgenij N. Chernykh



Nomadic Cultures in the Mega-Structure of the Eurasian World

Translated by Irina Savinetskaya and Peter N. Hommel

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Evgenij N.Chernykh



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Author's Preface to the English Edition

Over many thousands of years, the most important stages in the historical development of Eurasia appear to define two lines across the continent. Both are, of course, symbolic, but in other respects they remain entirely dissimilar. The first line, running from north to south, dissects the continent vertically, separating the *West* and the *East*. Its presence is clearly apparent in major cultural differences and biological divisions in human physical anthropology, and while I would hesitate to attach any inherent significance to the latter, these differences serve to emphasise the temporal depth of this divide. This line begins to manifest itself after the initial Early Palaeolithic settlement of Eurasia, around one and a half million years ago, and is continually redrawn in the subsequent millennia, affecting the pattern of human socio-cultural development even today.

The second of our lines runs perpendicular to the first and highlights a growing demarcation between the *North* and the *South*. This division appears much later, about 12 000 years ago, with the end of the Ice Age and the onset of the Holocene (as it is referred to by geologists). The retreating glaciers released the land of the continental mainland, and gradually, the geoeological zones of Eurasia, with which we are familiar today, began to take shape. In human terms, this division between North and South defines clear socio-technological differences among the peoples of the continent.

Overlaying these two lines, the latter “horizontal” line virtually bisects the more ancient, “vertical”, resulting in a cruciform division of the body of Eurasia that reflects a more complex picture of its historical development.

From North to South the layers of the geoeological “cake” of continental Eurasia, became, step-by-step, the domain of various different of socio-economic forms of society. In the far North of the continent—in its forest and forest-tundra zones—societies continued the traditions of Palaeolithic subsistence, based on hunting, fishing and gathering. The South, populated by societies that were increasingly reliant on sedentary agriculture and intensive animal husbandry, was characterised by scale and became very advanced in terms of their technology. Separating these two worlds, across eight thousand kilometres from the mouth of the Danube to Manchuria, was the steppe zone of Eurasia. This was the domain of mobile herders, pastoralists and nomads, whose societies and modes of subsistence were drastically different from both their northern and southern neighbours.

Over the last seven thousand years, through many dramatic twists and turns, the ups and downs of the history of the Eurasia was determined by interactions between the nomadic cultures of the steppe and the peoples of the southern agricultural world. Technologically and culturally, the latter have always had (or claimed) a superiority—sometimes very significant—over the former. Yet, the peoples of the nomadic world were frequently victorious in conquest.

When these equestrian hordes could so easily overwhelm the foundations of settled cultures and their seemingly insurmountable States, it should come as no surprise to find that from the Atlantic coast to the shores of the Pacific we find the same indelible myth: the nomad as a malign symbol of misery, destruction and barbarism. Yet, reality is always more complex than myth, and this is certainly true in this case. Over the course of this book, the role of nomadic cultures in the history of Eurasia will be considered in detail, beginning with what I consider to be the most significant historical benchmark in Eurasian prehistory: the emergence of metallurgy.

Throughout my career, nomads and metals have been the ever present foci of my research, and it is significant that this publication comes exactly 50 years after my first monograph on this subject, the *History of ancient metallurgy in Eastern Europe*, in which I set out to consider the nature of early relationships between the settled farming cultures of Caucasus and the pastoralists of the eastern European steppe. Since then, in almost all of my significant publications—books and articles—I have attempted to address these complex issues (some of the most important of these works are included in the bibliography). In 2013, I completed an extended popular presentation of all these ideas in Russian, entitled *Nomadic Cultures in the Megastructure of Eurasian World*. The current volume, published under the same title, is a translation of this book adapted for an English-speaking audience.

Evgenij N. Chernykh

Translator's Preface to the English Edition

For me, the translation of this text began on the 9th December 2012 during a period of rather intense correspondence with the author as we prepared for his visit to the University of Oxford in March 2013. I received a draft translation of three chapters along with a request for my comments. Three months later, and somewhat to my surprise, I found myself agreeing to undertake the translation of this forty-chapter excursion around the Eurasian steppe. Such is the effect of Evgenij Chernykh.

This task would have been immeasurably more difficult without an initial draft produced by my co-translator Irina Savinetskaya. Although we have never met, I remain extremely grateful to her for her efforts. From this basis, my aim was to work towards a text that reflected the intent and spirit of the original, without being constrained by the inevitable stylistic dissonance between Russian and English prose.

Rather than present a perfect translation of the Russian edition, published in 2013, I have worked with the author to edit and adapt both the text and its narrative flow for English readers. Anyone familiar with Russian and wishing to undertake a direct comparison of the two would certainly be frustrated by structural changes in many of the chapters. These are particularly apparent in the chapters dealing with prehistory, which overlap most closely with my own research interests. In the latter half of the book, as the discussion moves onto matters historical, the chapters remain structurally closer to the original. For me, the greater challenge in these sections was the differential coverage of translated sources in Russian and English. Wherever possible, Russian language translations in the original volume were replaced with English language translations of the same texts. However, in the case of Iakinf Bichurin (the authors preferred source for many of the translations from Chinese) and a number of sources for which suitable English translations could not be located in time, we made the decision to translate from Russian into English. In these cases, every effort was made to capture the nuances of the original text.

Throughout this process, as much for myself as for the author, I made extensive comments on the text, some of which Evgenij has graciously adopted in his final edition of the text. In my view, this work is particularly remarkable, since it represents a clear distillation of ideas from a man who has spent his entire career in the grasslands and deserts of Eurasia. Working on this book has left me with a far deeper understanding of this remarkable region and a far wider range of questions about its past. I am in no doubt that his conclusions will stimulate much discussion. I can only hope that in adapting this work for an English audience, we have been able to retain the same sense of fascination that prompted its author to produce it.

*Peter N. Hommel
University of Oxford*

Acknowledgements

This book would never have seen the light of day without the help and support of my friends and colleagues. Above all, I would like to express my sincerest appreciation for the input of my wife, Elena Yu. Lebedeva, and our dear friend and colleague Lyubov B. Orlovskaya. Their careful proofreading of this immense manuscript; their constructive advice about problematic passages, which did not read smoothly or appear entirely logical; their help in assembling the bibliography and reconciling citations and figure references was invaluable.

Throughout this book—on its cover and across the first pages of every major section—I have been able to include a number of photos illustrating the uniquely expressive art of the talented Buryat sculptor Dashi Namdakov. His work has always appeared to me to be remarkably in tune with the main themes of the book, and I am both gratified by and grateful for his kindness in giving permission for them to become part of this publication. This thematic and artistic “consonance” was first noticed and introduced to me by Natalia I. Shishlina—she has since put a great deal of effort into the selection of the most fitting and “consonant” of his sculptures and drawings to include in my work. I bow to them both for their willing consent and supportive participation.

I would like to address my heartfelt thanks to Irina Savinetskaya—she was a student of Central European University—and Peter Hommel who laboured over many months to bring text from Russian into English. For Irina, many of the themes covered were often unfamiliar, but she managed to overcome this difficulty successfully. For Peter, as an archaeologist, the greater challenge lay in resolving the many linguistic and stylistic complexities of Russian academic prose. It was the first time either of them had been asked to undertake such work on such a scale, and I am delighted with the result. I am also particularly grateful to Peter for the valuable comments and advice, which he shared with me during his work on the final translation—some of which I was able to take advantage of.

I would like to address special thanks to the managers and employees of the LRC Publishing House, in particular its head Alexey D. Koshelev, Mikhail I. Kozlov, and Sergei A. Zhigalkin with whom we have established an enduring collegiate relationship and from whom I received many positive impulses and encouraging suggestions on the desirability of extending my research along its previously established path. I also want to sincerely express my big gratitude to Irina V. Bogatyriova for the friendly and attentive participation in the final preparation of the book for publication.

And finally, my special thanks to Kira Nemirovsky, Production Editor at Academic Studies Press for her kind attention and active assistance in preparation of the book to publication.

Sculptor Dashi Namdakov

Shaman



Introduction

A TRAGIC CENTURY

The tragic and bloody events of the thirteenth century CE cast a long shadow across the history and perceptions of many Eurasian societies, as nomadic riders descended from the northern grasslands and swept across vast areas of the continent. Over the course of just a few decades, their conquests grew to an almost unimaginable extent. The devastating scale of the onslaught not only surprised but also stupefied the peoples of the settled world. The will of seemingly adamant states was crushed. Their physical and cultural defenses seemed paralyzed, as if by some powerful magic; some even seemed unable to actively resist these horsemen from the steppe; they were defeated even before their attackers appeared on the horizon.

The long historical memory of the societies, who are habitually given the high rank of “civilized” in academic texts and popular fiction alike, is full of scenes from the past, richly coloured with blood and the gloom of total devastation. Not only the written sources, but also the oral tales and epic stories are saturated with such visceral memories.

Who were these fiends? Where did these monsters come from? From the heart of which deserts, from the depths of which awful Hell or Goddamned country of Tartarus did they arise? What grave sins have we committed for the Lord to send such devilish, carrion-eating creatures upon us? Such questions rang through the halls of baffled rulers in Christian Europe, and similar cries and curses were heard across the Asian world.

How could simple farmers and city-dwellers understand the ruthless warriors who never left their horses’ saddles? What reason could there be for the stark differences in their appearance, style, and behavior from the familiar routine life of the towns, villages, fishermen’s’ hamlets, and even the hunters’ forests? These cohorts of mounted “monsters,” galloping across the continent, seemed elusive and invincible, emerging from and sometimes disappearing again into grasslands and deserts of the Eurasian Steppe. These apparently boundless and empty lands were frightening in their immensity to anyone unaccustomed to such latitudes, yet these wastes were the riders’ homes.

“Every Earth Zone ...”

Maybe it was the emergence and strengthening of the great Mongol Empire of the Chingisids that shaped the thinking of the most educated people of the time. For instance,

let us take the writings of the Persian nobleman Rashid-al-Din, the first vizier at the court of Ilkhanid (the Mongol conquerors and rulers of Iran) and one of the most prominent historiographers of his day. This is how the Persian historian perceived the giant Eurasian world, as it unfolded before his eyes, at the very beginning of the fourteenth century CE:

First of all, it should be known that in every Earth zone there are populations different from each other—the first one is sedentary and the other one is nomadic. Particularly, in the regions and countries with fields and many herbs and in the lands which are distant from city suburbs and settlements sometimes there are a great number of nomads. It can be seen in Iran and in the domain of the Arabs, where there are arid deserts with grass, since such land is suitable for camels because they eat a lot of grass, but consume very little water. For that reason Arab tribes and clans established in all the steppes and valleys places of rest from the West to the remote coast of the Indian Ocean[,] and their number is bigger than was necessary for the population. In a similar manner the peoples which have been called Turks from the ancient times and are still called this way, lived in the steppes ... known as Mogulistan (the land of the Mongols) ... which borders with the Great Wall of China ... Due to their strength, might, power and conquests they spread across all the regions of China, India, Kashmir, Byzantium, Syria and Egypt and subdued the majority of countries of the populated part of the world. (Rashid-al-Din I: 73, 74).

Thus, each zone of the Earth gave birth to peoples with certain appearances, lifestyles, behaviors, and occupations. The idea of Rashid-al-Din certainly seems justified, but it was hardly original.

“Earth ... the Progenitor of All Things”

Almost 2,000 years earlier, in the fifth century BCE, the “father” of Western historiography, the Greek scholar Herodotus, devoted one of his books to a detailed description of the Scythians. In Melpomene, he describes their history, their way of life, and something of the worldview of these warlike nomads, who seemed so very outlandish to the inhabitants of the Greek city-states. Herodotus considered, quite rightly, that it was the “land of Scythians” itself, which caused their “particularity.” Yet even this idea, grounded and framed by the realities of the world, had earlier roots in the lofty religious beliefs and mythology of ancient Greece, according to which, Gaia, the Earth, was the progenitor of all things.

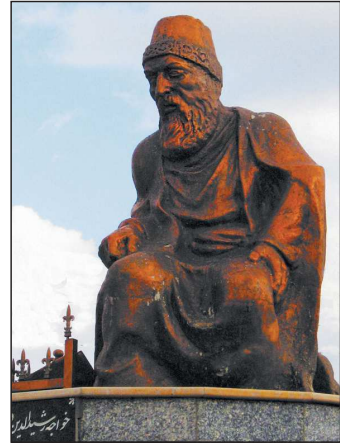


Fig. 1. Rashid-al-Din, c. 1247—1318, Hamadan, Iran.



Fig. 2. Bronze bust of Hesiod, previously thought to be Seneca, end of the first century BCE (National Archaeological Museum of Naples; Wikipedia).

Among the surviving works of the early Greek poets, these stories are most fully expressed in Hesiod's *Theogony*, which most scholars agree was written between 650 and 750 BCE:

Verily at the first Chaos came to be, but next wide-bosomed Earth, the ever-sure foundations of all the deathless ones who hold the peaks of snowy Olympus, and dim Tartarus in the depth of the wide-pathed Earth, and Eros, fairest among the deathless gods.

The “deathless gods” emerged in the boundless space thanks to the strange union between the progenitor Gaia and her own progeny, the Sky, or Uranus:

And Earth first bare starry Heaven, equal to herself, to cover her on every side, and to be an ever-sure abiding-place for the blessed gods.

