The Barbarian Empires of the Steppes
Course Guidebook

Professor Kenneth W. Harl
Tulane University
Professor Kenneth W. Harl is Professor of Classical and Byzantine History at Tulane University, where he has taught since 1978. He earned his B.A. from Trinity College and his M.A. and Ph.D. from Yale University.

Professor Harl teaches courses in Greek, Roman, Byzantine, and Crusader history from freshman to graduate levels. A recognized scholar of coins and classical Anatolia, he also takes students to Turkey on excursions and as assistants on excavations of Hellenistic and Roman sites.

Professor Harl has published numerous articles and is the author of Civic Coins and Civic Politics in the Roman East, A.D. 180–275 and Coinage in the Roman Economy, 300 B.C. to A.D. 700. His current work includes publishing the coin discoveries from the excavation of Gordion, Turkey, and a new book on Rome and its Iranian foes. Professor Harl also serves on the editorial board of the American Journal of Archaeology and is a fellow and trustee of the American Numismatic Society.

Professor Harl has twice received Tulane’s coveted Sheldon Hackney Award for Excellence in Teaching (voted on by both faculty and students) and has received the Student Body Award for Excellence in Teaching on multiple occasions. He was also the recipient of Baylor University’s nationwide Robert Foster Cherry Award for Great Teaching. In 2007, he was the Lewis P. Jones Visiting Professor in History at Wofford College.

Professor Harl’s other Great Courses include Alexander the Great and the Macedonian Empire, The Fall of the Pagans and the Origins of Medieval Christianity, The Era of the Crusades, Origins of Great Ancient Civilizations, The World of Byzantium, Great Ancient Civilizations of Asia Minor, Rome and the Barbarians, The Peloponnesian War, and The Vikings.
# Table of Contents

## INTRODUCTION

- Professor Biography ............................................................................ i
- Course Scope ..................................................................................... 1

## LECTURE GUIDES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>LECTURE</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>LECTURE 1</td>
<td>Steppes and Peoples</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LECTURE 2</td>
<td>The Rise of the Steppe Nomads</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LECTURE 3</td>
<td>Early Nomads and China</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LECTURE 4</td>
<td>The Han Emperors and Xiongnu at War</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LECTURE 5</td>
<td>Scythians, Greeks, and Persians</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LECTURE 6</td>
<td>The Parthians</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LECTURE 7</td>
<td>Kushans, Scae, and the Silk Road</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LECTURE 8</td>
<td>Rome and the Sarmatians</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LECTURE 9</td>
<td>Trade across the Tarim Basin</td>
<td>76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LECTURE 10</td>
<td>Buddhism, Manichaeism, and Christianity</td>
<td>84</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table of Contents

LECTURE 11
Rome and the Huns .................................................................93

LECTURE 12
Attila the Hun—Scourge of God .........................................102

LECTURE 13
Sassanid Shahs and the Hephthalites ..................................111

LECTURE 14
The Turks—Transformation of the Steppes .........................119

LECTURE 15
Turkmen Khagans and Tang Emperors .............................127

LECTURE 16
Avars, Bulgars, and Constantinople .................................134

LECTURE 17
Khazar Khagans .................................................................143

LECTURE 18
Pechenegs, Magyars, and Cumans ..................................151

LECTURE 19
Islam and the Caliphate ......................................................159

LECTURE 20
The Clash between Turks and the Caliphate .......................168

LECTURE 21
Muslim Merchants and Mystics in Central Asia .................176

LECTURE 22
The Rise of the Seljuk Turks ..............................................184

LECTURE 23
Turks in Anatolia and India ...............................................193
### Table of Contents

**LECTURE 24**  
The Sultans of Rûm ................................................................. 201

**LECTURE 25**  
The Sultans of Delhi ................................................................. 209

**LECTURE 26**  
Manchurian Warlords and Song Emperors ..................................... 217

**LECTURE 27**  
The Mongols ........................................................................ 226

**LECTURE 28**  
Conquests of Genghis Khan ......................................................... 235

**LECTURE 29**  
Western Mongol Expansion .......................................................... 243

**LECTURE 30**  
Mongol Invasion of the Islamic World ............................................. 252

**LECTURE 31**  
Conquest of Song China ................................................................ 261

**LECTURE 32**  
Pax Mongolica and Cultural Exchange ............................................ 269

**LECTURE 33**  
Conversion and Assimilation ........................................................ 277

**LECTURE 34**  
Tamerlane, Prince of Destruction ................................................... 286

**LECTURE 35**  
Bābur and Mughal India ............................................................... 294

**LECTURE 36**  
Legacy of the Steppes .................................................................. 302
## SUPPLEMENTAL MATERIAL

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Maps</td>
<td>310</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Timeline</td>
<td>312</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Glossary</td>
<td>379</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Biographical Notes</td>
<td>398</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bibliography</td>
<td>443</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The Barbarian Empires of the Steppes

Scope:

Our study begins with a description of the sack of Baghdad by the Mongols under Hulagu, grandson of Genghis Khan, in 1258. The Mongols ended the Abbasid Caliphate—a major shock to the Islamic world. To this day, Muslims regard this event as a catastrophe and a turning point in their history. The incident sums up popular images and stereotypes about the fierce steppe nomads. The course will examine the relationship of the barbarians of the Eurasian steppes with the sedentary civilizations of Europe, the Middle East, India, and China.