Then, according to a strange and not entirely logical sequence, Gaia gave birth to the Sea, Pontus, and afterward to the endless Ocean:

She bare also the fruitless deep with his raging swell, Pontus, without sweet union of love. But afterwards she lay with Heaven and bare deep-swirling Oceanus ...

According to this mythology, humans appeared much later in our world. Gaia and Uranus had a multitude of very different children. Many of them aroused fear in their father, Uranus, who chased them to the bowels of Earth. Finally, one of his most courageous sons, the Titan Kronos, instructed by his mother (who was already rather tired of Uranus) managed to castrate his own father. Very different creatures of uncommon appearance arose from the blood of the injured Uranus (Hesiod: 116—138).

However, just three centuries later, in the *Dialogues* of Plato, founder of the philosophical doctrine of Idealism and the foremost disciple of Socrates, the Earth was deprived absolutely of its mystical and mythological character:

I am persuaded, therefore, says he [Socrates], in the first place, that if the earth is in the middle of the heavens, and is of a spherical figure, it has no occasion of air, nor of any other such like necessity, to prevent it from falling: but that the perfect similitude of the heavens to themselves, and the equilibrium of the earth, are sufficient causes of its support. For that which is equally inclined, when placed in the middle of a similar nature, cannot tend more or less to one part than another; but subsisting on all sides similarly affected, it will remain free from all inclination. This is the first thing of which I am persuaded... . But yet further, says he, that the earth is prodigiously great; that we who dwell in places extending from Phasis to the pillars of Hercules, inhabit only a small portion of it, about the Mediterranean Sea, line ants or frogs about a marsh; and that there are many others elsewhere, who dwell in many such-like places. For I am persuaded, that there are everywhere about the earth many hollow places of all-various forms and magnitudes; into which there is a confluence of water, mists and air: but that the earth itself, which is of a pure nature, is situated in the pure heavens, in which the stars are contained, and which most of those who are accustomed to speak about such particulars denominate aether. (Plato, Five Dialogues).

Of course, there is no reference to the creation myth described in *Theogony* in the works of the materialist Herodotus, who was interested, above all, in the actual characteristics of the peoples of the world, their traditions and lifestyles, and the dependent

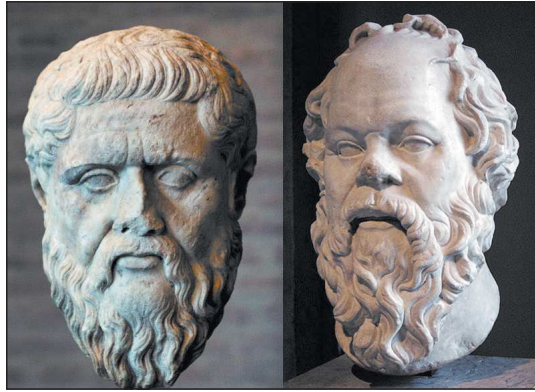


Fig. 3. Plato, c. 428—348, left, and Socrates, c. 469—399 (The Glyptothek [Munich] and Louvre Museums [Paris]).

relationship of all three with the different regions of the world. It was this relationship, which Rashid-al-Din managed to systematize into the notion of “Earth zone,” centered mostly upon understanding the difference between the Persians and the peoples of the northern grasslands. There are considerable similarities between the definitions of the “Earth zone” and the modern concept of the “geoecological zone,” which is the foundation for the basic structure, or to be more precise, the megastructure of the Eurasian world. Understanding this structure is the principal focus of this book.

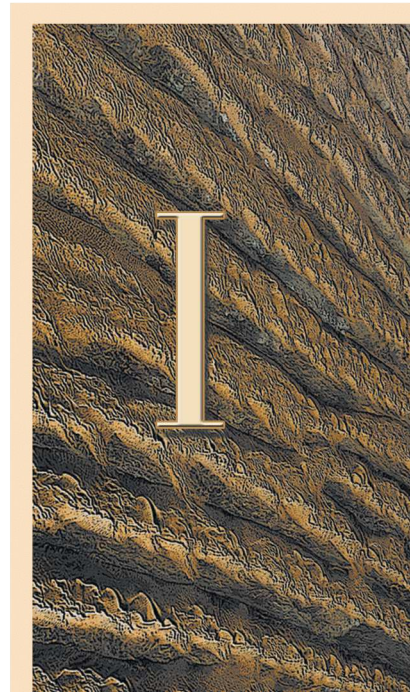
Sculptor Dashi Namdakov

Centaur with a stone



Part I

**THE STEPPE BELT
IN THE MEGA-STRUCTURE
OF THE EURASIAN WORLD**



Chapter 1

THE FORMATION OF THE EURASIAN WORLD

Structure and Mega-Structure in Eurasian Geoecology

Although poets, philosophers, and historians alike have long discussed the relationship between human societies and the environments in which they live, academic interest in this field of research has grown significantly over the last century. Today it generally falls under the rubric of geoecology, a broad interdisciplinary science, which, as it relates to the study of human beings, deals with the patterns of spatiotemporal interaction between nature and society. The pattern of these interactions structures the human world, both at the level of individual cultures and at the Eurasian mega-scale.

If we are to understand the development of the societies of Eurasia, specifically the societies of the Eurasian Steppe Belt, we have to understand a peculiar geoecological megastructure, which emerges simultaneously from the specific climatic-geographical characteristics of the continent, which shapes the basic ecology of its different zones, and the essential reflexive interrelation between these natural environments and the human communities which inhabit them. It is also important to recognize that both the economic model, to which a society is adapted, and many other characteristics of their wider culture, are shaped by a number of other factors. Among the latter, the level of technological development often plays the most important role. Certainly, the dominant technology of subsistence, on which the ability to exploit the potential of the natural environment is based, effectively determines the basic architecture of any culture as well as its broader worldview.

Culture and Subsistence Strategy

In this book, which is primarily concerned with *longue durée* patterns in human history, the main active subject is the *archaeological culture* or, in a broader sense, the *archaeological community*, which can be most concisely defined as a group of closely interrelated, neighboring archaeological cultures. As a result, the term *culture* regularly appears throughout this book and its usage is deliberately capacious. Put simply, it refers to the way of life of a particular society, covering virtually every facet in the daily life of any social being within it, from the characteristics and organization of technology, economy,

and production to the structure of languages, ideological systems, and social behaviors. Its use, however, entails no assumption about the ethnic composition of society, which can be either mono- or poly-ethnic.

Archaeologists, whose task is to characterize ancient societies on the basis of a largely material record, naturally favor technology as one of the most significant and distinctive features of human culture. Developments in economic technologies are usually considered to be of particular interest. Subsistence is, after all, the primary context for human interaction with the environment, and the technologies, which enable communities to extract the food and resources that they need to shape their social relations with the natural world.

Of course, subsistence technology is also rather broad concept, stretching into many spheres of life. However, at a basic level, it refers to technologies directly related to the provision of food, since without food no population or culture can exist. This definition has allowed a very clear distinction to be made between the two principal subsistence strategies: *foraging* and *food production*.

Foraging (gathering, hunting, and fishing) is based on the appropriation of wild resources—plants, animals and fish—that reproduce with minimal human participation in the process.

Food production (agriculture and pastoralism) is based upon the deliberate cultivation of plants or the active animal management by humans. At the very least, it entails significant human control over of the natural process or locus of reproduction. *Agriculture* involves intentional cultivation of plant species—the primary subsistence species exploited in Eurasia were grasses (cereals) and legumes (peas and beans). *Pastoralism* involves the active management or domestication of animal species to provide meat and various dairy products. For the vast majority of Eurasian cultures, cattle, sheep, and goats became the primary economic focus.

In archaeology, the terms *foraging* and *food production* are the basis for more yet more refined economic models, defined as *appropriative economies*, *productive economies*, and *complex productive economies*. The first two broadly follow the division between foragers and food producers discussed above, though they extend their definition into other spheres of life beyond the acquisition of food. They focus, for example, on the way in which leather, fur, or feathers are used for clothing, bone for tools and weapons, or wood for construction. They also emphasize the fact that many food producers may have grown plants primarily to acquire textile fiber, stimulants, and narcotics, or raised animals, such as horses and camels, not as primary sources of food, but for other purposes, such as transportation, traction, and wool. The third general model, the *complex productive economy*, takes this idea further still, defining a transition from humanity as a mere accomplice in natural processes of reproduction, to humanity as master of nature and its processes. This is perhaps most clearly expressed in the revolutionary development of primary metallurgy, the extraction of bright copper metal—dense, malleable and red—from fragile, green malachite, which pushed every culture that invented or adopted it toward an entirely new level of technological development.



These ideas, outlined so briefly above, have been well-rehearsed over the last century and are, no doubt, familiar. Nevertheless, it is important to revisit these simple economic models, as they form the structuring logic behind deeper investigations of the interrelation between ancient economies and geoecological zones of Eurasia. It is also important to note that, in referring to the various cultures of Eurasia as to agriculturalists or pastoralists, the primary aim is to consider the principal subsistence strategies of these communities. This is important, since subsistence strategies are not always mutually exclusive. Agriculturalists almost always kept some domestic animals, though crop cultivation doubtless consumed most of their time and attention, and even fully wild resources often played important roles. Similarly, many pastoralist societies engaged in hunting, sometimes to the extent that the activity appears to be a dominant mode of subsistence, and in one way or another, gathered foods remained an indispensable part of all economic models.

It is fairly simple to establish a relative chronological sequence of emergence of the three main life-sustaining models, and it is clear that the *appropriative (forager) economy* is the most ancient, dating back not only to the Early Stone Age, or Palaeolithic, but also into the animal world. Nevertheless, the Palaeolithic Age, which will be discussed further below, bequeathed its *appropriative economy* to all subsequent cultures, regardless of their geographic location. It was only with the beginning of the Holocene that this situation began to change and when it did, it changed rapidly. The comparatively flat technological monotony across Eurasia was transformed; as cultures with *productive economies* began to appear in several parts of the world. Over the next few millennia, these differential patterns of development were further accentuated by the emergence of so-called *complex productive economies* and metallurgy.

The Long Road to a Continental Mega-Structure

Geologically speaking, the megastructure of the Eurasian world, which creates the basic context for discussion in this book, is relatively recent, the gradual definition of its characteristic features primarily associated with the Holocene Age, the last 12,000 years. This, the interglacial of the Quaternary Period, was preceded by the rhythmically fluctuating environment of the Pleistocene Ice Age, which lasted for 2.5 to 2.6 million years, more than 200 times longer than the Holocene.

The Pleistocene encompasses more than 99 percent of human history, a period referred to as the Palaeolithic or Old Stone Age in archaeology. From about 2 million years ago, the fossil evidence suggests that our bipedal hominin ancestors—*Homo habilis* (handy man), *Homo ergaster* (working man), and *Homo erectus* (upright man)—became increasingly widespread in Southern and Eastern Africa; the latter, *H. erectus*, spread into the lower regions of Southern Eurasia from around 1.8–1.7 million years ago. Their gradual biological and cultural development and subsequent replacement by a series of hominin diasporas culminated in the arrival of our own species, *Homo sapiens sapiens*, modestly known as the wise, wise man.

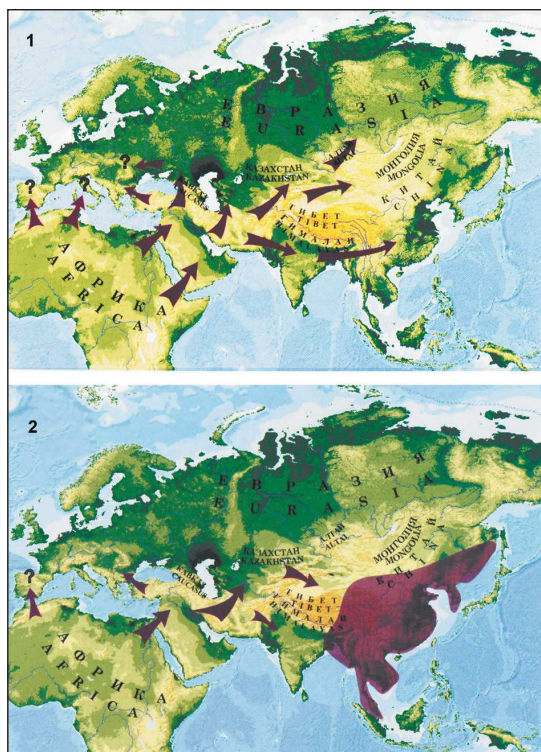


Fig. 1.1. Two waves of hominid migration out of Africa in the early Palaeolithic period: 1—c. 1.5-2.0 million years ago; 2—c. 600,000 years ago (after: Derevianko 2009: figs. 1 and 33).

First appearing in Europe during the early Upper Palaeolithic, this latter species, the final, and allegedly crown-ing, link in the chain of hominin evolu-tion—and the species to which we all belong—were responsible for the al-most infinite variety of post-Palaeolith-ic cultures from the Mesolithic to mo-dernity.-

The Holocene, which provides the environmental context for the devel-opment of these communities, is de-fined by a number of global geoeco-logical changes, which directly and drastically influenced the fate of al-most all post-Palaeolithic human com-munities. Climate change, deglaciation, and ecological transformation, includ-ing mass extinction of animal species, promoted a revolution in human sub-sistence strategies and saw a sudden and unexpected efflorescence of cul-tural and technological development around the world. The question “Why?” remains unanswered.

Four Continental “Enclaves”

Of all the global changes, which marked the onset of the Holocene, one of the most im-portant was a significant rise in sea-levels, leading to the formation of four continental *enclaves*, more or less isolated from each other: Eurasia, Africa, America, and Australia.



By calling such the vast continental lands “enclaves,” I acknowledge a significant deviation from the traditional meaning of the term, which usually refers to much smaller pieces of lands, partially or completely enclosed and isolated from each other. I do this quite intentionally; since I believe that, once established, they re-mained distinctive cultural “enclaves” for much of later human history.

As the huge glaciers of the Ice Age melted, the waves of the Northern and Pacific Oceans began to drown the narrow land bridge of Beringia, closing the terrestrial con-nection between Eurasia and America, which formed a major route of migration during the latter part of the Pleistocene. The straights of Gibraltar and Bab-el-Mandeb turned from narrow crossings into significant barriers, inhibiting the movement of Palaeolithic

populations in the very western and southern extremes of Eurasia. At the same time, the Isthmus of Suez, situated between Africa and Asia, shrank considerably under the encroaching waters of the Mediterranean and Red Seas. Similarly, thousands of years earlier, the Pacific and Indian Oceans had engulfed the exposed Sunda and Sahul continental shelves, turning the discontinuous route between tropical Asia and Australia from a difficult journey into an almost insurmountable barrier.

From the geological-geographical perspective, these transformations of the continental shoreline are almost insignificant, but at a human scale their impact was immeasurable and played an major role in the history of surrounding societies. Certainly, the disappearance of major routes of communication between the populations of the continents of Earth was a turning point in prehistory.

Though Eurasia and Africa were still connected by the narrow Isthmus of Suez, the role of this narrow bridge seems to have been relatively insignificant for most of the long history of African cultures during the early Holocene. It is important when discussing the apparent isolation of Africa from Eurasia, to differentiate the northern third of Africa, from the c. 20 million km² of Sub-Saharan Africa. The former, amounting to almost 10 million km², remained much more connected to Europe, via the Nile valley and the Mediterranean coast. Its ancient cultures consequently remained wired into the Eurasian model of development and followed a different pathway from their neighbors to the south.

The most significant event for us, in our examination of the history of the people of the Eurasian Steppe Belt, is the separation and isolation of Eurasia and the coincident formation of its geoecological zones, a structure that is still readily apparent today.

Of course, it would be naïve to imagine that such changes were accomplished overnight. Although the process of deglaciation began in 12,700–10,900 BCE, a sudden return to glacial conditions between 10,900 and 9,600 BCE, known as the Younger Dryas stadial, meant that large discrete glacial masses were still commonplace at the beginning of the Holocene; the fragmentary remains of more contiguous ice sheets, which formerly covered large parts of the Northern Hemisphere. Two particularly large ice “shields”—the Laurentian in the East and Cordilleran in the West—remained on the northern part of the American continent throughout the Late Pleistocene and Early Holocene. Consequently, it was not until the seventh or perhaps even the sixth millennium BCE that the principal characteristics of the Eurasian geoecological structure, which we will describe in more detail over the course of the next chapter, were finally established.



Fig. 1.2. Proposed pathways for human dispersals out of Eurasia during the Upper Palaeolithic.

Chapter 2

TRANSITIONS FROM NORTH TO SOUTH: GEOECOLOGY, SUBSISTENCE, AND THE EURASIAN STEPPE BELT

North—South, East—West

The megastructure of the Eurasian world can be broken down into its various megacomponents by following significant boundaries in human geoeology across the continent. In the previous chapter, we introduced the principal environmental zones of Eurasia (tundra, boreal forest, steppe, etc.), which run across the continent, like the layers of a gigantic cake (fig. 2.1). The shifting boundaries between these “layers” reached their current positions during the third millennium BCE, developing alongside the Neolithic and Copper Age communities of Eurasia. This ecological zoning is paralleled by significant differentiation in human socioeconomic behavior, each zone becoming associated, rather persistently, with specific forms of subsistence strategy.

That economy and environment are closely correlated seems obvious, the former determined primarily by the latter. However, it is easy to forget that this relationship also lies at the root of some of society’s most deeply held beliefs, both in the past and in the present. Acknowledging the importance of human-environment relationships does not entail a wholesale return to the worldview of the ancient Greeks, as described in the previous chapter, but it does require us to accept that the environment shapes the primary “architectural” elements in any culture or social structure. Other characteristics are built upon this framework and are in this sense secondary, though they are of no less importance.

Moving across the continent from east to west, we see substantial changes in these so-called “secondary” characteristics, which cut across the geoeological layers of the continent. Significant transitions in population anthropology, linguistic affiliations, and even prevailing ideologies or systems of belief help us to further break down our vast study area. During the Early Metal Ages, these transitions appear to coincide along a line, which divides the “cake” of the Eurasian continent into two almost equal halves (fig. 2.2). It is important to consider these megacomponents in detail at the outset of our study, since they provide the framework for subsequent debate. It seems reasonable to begin with the primary structural features, seen as stable socioeconomic tran-

sitions, from north to south, before addressing more subtle secondary variations from west to east in the next chapter.

The Geoecological “Cake” of Eurasia

The differentiation of socioeconomic strategies across the various ecological zones of the Eurasian continent begins to be apparent around the beginning of the fifth millennium BCE, with the onset of the Early Metal Age. Certainly, it was already well-established by the beginning of the Middle Bronze Age, at the end of the third millennium BCE and essentially maintained its integrity for the next 4,000 years. This stratification of Eurasian culture is a central theme in Eurasian social history.

Three primary and primarily independent subsistence strategies were seen in the prehistoric communities of Eurasia by the end of the third millennium BCE: 1) hunting, fishing and gathering; 2) pastoralism: nomadic or semi-nomadic stockbreeding; and 3) sedentary agriculture. Each of these strategies can be associated, fairly tightly, with one or other of the major ecological zones of Eurasia, which served as lasting strongholds for these very different and culturally distinctive communities (fig. 2.1).

The uppermost layer of the “cake” is the cold, austere world of northern hunter-fisher-gatherers, its base, the multi-colored world of sedentary farmers. Both domains stretch from the Atlantic to the Pacific Ocean. Across almost the whole of this span, except in the western extreme of the continent, these “upper” and “lower” worlds were clearly separated by an almost equally vast domain, the world of nomadic stockbreeders. Only in the Eastern Baltic and the very south of Scandinavia did the sedentary agricultural world directly connect with the world of hunter-gatherers.

From the geoecological perspective, the forest, forest-tundra, and polar tundra zones, which were the domain of the hunter-fisher-gatherers of Eurasia, are perhaps the most contiguous of the three worlds, extending almost unbroken over an area of 17–18 million km². Only small groups of nomadic and semi-nomadic reindeer herders, traveling across the tundra and forest-tundra zones to the far north of the Eurasian continent, seem distinctive against this background of apparent technological homogeneity.

The domain of the pastoralists was more discontinuous, with various discrete and distinctive areas. Of these, the greatest part of their domain was the Eurasian Steppe Belt, extending 8,000 kilometers, from the coast of the Yellow Sea, to the mouth of the Danube and the foothills of the Eastern Carpathians. The other important, though smaller part was the Arabian Peninsula (or subcontinent), separated from the Eurasian Steppe Belt by the communities of the Iranian Plateau and Anatolia (fig. 2.1; 2.2).

Finally, we turn to the southern domain of sedentary farmers, which was the largest, most colorful and diverse of these geoecological zones. Covering a total area of 22–23 million km², this domain consisted not only of the great fertile valleys of Eurasia and North Africa, formed by the Nile, Tigris, Euphrates, Indus, Yellow, and Yangtze Rivers, which were extremely productive agricultural areas, but also the smaller valley systems of the temperate zone, and the isolated oases of the desert edge, where agriculture thrived in seemingly impossible, or impossibly risky conditions.

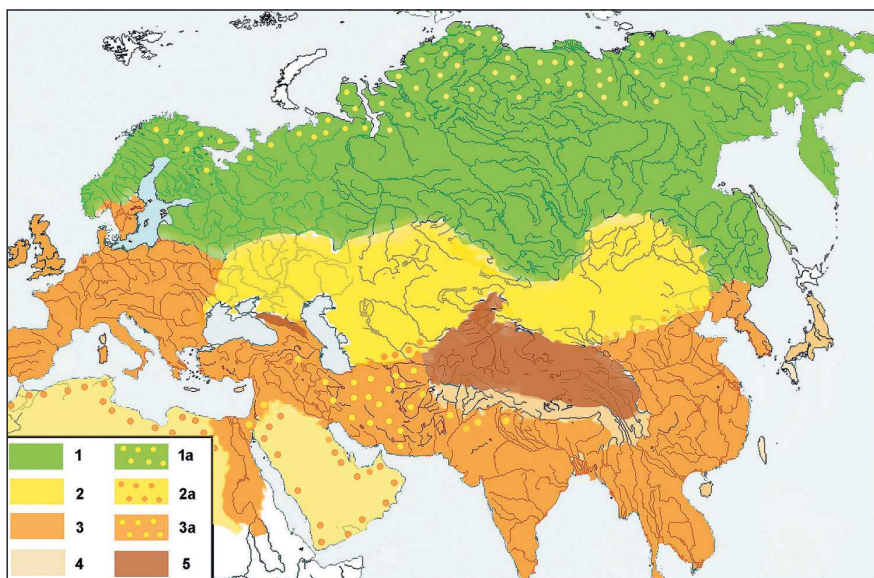


Fig. 2.1. Major geoeological divisions within Eurasia and the prevailing subsistence strategies of cultures within them: 1—forest and tundra zones; the domains of hunter-fisher-gatherers and (1a) reindeer breeders; 2—the Steppe Belt (from the Black Sea to the Yellow Sea); the domain of nomadic/semi-nomadic pastoralists and (2a) oasis cultures of agricultures within the pastoral domain; 3—areas dominated by cultures with a sedentary agricultural way of life and (3a) cultures of stockbreeders within the domain of farming cultures; 4—piedmont zones; regions where typical mixed subsistence strategies are dominant; 5—high-mountain areas; indefinite (mixed) subsistence strategies.



Fig. 2.2. The borders of the Steppe Belt (purple dotted line), the division between the western and eastern domains of Eurasia (red dotted line), and the Dzungarian Gate (blue arrows).

A substantial part of this southern zone consists of high-altitude areas such as the confusing maze of high ridges of the Himalayas that surround the Tibetan Plateau, and extend into the Pamir-Tian Shan systems. The far less significant Central Caucasus Range was also included in the southern domain, and taken together, these high-altitude areas covered an area of at least 4 million km². From an agricultural perspective sedentary cultivation in this area is not very significant, restricted to narrow river valleys and streams bordered by gorges. These great mountain ranges effectively partitioned the southern domain into its different areas, which often remained isolated from each other, when we shift our focus from “north-south” to “east-west,” the Tibet-Himalayan cluster will receive more attention.

Differences between the Domains

Although the many human cultures associated with each of these vast geoecological domains played a special and complex role in the multi-millennial history of the Eurasian peoples, the role of the northern block of hunter-fisher-gatherers seems to be the least significant. The principle of self-sufficiency seems to lie at the foundation of the existence of peoples of the forest domain. These cultural communities were apparently disinterested in the lifestyles or technological developments of their southern neighbors; at least, archaeologists have discovered little evidence of interest. The north interacted with their southern neighbors only when aggressive steppe nomads encroached on their territories, perhaps demanding tribute in furs.* Consequently, in the historical “soap-opera” of Eurasian culture, these cultures, scattered from west to east across the continent, play only a minor role in the plot, and they can seem rather monotonous. Of course, my colleagues specializing in the study of these northern communities would strongly disagree with this statement. They would point to differences in pottery ornament, flint tools, floor plans of habitations, etc. However, in describing them as monotonous, I am referring only to their primary features, the elements that structure their existence and are determined by the same underlying subsistence model. Significant differences between the populations of Western and Eastern Siberia, which were largely conditioned by other factors and are discussed when the narrative changes its orientation to consider differences across the continent from east to west.

However, regardless of their scientific opinions about hunter-gatherers, most researchers would agree that, during the third and second millennium BCE, the greatest diversity in material culture and socioeconomic structure was seen in the peoples of the southern, sedentary, agricultural domain. Archaeologists, historians, and other writers have dedicated incalculable millions of words, in voluminous monographs, popular books, encyclopedia and articles, to this fascinating kaleidoscope of “civilization” in Egypt, Mesopotamia, Anatolia, the Levant, the Aegean, and the Indus Valley. Traversing

* From the Bronze Age to the modern world, the neighbors of hunters have been fascinated by fur. Historically, the nomads of the steppe claimed the tribute of fur from their northern neighbors only when they felt powerful. When they felt weak, defeated, or humiliated, they sought only to find shelter or refuge among the endless forests and marshes, which were so alien to their enemies.

the mountainous heart of Eurasia, over the Hindu Kush and the Tibetan Plateau, we turn over pages in the history of Eurasia, which are much less well-known in Europe—concerning the ancestors of the Chinese State, the mythical Xia dynasty, and the historical kingdoms of the Shang and Western Zhou.

It would be impossible to present a meaningfully summary of the characteristics of such a varied list of societies, and any detailed discussion would distract us from our course. Fortunately, information about these civilizations is so widely known that it is likely to be familiar to most readers.

Given the focus of this book, it seems more fruitful to focus the discussion on the specific problems and principal features of Eurasian Steppe Belt, which served as durable domain of the stockbreeding cultures. The character of the Eurasian Steppe Belt is very different from both the forest to the north and the farmlands farther south. Its location between these domains gives it a very special and important role in Eurasian history, an ecological and cultural buffer zone between the world of hunter-gathers and the agricultural domain. In spite of this, the cultures of the Steppe Belt have been studied far less intensively than their “civilized” neighbors in the southern domain. This holds true not only for historical monographs, but also for archaeological publications, and it is the principal justification for writing this book.

The Geocology of the Eurasian Steppe Belt

The Eurasian Steppe Belt, covering a territory of more than 8 million km² in the mid-latitudes of the continent (fig. 2.2), is characterized, first of all, by its landscape and ecological characteristics:

- 1) The absence of forest cover or its almost complete suppression by grass and herbaceous plants;
- 2) Continental or extreme continental climate, hot summers and cold winters with a tendency to aridity and drought.

Although our conventional description of this complex ecological zone as the Eurasian Steppe Belt seems to give it a sense of homogeneity, this is to some extent misleading. It is important to recognize that this “Belt” in the centre of the body of the Eurasian continent encompasses significant variation. These are seen clearly in the main feature of its vegetation and climate, which grades into a forested environment along its blurry northern edge and encompasses vast areas of barren desert in the south. There are also major differences in the geomorphological characteristics of its various regions from west to east, which include a variety of landscapes, from the absolutely flat plains, to the North Caspian Sea, to the rolling hills and mountains of the Mongolian area.

An almost equally vast territory of forest-steppe abuts steppe regions to the north, and, as its name suggests, this area has substantially greater forest cover. However, there is a continuous gradient between these two ecological zones and the division between them is more or less arbitrary. The main regions of the Steppe Belt are almost as difficult to differentiate, though even a quick look at the map (fig. 2.1; 2.2) allows us to distinguish two obvious “halves” connected at a narrow bottleneck in the steppe, referred

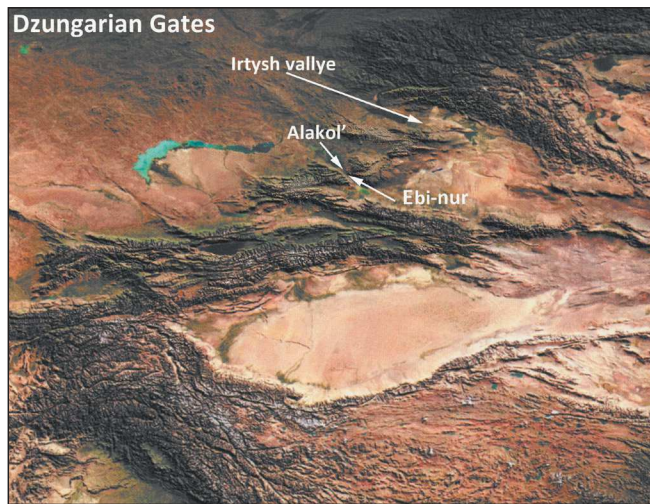


Fig. 2.3. The Dzungarian Gates; two major routes between Altai and Tarbagatai (the valley of the Irtys River), and between the Tarbagatai and Dzungarian Alatau (Lakes Alakol' and Aibi). Satellite imagery (Nad Zemlej: 86).

to as the Dzungarian Gate (fig. 2.3). The territories of the two parts are almost equal in area, amounting to 3.8 million and 4.2 million km² respectively. The East Asian Steppe is more or less contiguous and homogenous in appearance, except in the basin of the Tarim River, around what is today the Taklamakan desert. The West Eurasian Steppe is further subdivided into its Eastern European and West-Asian regions by the spurs of the Southern Urals and the Mugodzhur Hills. The territory of the latter is around 2.5 million km², whereas the Eastern European region covers an area of just 1.5 million km².

The West-Eurasian Steppe and Its Borders

The far western end of the Eurasian Steppe Belt is located in the basin of the Lower Danube River, where a relatively narrow strip of grassland runs along the northwestern shores of the Black Sea (fig. 2.4), encompassing the Northern Crimea and the perimeter of the Azov Sea. The sea borders end with a mighty and insurmountable wall of the Greater Caucasus. Only next to the shores of the Caspian Sea does this mountainous "wall" retreat to the west, giving way to the famous Derbent passage, which for thousands of years served as a convenient route of contact between the peoples of the northern and southern domains, whether peaceful or otherwise. Farther east, the Steppe Belt runs around the Caspian shore, the brackish water of the inland sea creating a clear southern boundary for the Steppe Belt till it runs east along the northern edge of the Kopet Dag mountains, which form the border between Karakum desert and the green oases of the Iranian Highlands to the south (fig. 2.5; 2.6).

Beyond the Kopet Dag, the southern border of the Steppe Belt runs up along the foothills of the great Pamir and Tian Shan mountains (fig. 2.7), the entangled ranges of mountains and plateaus, which twist and rise into to the Hindu Kush to the south.



Fig. 2.4. The western part of the Steppe Belt (Southern Transurals) has a milder climate and presents a more uniform landscape and vegetation zone.



Fig. 2.5. Kara Kum. Dunes in this desert are rare; saline plains dominate the landscape.



Fig. 2.6. Kara Kum. In the South, the saline plains of the desert are interrupted by the relatively low mountain ranges of the Kopet Dag, which clearly define the southern border of the Steppe Belt in Central Asia.

Beyond lie the ranges of Kunlun and Altyn-Tagh Mountains, which merge with the Tibetan Himalayas after circling the Taklamakan desert without any significant deflections.

It is important to once again stress that the West Eurasian part of the Steppe Belt is characterized by well-defined southern borders, which follow the shores of the Black and Caspian Seas and the foothills of the vast Alpine-Himalayan orogeny. In contrast, the western and northern borders of the Steppe Belt are rather vague, except where they are defined by the mountains in a small part of the South Urals. Based on the main definitions of this area, listed above, the northern contours of the Belt would be expected to follow the southern edge of the Boreal forest or *taiga*, however, as has already been noted, differences between extended forest-steppe and steppe areas are far from clear when set against the “strict” physical borders in the south.



Fig. 2.7. The southern slopes of the Tian Shan appear completely inaccessible. Some of its sheer precipices are 1,000 or even 1,500 m tall.

The Dzungarian Gate and Mongolian Mountain Steppe

The Dzungarian Gate, which serves as the primary connection between the West-Asian and East Asian parts of the Steppe Belt, is, in geological terms, a geosyncline between the recently folded ridges of the Alpine-Himalayan orogenic system and the much more ancient mountains of the Sayan-Altai (fig. 2.3). In more human terms, this unusually low-altitude pass between the mountains became a convenient route for numerous nomadic groups and their stock. This was itself divided into two parts by the relatively low peaks of the Tarbagatai Mountains. It seems that the route lying to southwest of the Tarbagatai was not greatly favored in antiquity, in spite of the fact that it runs close to the famous, slightly brackish Lake Balkhash. It appears that the northwestern route was far more attractive to the pastoral communities of the Early Metal Ages. Here, within the deserts and semi-deserts of the Dzhungar Mountains, one of the great Siberian Rivers, the Irtysh, has its source (fig. 2.8). The Irtysh Basin created a channel of communication stretching 4,000 kilometers, between the foothills of the Altai, to the Western Siberian plain.



Regarding the Dzungarian Gate, there is a strange parallel with the gates of a Russian rural manor, which traditionally had a grand gateway, for horses and carts, and a smaller gate, used by people. Perhaps, the route along the Irtysh Valley, partially bordering the Altai Mountains, can be thought of as the main gateway into the Dzungarian Basin. The smaller gate with its door facing the west was situated

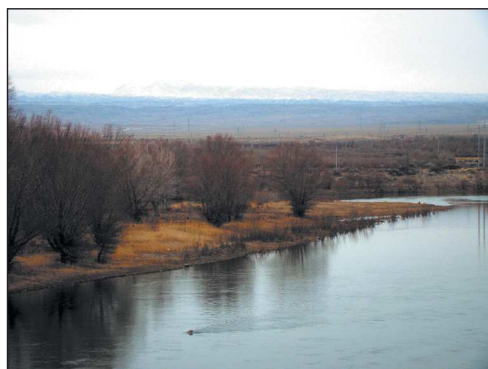


Fig. 2.8. The broad valley of the Irtys River within the Dzungarian Gate; on the horizon lie the northern foothills of the Tarbagatai range.



Fig. 2.9. The eastern part of the Steppe Belt (Central Mongolia) differs from western territories in its more rugged, mountainous landscape.

between the Tarbagatai and the high range of the Dzungarian Alatau, a spur of the Tian Shan. It appears there was also another gate—an amazingly audacious construction—between the fertile Ili Valley and the mountain oases of Tian Shan (fig. 2.3).

The landscape of the East Asian “half” of the Steppe Belt is very different from the regions farther west. It is predominantly a mountain steppe (fig. 2.9; 2.10) characterized by infertile soils and an extremely continental climate. Despite the fact that the eastern part of the Steppe Belt sits in more southerly latitudes, the impact of the North is much more discernable and discontinuous permafrost extends almost up to the borders of the Gobi Desert (fig. 2.11).

The central area of the East Asian steppe lies in and around modern Mongolia, including the regions of Inner Mongolia located in what is today Northern China. This immense territory covers an area of more than 2.5 million km². To the north, the steppe and desert are bounded by the wooded spurs of the Sayan-Altai (fig. 2.12), the eastern borders of these great mountains stretching to the edge of the Selenga basin, which drains into Lake Baikal. To the east of the river, the traveler must cross the wild forest-steppe of the Transbaikal, which, in its semi-mountain environment, has little in common with the forest-steppe seen in Eastern Europe or Western Siberia.

Almost the whole southern borderline of the Mongolian steppe is the vast desert of the Gobi plain. Characterized by rocky or loamy-halophytic soils or sand and a total absence of forest (fig. 2.13—2.17), the flat horizon of the landscape is disrupted only

by sand-drifts and low hills, the eroded remains of ancient mountains ground to dust over hundreds of millions years. Beyond the desert rises the mountainous wall of the Kunlun and Altyn-Tagh Mountains, forming the northern border of the rooftop of the world—the Tibetan Plateau—and the southern boundary of the Eurasian Steppe Belt.



Fig. 2.10. The Dzungarian Gate with the mountains of the Mongolian Altai rising in the background.



Fig. 2.11. Central Mongolia, a blizzard in the middle of August; the climate in the eastern Steppe Belt is significantly more severe than that of the west. Such weather is not uncommon.



Fig. 2.12. The Dzungarian Gate, wooded slopes of the Altai border the valley of the Irtysh River.



Fig. 2.13. Mountains, sand dunes, and saline plains between the southern slopes of Mongolian Altai.

Fig. 2.14. The Mongolian Altai. Camels and the desert are inseparable. It would have been impossible to cross these vast desert territories without this animal. Camels also played a role as “desert cavalry” among the eastern nomads.

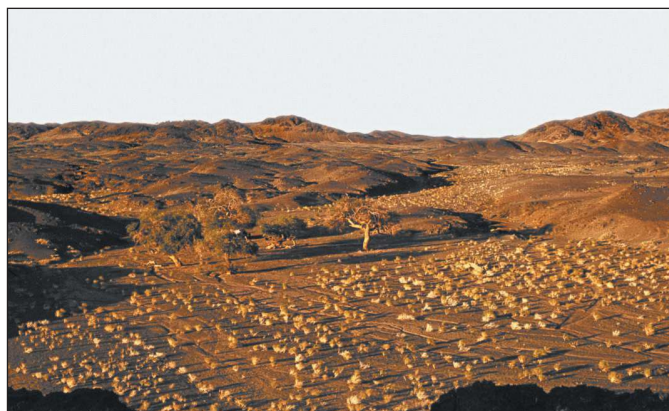


Fig. 2.15. The Southern Gobi with its rocky hills. Several trees cluster next to a barely noticeable source of water: the well of a Lamaist monastery Ulgiy Nur destroyed in the 1930s.

Fig. 2.16a. The endless dunes of the inhospitable Taklamakan, a sandy desert situated southwest of the Dzungarian Gate in the Tarim Basin (Google, satellite imagery). The average height of these large dunes is almost 100 m, while some "giants" rise up to 300 m. Each year. The wind, reaching speeds of 150 m/hour, moves these vast sand ridges, threatening the existence of rare oases and roads.



Fig. 2.16b. The Northern Xinjiang: the cattle lives at grass in the summer and winter.



Fig. 2.17. The unapproachable slopes of the Tian Shan, sinking into the desert, are impressive in their unique forms and variety of colors.

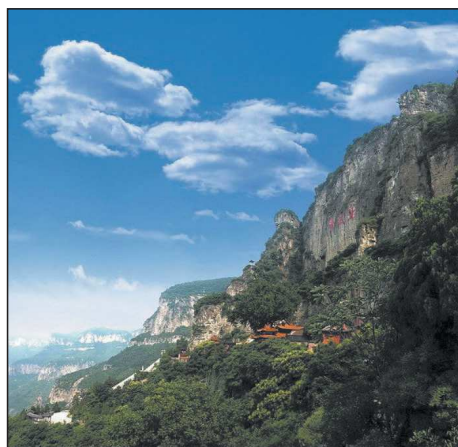


Fig. 2.18. Steep mountainous slopes, which look like a gigantic staircase, separate the cold and desolate Mongolian Plateau from the rich plains of central China (along the borders of Hebei and Shanxi provinces) (Wikipedia).

Only in the far eastern wing of the Steppe Belt, the Manchurian Plain, do we see a landscape similar to that of the Western Steppe. Bordering the Yellow Sea, the far eastern end of the Steppe Belt shares many features in common with the Pontic Steppe, along the Northwestern Black Sea shore and steppe areas of the Lower Danube. Through here, the Pastoralists of Manchuria and Western Mongolia had rather convenient access to the great Central Plain of China, which straddles the basin of the Lower Huang He or Yellow River and the northern parts of the Yangtze Basin. In this area alone, the southern frontier of the Steppe Belt came to be artificially delineated by a unique man-made construction: Great Wall of China (fig. 2.18, and see: chapter 26).

A prominent Russian traveler of the late nineteenth century, Nikolay Przheval'skii, described his impressions of the border between the Mongolian plateau and the Great Plain of China as follows:

Finally, far ahead on the horizon, the indistinctive contours of the mountain ridge, which serves as a sharp border between the high and cold Mongolian plateau and the warm plains of China, appeared. This ridge has a rather alpine character. Steep side slopes, deep gorges and abysses, pointed peaks, sometimes crowned with sheer cliffs, and finally—the look of bareness and wilderness—this is the general character of these mountains, on which the famous Great Wall stretches... . Until the very last moment the traveler walks in between the hills of the hilly plateau until he suddenly sees the most striking panorama. Below, beneath the feet of the charmed viewer, the numerous ranges of high mountains, sheer cliffs, and gorges, peculiarly intermingled with each other, raise as if in a strange dream. Behind them stretch the densely populated valleys with numerous rivers running across them as a silver snake. The contrast between what is left behind and what lies in front is incredible. No less significant is the change of the climate. (Przheval'skii 1946: 59)

His description of another, no less striking contrast, between the deserts and semi-deserts of Mongolia and the mountain ranges of Tibet Himalayas is no less dramatic:

... the continuous, massive wall of mountains stretching from the Upper Huang He until Pamir ... is a northern borderline of the highest elevation of the Central Asia, which is divided by it in two distinctly different parts: the Mongolian Desert on the north and the Tibetan Plateau on the south. Nowhere else in the world there are such differences between two bordering countries on such a vast territory. Some areas of the mountain ridge separating them [are] no wider than several dozen versts, while on the both sides of it there are regions with absolutely different geological characteristics, topographical

reliefs, absolute altitudes, climates, flora, fauna and finally—origins and histories of the peoples living there. (Przheval'skii 1948: 101; see: also fig. 2.18)

Arabian Desert Plateaus

The Eurasian Steppe Belt has given rise to a great number of nomadic and semi-nomadic stockbreeding cultures, whose existence has, in one way or another, influenced the fates of many settled societies and civilizations to the south. However, in this field, the Steppe Belt has a rival—the Arabian Peninsula. Often referred to as a subcontinent, the peninsula covers an area of about 2.8 million km². Although its arid uplands seem isolated on a map (fig. 2.1; 2.2; 2.19—2.21), in practice they gradually merge with the Syrian Desert to the north, which lies between Mesopotamia and Palestine. These contiguous deserts, taken together, cover an area of more than 3 million km². In comparison with the Steppe Belt, this territory is somewhat smaller, but nonetheless impressive.

The deserts of the Arabian plateau, with their green oases, are justifiably famous, described in oral tales and epic legends, as well as in many well-known written sources. They were the cradle of early pastoral cultures of the Semitic peoples, including the Jews and the Arabs (fig. 2.22). In this context, the Sinai Peninsula plays a similar role to the Dzungarian Gate in Eurasia, connecting the Bedouin of the Arabian deserts with the inhabitants of the Sahara. However, with the rise of the Egyptian civilizations in the Nile River Valley, particularly within the braided channels of its delta, regular communication between these two groups of nomadic cattle herders must have ceased.

The dramatic rise of mobile and semi-sedentary pastoral cultures in the Arabian Peninsula their impact on their neighbors, will be considered in more detail in a subsequent chapter. Certainly, there are many parallels between the Steppe Belt and the Arabian Peninsula, but there are also the major differences between these northern and south-



Fig. 2.19. The Arabian Peninsula and surrounding territory. Satellite Imagery (Nad Zemlej: 127).

ern stockbreeding societies. The patterns of later history would eventually bring descendants of nomads from the Arabian Peninsula into conflict with intruders from the depths of the Eurasian Steppe Belt, resulting in one of the most significant clashes in the history of the Old World. However, this meeting will be discussed in the second volume of this book, where the differences in the development of these two groups of nomadic cultures will become a particular focus of attention.

The Domain of Nomadic Culture

The Eurasian Steppe Belt was and is a pastoral world. Its seemingly endless sea of grass and sand was not merely a backdrop to the pastoral tribes development, but a beloved home, surprisingly secure against the their enemies and rivals. However, the peoples of the Steppe Belt only became truly powerful when they saddled the wild horses of the steppe and harnessed them for riding. The generations of pedestrian herders, who preceded these riders, could cover only limited distances within this vast expanse, because of the slow pace of both people and cattle. They also had a limited capacity to direct their herds or to protect them from carnivorous animals and rival groups. Quite suddenly, with the appearance of riders in steppe, the level of mobility and travelling speed increased dramatically, while the military advantage of agile cavalry over sedentary farmers, with their unavoidable attachment to their fields and villages, became very tangible. Without doubt, the growing dominance of these riders appeared initially on the plains of the great Eurasian Steppe Belt and I prefer to call all stockbreeding cultures with horses as *mobile*.

The domestication and saddling of camels also lead to significant changes in the status of herders in the desert regions (fig. 2.14; 2.22). Thanks to their adaptation to the arid environment, a camel had many advantages, even over the agile and fleet-footed horse. Camels' ability to go without water for long periods of time made them irreplaceable baggage animals in the challenging conditions of the desert environment. Camels were also rather good riding animals and the results of many battles between the tribes of Arabia were decided from the backs of these animals. It is worth noting that

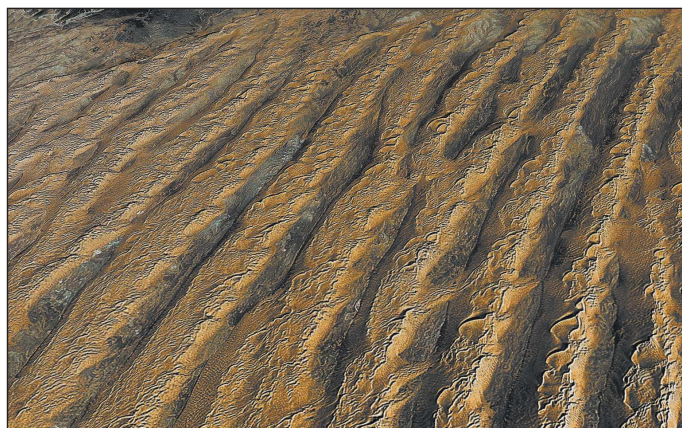


Fig. 2.20. The desert in South Arabia, with surprisingly intricate, high ridges of sand dunes, no less impressive than those of the Taklamakan. At the time of the Prophet Muhammad these inhospitable desert territories were also crossed by local nomads on camels (Google, satellite imagery).



Fig. 2.21. Today, flocks of sheep wander in the same “sandy steppes of the Arabian land,” finding poor foraging with great difficulty (Google).

when Muslim Arabs conquered Jerusalem in 638, Umar ibn Al-Khattab, the Second Rightly-Guided Caliph of Islam, victoriously entered the city on camelback, as was fitting for a warrior and a son of desert.

Another development, which allowed the peoples of the steppe to significantly increase the efficacy of their military force, was the discovery of metal and its subsequent application in the mass-production of weaponry. From an early stage, bows and arrows had a special significance in nomadic warfare and the use of metal in their production had substantial benefits over other materials, such as stone, bone, or fragile flint. For one thing, metalworkers and casters could easily give these objects a more regular, standardized form, more suitable for accuracy over distance. This advantage played an enormously important role in the development of mounted warfare and hit-and-run cavalry tactics, since it was in these contexts that the unequalled skills of the steppe armies manifested themselves most clearly and most often.

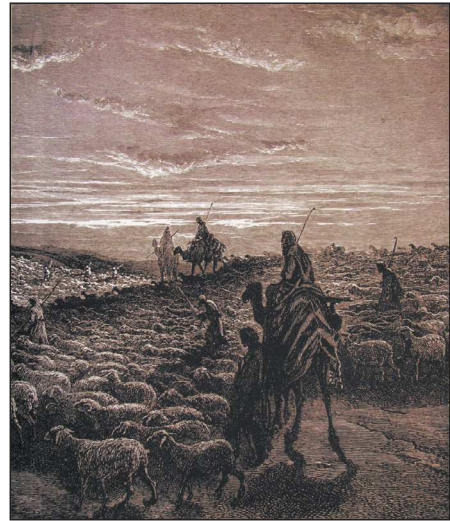


Fig. 2.22. The migration of biblical Abraham to the land of Canaan with his flocks. Fragment of an engraving by Gustave Doré (Books: 30—31).



The cavalry that emerged onto the vast Steppe Belt in the early Bronze Age was soon followed by the development of harnesses to drive light battlefield chariots, which were designed for a driver and a warrior—a bowman, spearman, or swordsman. The status and spread of cavalry and chariot troops gradually increased and

they soon became the main striking force in almost all armies of the world. However, not all these events are so ancient and the role of the cavalry was continually elaborated until the early twentieth century, when cavalry units in armies across the world began to re-equip with motorized vehicles and tanks. During the First World War, cavalry continued to play a prominent role. The chorus of “Rostovite Carriages,” a popular song of the 1930s, describes the horse-army’s racing machine-gun carts as “our pride and beauty!” and even on the eve of the Second World War, Vasily Lebedev-Kumach, a popular Soviet lyricist of the time, felt able to compose the following lyrics:

And the promise of Stalin has come true,
As it always does:
The cavalry defeated everyone
And did not let them hide away.

However, these words were not prophetic and the mounted cavalry of Europe’s armies met a tragic end, extinguished on the battlefields of the Second World War in a matter of months. Perhaps their only consolation was pride in a long and glorious past.

Chapter 3

TRANSITIONS FROM EAST TO WEST: ACROSS THE LAYERS OF THE EURASIAN GEOECOLOGY

The major transitions from north to south, outlined in the previous chapter, allowed us to differentiate three geoeological layers within the vast continent of Eurasia. For thousands of years, these were the domains of three economically distinct human worlds. In this chapter, we turn our attention to transitions along a different axis, running from east to west. These transitions are not seen as differences in subsistence technology, the structuring principal of society, but are visible in so-called “secondary” characteristics, which clothe the primary structure of society. These will form the basis of our comparisons in this chapter. Although these characteristics are nominally “secondary,” they are of critical importance. They effectively define individual societies and cultures, encompassing aspects of physical anthropology, linguistic affiliation, and even differences in ideology or worldview.

Of course, geoeology continues to play an important role in shaping societies, and it is no coincidence that, during the Bronze Age in the Steppe Belt, major transitions in the characteristics we have just described seem to coincide along geographic frontiers. We have already discussed the phenomenon of the Dzungarian Gate, which allowed us to draw a rather precise frontier between two vast areas of the Eurasian Steppe Belt. Key differences in the structure of societies are manifest across such divides. Differences between Eastern and Western societies are discussed in more detail in the second volume of the book, which deals with the historical context of pastoralists in the Steppe Belt and the settled agricultural societies with which they are inextricably interconnected. For that reason, the present chapter is best approached as a basic introduction to this complex subject rather than a comprehensive statement.

The East in Eurocentric Perspective

Oh, East is East and West is West, and never the twain shall meet,
Till Earth and Sky stand presently at God's great Judgment Seat;
But there is neither East nor West, Border, nor Breed, nor Birth,
When two strong men stand face to face, though they come from the ends of the earth!

From The Ballad of East and West by Rudyard Kipling

Although the term “Eurocentric” itself is relatively recent, appearing first as *Euro-pa-zentrisch* in the writings of J. Witte (1914: 214), K. Haushofer (1941: 110), and others at the beginning of the twentieth century, the main postulates of the Eurocentric Worldview were formulated long before (see also: Dorpalen 1984). J. H. Zedler (1734: 1129) captured the sense of superiority widespread in enlightenment thought, in his description of the European continent as “for various reasons preferable to all of the other [parts of the world],” particularly in the characteristics of its climate, landscape, and people! However, the opposition between the barbaric, heathen “East” and the civilized, Christian “West,” implicit in this passage, was at least 2,000 years old by the time it was written. It has roots in the expeditions of Alexander the Great and the preceding Greco-Persian wars during the first millennium BCE, and is apparent in the accounts of the conflict between Rome and Parthia around the turn of the Common Era. It is perhaps most clearly expressed, however, from the seventh and eighth centuries CE onward, as the expansion of Islam brought it into conflict with the Christian world; the beginning of a long and murderous dialogue between these two great civilizations. However, in spite of this long “intellectual” tradition, it is important to realize that the Eurocentric division of Eurasia, described below, is largely artificial. Only by following patterns in human geocology can we begin to reconsider the location and significance of divisions between these allegedly incompatible worlds of East and West. To do this, we must first define a general Eurocentric geography of the East.

Traditionally, the boundary between the East and West follows the line of the Bosphorus and traces the coast of the Mediterranean along the shores of Asia Minor and the Levant. This whole region, including ancient Mesopotamia, tends to be referred to as the Near East by the historical disciplines, though it overlaps significantly with popular definitions of the wider Middle East. This rather more fluid area typically includes the Levant, the Arabian Peninsula, Iraq, and Iran, though it often draws in Afghanistan and the Southern Caucasus as well. In recent years, its definition has even been extended to include areas of conflict and civil unrest along the North African coast. The definition of Central Asia tends to be more stable, encompassing the former Soviet States of Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, and Afghanistan. These countries separate the Middle East from high peaks and plateaus of the Tian Shan, Pamir, and Himalayas, which form the mountainous western borders of Far East. According to the Eurocentric paradigm, only Europe itself is actually the West.

Dividing Lines and Defining Borders: The Mountains between East and West

If we return to geocology, it is quite obvious that some of the boundaries between different parts of Eurasia, defined above, are more easily justified than others. For example, it is quite clear that the mountainous core of Asia creates an uncompromising physical barrier, which separates the southern domain of sedentary agriculture into two unequal halves (fig. 2.2). Extending northward, the spurs of these mountains also subdivide the mobile pastoralist communities in the Eurasian Steppe Belt, who remain connected only along a narrow bottleneck in the steppe and desert between Tian Shan

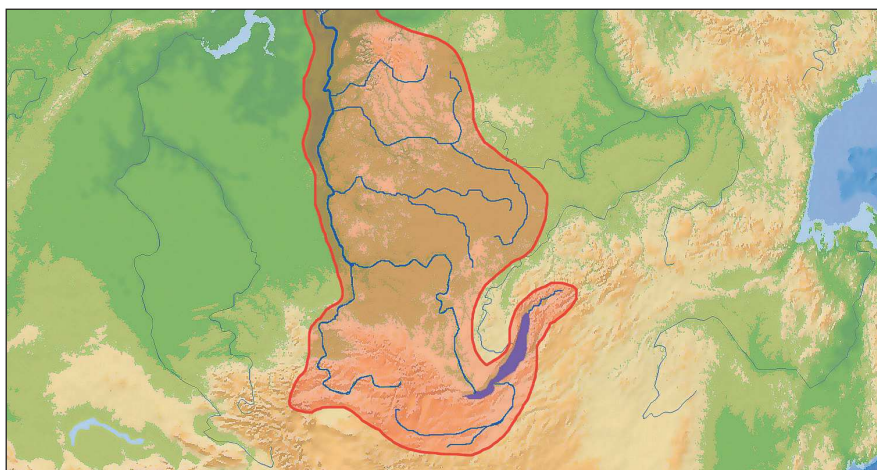


Fig. 3.1. The Yenisei River basin. One is struck by the sharp asymmetry in the situation of its major tributaries: more than 95 percent of the total territory of the basin lies in the mountain and taiga territories of Eastern Siberia, whereas the number of tributaries from the low-lying, and very humid Western Siberia is very low.

and the Sayan-Altai, as discussed in the previous chapter. In the south, the same belt of young mountains also effectively separates the Indian subcontinent from both Central and Eastern Asia.

Far to the north, the hunter-fisher-gatherers of the Boreal forest were also to some extent divided along the same meridional line. In this case, it was not high mountains, but the great Yenisei River, which formed the geoecological frontier, separating the mountainous plateaus of Central and Eastern Siberia from the surprisingly flat and marshy forests to the west (fig. 3.1).



Although we opened this chapter with lines from Kipling, we have given little consideration to the place of South Asia in the Eurocentric scheme. Yet, for many, the Indian subcontinent was (and is) the authentic embodiment of the East. Certainly, both India and its neighbors are predominantly non-Christian countries and, therefore, Eastern, according to many Eurocentric definitions. However, wider discussions are not always so clear-cut and, even within the geoecological approach outlined here, it remains difficult to define the disposition of this large subcontinent. In the north, across the basins of the Indus, Ganges, and Brahmaputra, it is perhaps described best as the peripheral West. However, this frontier, supported by aspects of anthropology, linguistics, ideology, and worldview, remains rather vague and imprecise. More southerly regions of the Deccan Plateau are still less easily defined within the dualistic East-West dichotomy established here.

The Line between Asia and Europe

Wrapped up in the discourse of confrontation, the discussion of the boundary between civilized, democratic Europe and socially “backward,” anti-democratic Asia is obviously

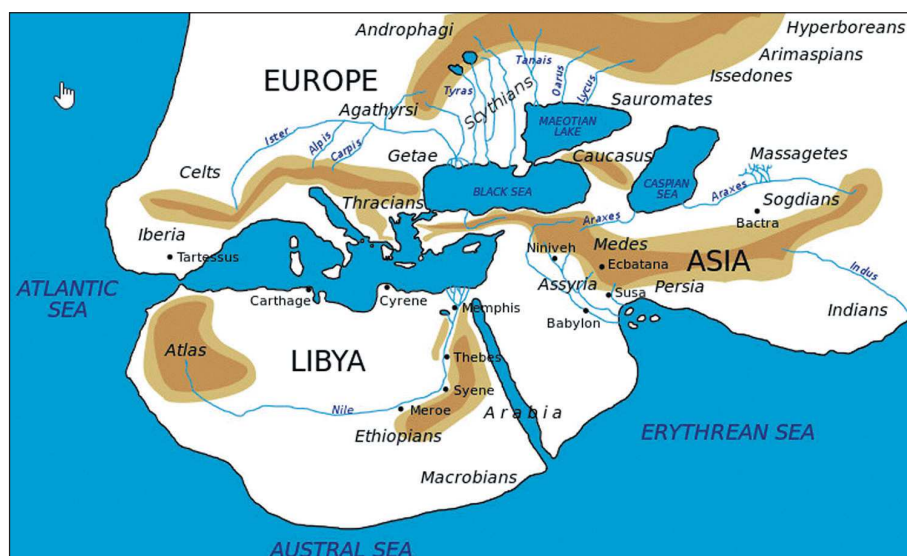


Fig. 3.2. Most probably, this is the map of the world as understood by the “the father of history,” Herodotus.

politically sensitive. Even if we adopt a purely geographical perspective, there is often significant disagreement about the position of this line. Following the remarkable Flemish cartographer Gerardus Mercator (fig. 3.3; 3.4), there is a consensus that in the north of the continent the division follows the line of the Ural Mountains (the Riphean Mountains of earlier texts). However, from a geocological perspective the mountains of this ancient seam between the Eastern European and Siberian cratons seem too low and diffuse to create a meaningful barrier. Further south, the precise position of the borderline becomes increasingly confused. One textbook might refer us to the Kuma-Manych depression, another to the line of the Greater Caucasus, still others to the course of the Ural River, or to Emba, flowing through the Ryn Desert. In 1964, an attempt to unify definitions was made by the International Union of Geographers (fig. 3.5), but the discussion continues. As recently as 2010, the Russian Geographical Society organized an expedition to review the precise location of the borderline between Europe and Asia, beginning in the territory of Kazakhstan (see: Chibiliov, Bogdanov 2011). But has it had any impact? This debate, like the origins of the Eurocentric Worldview, is not a product of recent political history. It has been a point of discussion for more than 2,000 years. Herodotus, writing in the fifth century BCE, had this to say on the issue:

For my part, I cannot but laugh when I see numbers of persons drawing maps of the world without having any reason to guide them; making, as they do, the ocean-stream to run all round the earth, and the earth itself to be an exact circle, as if described by a pair of compasses, with Europe and Asia just of the same size. The truth in this matter I will now proceed to explain in a very few words, making it clear what the real size of each region is, and what shape should be given them... But the boundaries of Europe are quite unknown, and there is not a man who can say whether any sea girds it round either on the north or on the east, while in length it undoubtedly extends as far as both

the other two. For my part, I cannot conceive why three names, and women's names especially, should ever have been given to a tract which is in reality one, nor why the Egyptian Nile and the Colchian Phasis (or according to others the Maeotic Tanais and Cimmerian ferry) should have been fixed upon for the boundary lines; nor can I even say who gave the three tracts their names, or whence they took the epithets. (Herodotus, IV: 8—10) (fig. 3.2)

A thousand years later, in the sixth century CE, the Byzantine chronicler Procopius of Caesarea (History of the Gothic War VIII: 2) also discussed the Cholchian Phasis (the present-day Rioni River), as the border between the two continents:

In this land [the Transcaucasus] there are very high steep mountains, covered with forests. They stretch up to the very Caucasus Mountains. Behind them, to the east, is located Iberia extending as far as the lands of the Persarmenians. The River Phasis runs across the mountains rising high up to the sky. It derives from the Caucasus Mountains and descends in the middle of the "halfmooned" Pontus. Some people believe that in this location the River Phasis serves as a dividing line between the two continents. The lands downstream to the left are considered Asia, and lands downstream to the right—Europe. The settlements of the Lazi are located in the European part and they have no towns, fortifications or villages worth any attention on the other side... According to the local legend, the Golden Fleece, which according to myths of the poets forced the Hellenes to build Argo, was located in that part of Lazica. But in my opinion it is not true at all.

Echoing Herodotus, the great Russian chemist Dmitry Mendeleev (1907: 143) suggested that *"the separation of Europe from Asia is artificial in every respect and, in the course of time, by all means will be undermined or perhaps even disappear."* However, this prediction has not proved entirely correct. The desire to distinguish Europe and Asia has by no means disappeared. In fact, it remains remarkably persistent. The French journalist and philosopher Bernard-Henri Lévy suggested that *"Europe is not a place, but an idea."* If this is the case, it is a very powerful idea. For modern Russians, questions such as: *"Does Russia stand for the ideals of Asia or Europe?"* are very familiar in the popular media.

Since disputes of this kind appear to be endless, a positive contribution to the issue can only be made by approaching the problem from a different angle. In the previous chapters I have tried to relate major ecological zones with social, economic, and cultural differences in human populations. Can a similar method be applied to the borders between Europe and Asia?

We have already mentioned, in passing, that from our geoecological perspective, the accepted Uralian border seems unsatisfactory, its time-weathered mountains providing, at best, a permeable frontier.



Fig. 3.3 Gerard Mercator (1512—1594).



Fig. 3.4. The border between Asia and Europe on the map G. Mercator (1566?); https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gerardus_Mercator.



Fig. 3.5. The border between Europe and Asia in the views and debates of contemporary geographers (1964).

The same might be said of proposed divisions within the Caucasus, which offers no significant obstacle to human or animal movements. This argument can be supported by the fact that there are very few differences between communities living on either side of these questionable intra-continental frontiers. It seems reasonable, therefore, to retain the Steppe Belt as the major division in Eurasia, in spite of its latitudinal character. In the west, the border of the Steppe Belt is defined by the Carpathian Mountains, reaching down to the mouth of the Danube (fig. 3.5), and the socio-economic and cultural differentiation of Europe and Asia should be most apparent in this region. We can extend this dividing line northward along the Carpathian foothills and into the Eastern Baltic region. Creating a zone from the southeastern tip of the Baltic region to the northwestern end of the Black Sea region, not far from the mouth of the Danube (fig. 3.6). This proposed division presents Europe as a gigantic peninsula “glued” to the western tip of Asia, its outer edges carved by the waters that surround it.



Fig. 3.6. The official (2) and the actual (1) border between Europe and Asia in my own understanding.

West and East Beyond the Geoecological Framework

Perhaps, the various divisions on our map of the Eurasian continent will be more apparent if we overlay some of the major “secondary” characteristics of human societies across this area. Together with concrete economic adaptations, these aspects define the essential characteristics of the communities and cultures in the western and eastern parts of Eurasia.

However, in attempting this, it is essential to keep in mind one crucial point: environmental conditions have changed only slightly during the Holocene. Unlike the stable geoecological foundations of Eurasian society, many of the secondary characteristics of communities, from broad anthropological or linguistic affiliation to the specifics of prevailing worldview, have exhibited no such stable diachronic patterns. This instability was conditioned by their absolute association with particular individuals, communities, and cultures and their shifting movements across the map of Eurasia.

Anthropology

Of all these unstable, “secondary” characteristics, those of physical anthropology are perhaps the most persistent. Even today, the human inhabitants of continental Eurasia are divided, fairly precisely, between, so-called Caucasoid populations of western Eurasia (including most of Central Asia, South Asia, and North Africa) and the Mongoloid populations of Eastern Eurasia. Undoubtedly this division dates back far into the Pleistocene, to the Palaeolithic colonists of the Eurasian world.

The discussion of these “racial” types emerged, most famously, in the writings of Christoph Meiners and Johann Friedrich Blumenbach, who worked in parallel at the University of Göttingen in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. From a

modern perspective, Meiners's work is by far the more objectionable, and is often described as early "scientific racism." He made various claims about the anthropological origins and structure of the human races in two major works: *An Outline of the History of Mankind*, published in 1785, and *Researches on the Variations in Human Nature*, published in three volumes in 1811, 1813, and 1815, respectively. Across these works, he defined a simple, binary division of humanity into the Caucasian and Mongolian races. The division between the two structured around the concept of beauty, which seemed to equate to Meiners's own aesthetic preferences, and which was based solely on external characteristics. Nevertheless, Meiners claimed that the Mongoloid race as a whole was weaker in body and spirit, and was unable to compete with the Caucasian race in the moral virtues. Although Meiners's basic terminology was subsequently adopted by one of his colleagues at Göttingen, the younger and more talented researcher Blumenbach, its racist overtones were not.

Blumenbach's own scheme, which combined aspects of Meiners's work with his own ideas, was expounded in 1781 and developed in the definitive, third edition of his doctoral dissertation, *De Generis Humani Varietate Nativa* (*The Natural Variety of Human-kind*) in 1795. Unlike Meiners, he divided humankind into five groups, distinguished principally, though not exclusively, on the basis of consistent differences in the proportions and characteristics of their crania. These groups were the Caucasian, Mongolian, Ethiopian, Malayan, and American races, of which he considered the Caucasian type to be primordial:

I have taken the name of this variety from Mount Caucasus, both because its neighbourhood, and especially its southern slope, produces the most beautiful race of men [sic], I mean the Georgian; and because all psychological reasons converge to this, that in that region, if anywhere, it seems we ought with the greatest probability to place the autochthones of mankind. (Blumenbach 1798: 269)

The other races, he believed, had degenerated from this type, through adaptation to different environmental conditions. This monogenic view was quite different from the ideas of earlier scholars, though the emphasis on beauty as a distinguishing characteristic ties him into the same academic tradition. However, unlike his contemporaries and many later scholars, he explicitly rejected the notion of any inherent racial hierarchy.

Although Blumenbach was certainly a pioneer of both anthropology and zoology, many of his conclusions were a product of their time and have since been discredited. However, his basic description of the races and their distribution, his role in the development of craniometry as a legitimate field of scientific enquiry, and his emphasis on human equality, remain valid and are certainly worthy of note. Unfortunately, not all of his successors were equally progressive.

Linguistics

Although it is also theoretically possible to trace the character and structure of recent language families back into the Pleistocene, even compared with the study of physical anthropology, the procedures and problems are complex, challenging, and ill defined. Perhaps the most difficult challenge of such studies of prehistoric linguistics is the need

to establish a meaningful connection with the archaeological data. Thus far, satisfactory “bridges” between these two lines of evidence have only been established on the basis of documentary evidence, in which the main linguistic characteristics and structures are directly available for study.

In practice, palaeolinguists usually begin by formulating general hypotheses independently of archaeological data, establishing the absolute age of the various branches of reconstructed linguistic phylogenies using glottochronology—a complex (and often contested) technique developed deep within the discipline. Only at this stage is any attempt made to link linguistic and archaeological versions of the past, at which point all the inconsistencies and weak points of the methods begin to reveal themselves.

The main, rather unfortunate and sometimes almost inevitable, barrier is certainly the sharp differences existing between the strictly given material basis of archaeology and very differently formulated, essentially speculative, and largely independent from the archaeological perspective logic of linguistic syntheses. Discrepancies are rather distinctly manifested in the elaborate theory of Indo-European linguistics, explained in detail by its authors, Thomas Gamkrelidze and Vyacheslav Ivanov (1984, vol. 2: 717–740, 748–752, 859–894). The most important elements of the Indo-European protolanguage discovered by the authors allow us to reconstruct almost a complete image of ancient cultures of Indo-European speakers. However, there are a number of justified objections to a simple application of proto Indo-European linguistic characteristics reconstructed by Gamkrelidze and Ivanov as well as glottochronological schemes to the archaeological data. It is no less difficult to link the archaeological specifics with the theory of the so-called Nostratic languages. In the Russian school of palaeolinguistics, this theory was developed by Vladislav Illich-Svitych in his three volume work *The Attempted Comparison of Nostratic Languages* (1971), and continues to be discussed by scholars like Sergei Starostin in provocatively titled papers such as “Humankind Had Only One Proto-language,” published in the journal *Znanie-Sila* in 2003.

According to researchers in glottochronology, the development of the indigenous linguistic mega-family was supposed to take place toward the very end of the Upper Palaeolithic era, about 15,000 years ago. However, the theory of the unity of Nostratic languages does not seem at all convincing from the point of view of cultural polycentrism, the main and obvious principles of which rather clearly manifested themselves at certain times. For these reasons, in defining significant regions in the meridional cross-section of Eurasia from west to east, I will rely on major linguistic families associated with the rather late history.

There is no doubt that the western part of Eurasia was, primarily, the domain of three major language families, of which the Indo-European is certainly the largest. In the past, speakers of Indo-European languages inhabited the two southern zones of Western Eurasia, the domains of the sedentary farmers and the mobile cattle herders. In the south, Indo-European speaking communities lived alongside people speaking languages of the Semitic language family, while in the north, the entire northern forest zone was the domain of Finno-Ugric speakers, languages that are only spoken today in a relatively small number of countries and communities.

In the eastern part of Eurasia, we find the Tungus-Manchurian language family, which is regarded by some linguists as part of the larger Altaic mega-family, encountered primarily in forest and steppe zones of the continent. The southern part of the Eurasian “East” was occupied by Sino-Tibetan language mega-family, the most significant components of which were the languages spoken on the fertile Central Plain of China.

Ideological Systems

Similar divisions can be seen in the characteristic aspects of ideology and worldviews of cultures and cultural communities. While researching these factors, it is clear that there is meaningful traceable interconnection between the dominant religious ideology and the character of its material manifestation. However, the proper interpretation of ideology solely on the basis of ancient artifacts, such as buildings or burial complexes, is rather difficult and cannot always be accepted as either adequate or accurate. The most distinctive differences in these spheres appear with the formation of major world religions, with their explicitly defined systems of belief. For this reason, I will draw my examples from this much later period, though the differences between the East and the West have always manifested themselves most distinctly in the sphere of ideology.

The related, monotheistic “Abrahamic” religions (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam) represent the most significant ideological system in the western part of Eurasia. All these religions are based on the concept of divine revelation, beginning with the legendary figure of Abraham or Ibrahim, the first man to whom the Almighty revealed himself, binding him with a strict testament:

And the Lord said, Shall I hide from Abraham that thing which I do; seeing that Abraham shall surely become a great and mighty nation, and all the nations of the earth shall be blessed in him? (Genesis 18:17—18)

In the Quran, this revelation to Ibrahim comes in a slightly different form:

Lo! Abraham said to his father Azar: “Takest thou idols for gods? For I see thee and thy people in manifest error.” So also did We show Abraham the power and the laws of the heavens and the earth, that he might (with understanding) have certitude. When the night covered him over, He saw a star: He said: “This is my Lord.” But when it set, He said: “I love not those that set.” When he saw the moon rising in splendour, he said: “This is my Lord.” But when the moon set, He said: “Unless my Lord guide me, I shall surely be among those who go astray.” When he saw the sun rising in splendour, he said: “This is my Lord; this is the greatest (of all).” But when the sun set, he said: “O my people! I am indeed free from your (guilt) of giving partners to God. For me, I have set my face, firmly and truly, towards Him Who created the heavens and the earth, and never shall I give partners to God.” (Quran 6:74—79)

The Almighty bestowed revelation also on Isaac’s son, Jacob, who saw the following in a dream:

And he dreamed, and behold a ladder set up on the earth, and the top of it reached to heaven: and behold the angels of God ascending and descending on it. And, behold, the LORD stood above it (fig. 3.7), and said, I [am] the LORD God of Abraham thy father, and the God of Isaac: the land whereon thou liest, to thee will I give it, and to thy seed;

And thy seed shall be as the dust of the earth, and thou shalt spread abroad to the west, and to the east, and to the north, and to the south: and in thee and in thy seed shall all the families of the earth be blessed. And, behold, I [am] with thee, and will keep thee in all [places] whither thou goest, and will bring thee again into this land; for I will not leave thee, until I have done [that] which I have spoken to thee of. And Jacob awaked out of his sleep, and he said, Surely the LORD is in this place; and I knew [it] not. (Genesis 28:12—16)

Extremely important for the Abrahamic religions—especially Christianity and Islam—was to express their unique greatness by means of grandiose temples (fig. 3.8—3.10). In this respect the sacred architectural symbolism of the Eastern Eurasian was more modest and sharply inferior to the West (fig. 3.11—3.13).

The Eurasian East in this regard seemed different. The southern region, inhibited by sedentary agricultural cultures, was presented by three important and distinctly different systems: Confucianism, Daoism, and Buddhism. In my opinion, only Buddhism can be regarded as a religious system. Its opponents, Confucianism and Daoism, were ethical and philosophical systems rather than religious systems. Confucianism was the most “mundane” system among the three. In principle, the Confucian world view concept recognizes as the most significant value the cult of the “ultimately wise” ancestors rather than a cult of earthly rulers, without doubt following the admonition of the “ultimately wise.” Confucius himself believed that his main purpose was not to invent anything, but to transmit the highest wisdom of Heavens and at the same time to believe and venerate the past.

The verses of “The Question of Heaven,” a curious philosophical poem from the most ancient anthology of Chinese poetry, the *Shijing* (“Book of Songs”), seems to encapsulate the differences between the Chinese worldview and canons of the distant West. According to tradition, the initiative of compiling the “Book of Songs” is attributed to Confucius himself:

From the far origin of all antiquity,
Who hands the story down to us?
Before heaven and earth take shape,
How do you delve into what’s there?
When light and dark are still a blur,

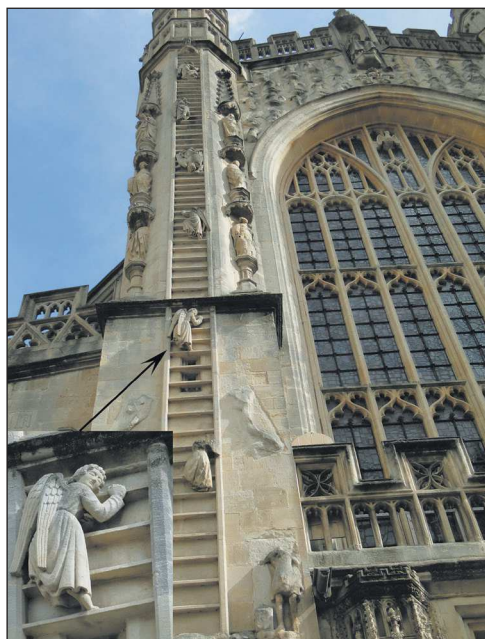


Fig. 3.7. Angels climbing an endless stairway up to the Heavens. Bath Cathedral, Southwestern England.



Fig. 3.8. Panorama of the central part of Jerusalem (Wikipedia; <http://alternativetours-jerusalem.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/12/Jerusalem-Israel.jpg>).



Fig. 3.9. Vatican—the center of Catholicism (Photo: David Liff; <http://ru.wikipedia.org>).



Fig. 3.10. Mecca, Masjid al-Haram at the time of Hajj (Wikipedia; www.iwallhd.com).

Who can see through to their source?
When it's altogether primal chaos,
How do you see the shape of things?
Blazing radiance and utter darkness
And nothing more: how did it happen?
(Hinton 2008)

Buddhism too differs from Western religions so distinctly that many rightly choose not to place its underlying principles in line with the foundations of such religious doctrines as Islam, Christianity, and their forebear, Judaism.

If one considers Buddhism only a religion, it would seem strange. This religion never knew a single church institution (even in a framework of one state) or any other centralizing social institutions but nevertheless has managed to preserve up to nowadays the largest part of its outer characteristics and most importantly—its essence with the man and not a god or idea in the centre even twenty-five centuries later. Each of us is the creator not only of his own fate, but also of the fate of the universe, since only the combination of our deeds, words, and thoughts rules over the tourbillion of individual lives and the world process. In order to accomplish it one should not make sacrifices, but only learn to live in accordance with the common sense, in other words—to find the “golden mean” in everything. Buddha called his revelation the “Middle Way” between the extremes of human existence (for instance between the hunger for pleasures and the complete denial of them). (Androsof 2000: 7)

Buddhism lacks the notion of God, the creator of all living things, an omniscient Supreme Being, who rules over the even the minutiae of the immense world, exercising the highest wisdom, inconceivable to mortals. The Manjusri-mula-tantra translated from Sanskrit into the Tibetan language gives the “primordial?” image of the world, conceived by Tibetan Buddhists (followers of Lama):

In the Satya Yuga epoch a man was strong with his own strength, lived in Heavens and was absolutely free from aging and death. There were no constellations back then. There were no sun and no stars. There were no Gods and there was no Asuras. The first epoch is the peak of time. The tribe did not exist outside of people. There was no end to life. And there was no birth either. There was neither a religious duty, nor hidden spells. People were free from virtue and sin. Personal happiness manifested itself fully. There was neither human behaviour nor deeds. People were pure and did not have their own self. (Pubaev 1991: 205—206)

The Buddhist religion considers the aspiration to attain true enlightenment, which only Buddhas are capable of, as the ultimate mission of the spirit. The Buddhist religious-philosophical system is based on the doctrine of the “Four Noble Truths,” which are about human sufferings, ways to attain enlightenment, and the stages of reaching the highest virtues, leading men to the state of essential happiness and desired nirvana. Gods are unable to compete with Buddha. They are afraid of his excellence, since Buddha becomes the Great Lord of Life in his essential happiness. Having reached ultimate truth through his wanderings and work, Buddha announced his transition from the earthly domain to nirvana to his disciples:

At that moment, gods were unable to withstand the radiance of Buddha, a hermit marked by special characteristics of a supreme being, and fled (Rinchen Drub 1932: 164).

In general, a large number of basic canons of Buddhism are very close to the teaching of Dao. The final, important difference between Western religions and Eastern ideological systems is the absence of any notion of original sin in the latter. According to the canons of the West, even a newly born human already bears the traces of sin and guilt before the Creator, dating back to the fall of humankind and the disobedience of Adam and Eve, and must hourly praise and thank the creator for his divine mercy. Based on this concept all the peoples of these Western religions, as well as of Judaism, the primary ideology of these religious systems, regard their own calamities as a result of the collective sin of humankind in the face of the Almighty. The aforementioned differences can most easily be recognized in contrasting attitudes to nomadic invasions in the historical sources, which Western authors almost universally described as a punishment for grave sins.

Interaction and contact between the adherents of Eastern and Western doctrines were feeble, while the attributes of the spread of Western ideologies in Eastern Eurasia seemed generally rather insignificant. For our subject, the Nestorian teaching was one

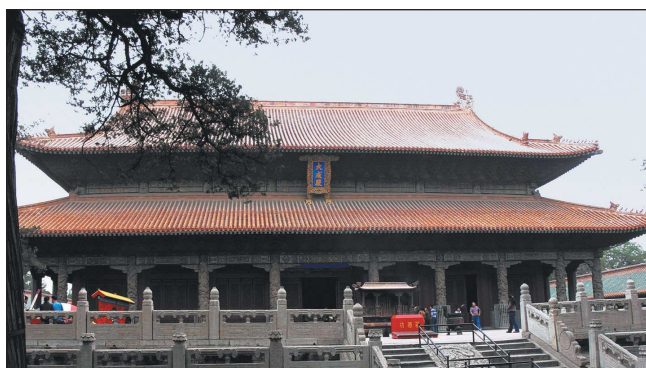


Fig. 3.11. The Temple of Confucius at Qufu (China), the main hall (Wikipedia; en.wikipedia.org).



Fig. 3.12. The Taoist Temple Changchun in the town of Wuhan on the Yangtze River (Wikipedia; www.easytourchina.com).

of the most significant exceptions. Nestorianism, an Eastern branch of Christianity, which, shortly after it was condemned by a number of Ecumenical councils as malicious heresy in the fifth century CE, spread widely among the pastoral peoples of the Turkic Qaganates. In the last period of great transmigration of peoples, or the second half of the first millennium CE, its proselytes even appeared in Tang Dynasty China, though its teachings failed to establish a durable legacy in the East. However, Nestorianism is particularly interesting to us because its brief “golden age” was a direct result of the influence of nomadic peoples of the Steppe Belt, who once again acted as a bridge across the continent.

The advancement of Islam in the East was much more significant, becoming widespread among the Turkic-speaking farmers of Xinjiang, located to the east of the Dzungarian Gate. A much more cohesive “Eastern” enclave of Islam consolidated itself in Bangladesh, in the lower reaches of the Ganges and Brahmaputra rivers. However, this dissemination of Western religious views in the East occurred much later.

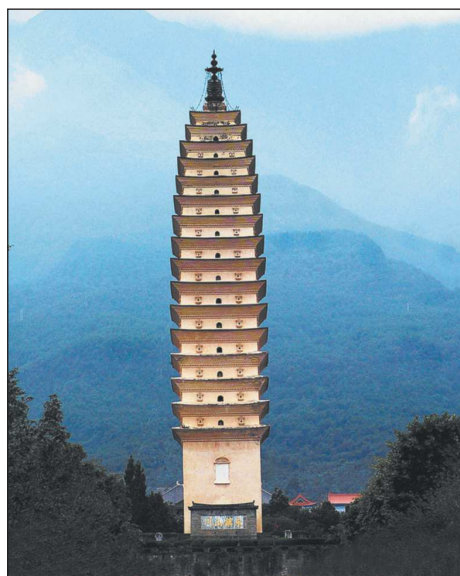


Fig. 3.13. The Buddhist Temple “Three Pagodas” in the city of Dali (South China).

Sculptor Dashi Namdakov

In the light of Shambhala



Part II

THE ARCHAEOLOGY OF NOMADIC CULTURES



A large, stylized, gold-colored Roman numeral II, positioned over a textured, brown, and gold background that resembles a close-up of a rock surface or a textured fabric. The numeral is set within a rectangular frame that is part of a larger, textured background.

Chapter 4

ARCHAEOLOGY AND HISTORY: SOURCES OF DIFFERENCE

The central focus of this book is to explore the role of pastoral societies in the formation, maintenance, and transformation of what I have called the “Megastructure of the Eurasian World.” To achieve this it is necessary to understand that complex relationships existed between these communities of herders and their “neighbors,” whose ways of life were so radically different from their own. It is particularly important that we consider their interactions (social, economic, and military) with the sedentary agrarian civilizations to the south. For this reason, I would like to begin the second part of this book by describing the historical arena of Eurasia in which these dynamic relationships developed and were played out.

Archaeology and History: Pre-Literate and Literate

Human cultures have existed in one form or another for nearly two and a half million years, and it is the main task of archaeologists and historians to discover their remains, describe their characteristics, and define their positions within this long developmental saga. It is important to differentiate these disciplines, which are unequal in chronological coverage but of equal significance in our understanding of the past. Archaeology, which deals with the almost infinite diversity of human artifacts, covers the whole of this vast and diverse period, from the first evidence of hominid tool use to our recent industrial heritage. The remit of historical research, by contrast, covers only the thin surface film of human development, accumulated since the advent of writing around 5,000 years ago (fig. 4.1). However, in spite of its limited time depth, the evidence on the field of history is astonishingly rich and includes many billions of inscriptions, texts, and documents.

Although archaeology continues to play an important role long after the emergence of written records, the value of its contribution tends to be treated as auxiliary; the returns of archaeological research diminishing, as the possibilities of more effective and more reliable text-based research increase. However, the point at which societies become literate varies considerably, and in dealing with large chronological and spatial surveys, particularly where literate and pre-literate societies overlap or intersect, the most fruitful research has involved a combination of both archaeological and historical

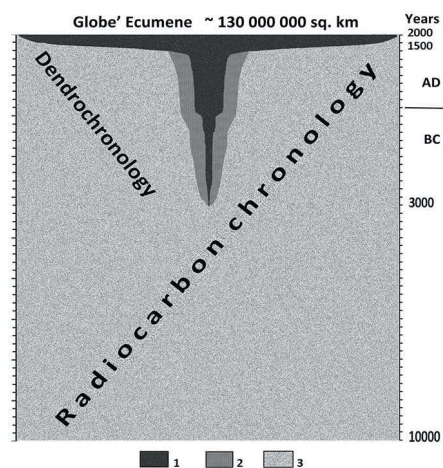


Fig. 4.1. A chart displaying chronological and spatial correlations between the principal methods of calendar dating used in archaeology and history. Conventional notation of the main methods of dating: 1—analysis of written sources; 2—analysis of material sources dated on the basis of written sources; 3—dendrochronology and radiocarbon analysis.

methodologies. This fact is obviously of critical importance in our discussion of the Eurasian world, where literate and non-literate societies existed in parallel for thousands of years (see: Appendix 1).

If we are to understand the relationships between these two kinds of societies (literate and pre-literate), we need first to understand some of the major differences in the sources which relate to them, their rates of accumulation, and the methods by which they are processed and studied.

Understanding Differences in Method and Approach

One of the critical differences between archaeology and history is the way in which the sources available have accumulated. Although new discoveries are being made in both fields, almost all of the major texts—from the early phases of writing to the late Middle Ages—have been well-known to historians for a very long time, often more than a century. Only the Modern Age is characterized by the rapid accumulation of new historical sources at a grand scale, and most of these sources lie beyond the scope of our discussion.

The majority of the written sources known from the period between the first millennium BCE and the first half of the second millennium CE, have already been repeatedly published, republished, and translated into a variety of different languages. Lengthy comments on the texts are provided, and they drawn into various interpretative schemes across the wide field of historical research. Many of the quotations cited in the subsequent chapters, particularly in the third part of this book, pertain to these types of sources: court documents, chronicles, epic poems, and even consciously historical accounts.

It is unrealistic to expect evidence from the “Pre-Literate Era” to be similar, either in character or density. Unlike the discovery of major new textual sources, which is a comparatively rare event, the accumulation of new archaeological materials increases annually, if not exponentially, then in an arithmetic progression. These new finds, collected in surveys or excavated from the cultural layers of settlements or cemeteries around the

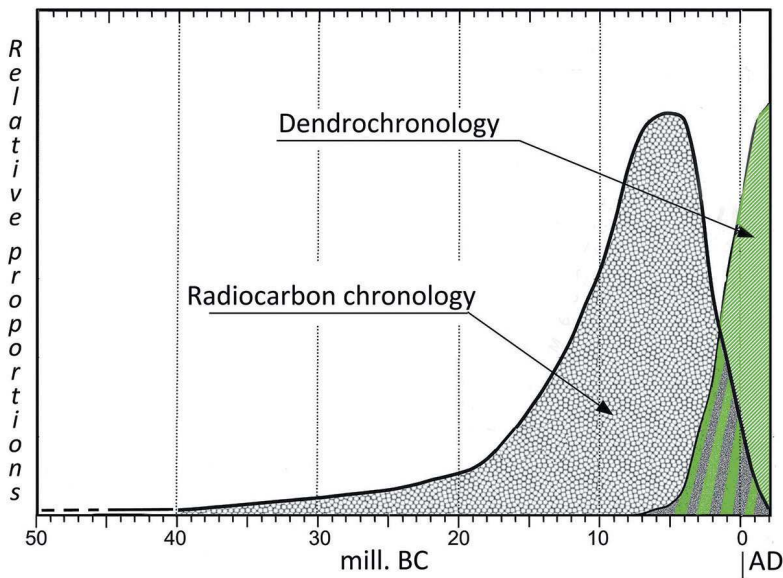


Fig. 4.2. A chart displaying correlation of the methods of radiocarbon dating and dendrochronology with the major historical and archaeological periods.

world, continuously swell archaeological collections and regularly require us to modify our basic interpretations and approaches to the data. Although we cannot not avoid analyzing materials from earlier excavations—which include some of the most important and impressive artifacts from antiquity—our interpretation of these finds should be in line with the latest evidence and approaches.

As a result of the differences in their source materials, the methodological arsenals of historical and archaeological research provide further contrast between the two disciplines. Over the past fifty or sixty years, archaeology has enriched itself wonderfully by borrowing and adapting techniques and methods from the natural sciences, including physics, chemistry, biology, and earth sciences. It has also made full use of wider technical advances in society. Nowadays, these methods are present in almost all fields of archaeological study, from field reconnaissance, excavation, and chronology (fig. 4.2), to artifact analysis, palaeodemography, and population genetics.

At the same time, the arsenal of methodologies used by historians to study and analyze the historical documents has undergone few significant changes, creating an additional barrier between the disciplines, which further hampers cooperation.

This methodological “imbalance” between history and archaeology forces me to divide all the materials discussed in this book into two parts. The first deals with the *Archaeology of Nomadic Cultures* and attempts to characterize the pastoral cultures of Eurasia on the basis of what we know of their sites, monuments, and material culture. This task will occupy us for the remainder of this volume. The second part, entitled *Nomadic Cultures in Eurasian History*, deals primarily with the role of pastoral communities in later periods, and is based primarily on written sources.



Fig. 4.3. The altar of an early Christian underground church (left) and burial catacombs (right) on the Island of Malta.

Interpreting Archaeological Sources

More than 95 percent of all archaeological finds are excavated from cemeteries and habitation sites. The latter are extremely diverse, ranging in size and structural complexity, from cities and towns to farmsteads or campsites. The term also covers more specialized constructions such as palaces, fortresses, temples, workshops, monasteries, and mines. However, it is only rarely possible to study the archaeology of settlements in the steppe, because mobile pastoral communities tend to leave only ephemeral traces of occupation. As a result, our discussion of the archaeology of the Eurasian Steppe will be based heavily on the more abundant material from cemeteries and necropoleis.

Most burial structures have two main elements: an underground chamber and the aboveground structure or complex of structures. Both elements have special significance. In some cultures they were clearly supposed to be in equilibrium. Richly furnished graves beneath the earth were reflected in colossal mounds, stone structures, stelae, or vast burial compounds on the surface. Similarly, modest burials were often mirrored with modest aboveground markers. In many cases, these differences in scale can help to map out the social landscape of the past, though some caution is required. There are many cases where individuals known to be powerful or influential in life were buried in modest graves with almost nothing at all, and others where rich objects indicating the greatness of a deceased were hidden deep underground with almost no evidence of their location on the surface.

Of course, history is filled with examples of people who managed to overcome the shackles of such strict ideological canons or social regulation in order to reveal their special importance to the living. Perhaps this tendency was most strikingly manifested in the Christian world and particularly in Catholicism. For example, it is well-known that the burial rites of the early Christians were modest to the point of austere asceticism (fig. 4.3). Indeed, one of the most important commandments of early Christianity has always been