Lecture 2 starts with the peopling of the steppes in the Bronze Age, the domestication of the horse and camel, the invention of wheeled vehicles, and the spread of Indo-European speakers (Iranian and Tocharians) over the steppes—and then into Europe, Iran, and India. This was the first major movement on the steppes, and it went from west to east.

Then, we begin to explore the steppe nomads and their interaction with the urban civilizations and each other from about 600 B.C. to 600 A.D. We start with the eastern steppes, discussing Han China and the nomads. Wars and migrations led to the first travels across the steppes from east to west, thus influencing the central and western steppes. The last players in these migrations were the Huns and Hephthalites, the foes of Rome and Sassanid Iran, respectively. These nomads helped to bring a close to antiquity.

Lectures 14 to 25 deal with the steppes in the early Middle Ages, from about 600 to 1200 A.D., that is, before the Mongols. Again, we start in the east, with Tang China and the Turks who emerged on the eastern steppes and spread dramatically across Eurasia, displacing and assimilating Tocharian and Iranian speakers. The Turks apparently devised the stirrup and the composite bow to become dreaded horse archers. We will also deal with the Turkish nomads and Constantinople; these khaganates anticipated the later Golden Horde and played a decisive role with Byzantium and the caliphate.
In Lectures 19 to 25, we concentrate on the relationship between the Turkish-speaking nomads, or Turkmen, and Islam. Once the Turks embraced Islam and entered the Middle East, they assumed the dominant military role ever after and carved out new Islamic worlds in Anatolia and India. In time, Turkish dialects won out over other languages in the cities of Transoxiana. The Battle of Talas in 751 was pivotal, bringing together the Turkmen, Tang China, and the Abbasid caliphate. The Turks, who henceforth dominated the steppes (even under the Mongols), for the first time saw Islam rather than China as the most powerful civilization—a major change.

Lectures 26 to 35 explore the impact of the Mongols. We start with the Chin Dynasty in northern China (the typical Manchurian-Chinese frontier state) and Sung China, scrupulously posing as the heir to Confucian traditions and the Han Empire. This division was exploited by Genghis Khan, who rapidly expanded across the whole of the steppes, and his heirs, notably, his grandsons Khubilai Khan and Batu, who subjected the urban civilizations of Christian Russia, Muslim Iran and Transoxiana, and Sung China. This Pax Mongolica had a major cultural and technological impact. Ironically, it led to the spread of gunpowder that produced the first cannons and handheld firearms, which, when perfected by Christian Europe, put the steppe nomads out of business.

The Russians, starting with Ivan the Terrible, expanded across the steppes and ended the power of nomadic armies. But in the Islamic world, the Ilkhans converted to Islam, and the heirs of Genghis Khan, notably the conquerors Tamerlane and Baybur, ruled two of the great Muslim empires of the early modern age.

We close our course with the end of steppe power after 1500, notably with Ming China, Safavid Iran, and czarist Russia. Yet today, the steppes have again emerged as strategic, especially as the Soviet Union has fragmented and with prospects of separatist movements in Xinjiang.
Mongols, originating from the Eurasian steppe, have been portrayed as civilization’s worst nightmare; in many ways, the Mongols epitomized the typical barbarian. On the other hand, the Mongols were an exceptionally successful people. Genghis Khan and his three grandsons conquered a world empire; in fact, the 13th century is known as the Mongol century. In terms of military organization, logistics, vision of empire, and knowledge of the world, the Mongols surpassed all other previous nomadic peoples on the steppes. This course, *The Barbarian Empires of the Steppes*, is their story.

**The Sack of Baghdad**

- On February 13, 1258, a Mongol army under Hulagu, who was a grandson of Genghis Khan and ruler of the western domains of the Mongol Empire, sacked the city of Baghdad. Muslim chroniclers later reported that for 40 days, blood ran in the streets; 800,000 people may have been killed.

- The sack of the city was seen as a disaster by the Islamic world. It also confirmed every stereotype that civilized, literate societies had about peoples of the Eurasian steppe. Hulagu was no friend of Islam; he was married to two wives who were Nestorian Christians, and he himself was an animist and worshiper of Mongol spirits.

- Since the 9th century, Baghdad had been the intellectual center of the Islamic world. The destruction of Baghdad meant the destruction of the cultural and economic nexus of the entire Islamic world.

- The *caliph* of Baghdad was rewarded by being rolled up in a carpet and trampled to death by Mongolian cavalry. This was the traditional Mongol execution; they feared that if their swords or weapons shed the blood of a ruler, this could have bad repercussions in the animist world.
Two years later, the Mongol army had retreated into central Asia. Baghdad never recovered, however, and has still not regained its role in the Islamic world. New centers of power emerged in the Islamic world as a result of this Mongol sack—first, Cairo and, later, Constantinople, Tehran, and Delhi.

Nomadic Life on the Steppe

- The Mongols were the last of a long tradition of empires of the steppes, going back to the 3rd century B.C. with the Xiongnu in China. Mongols maintained a traditional steppe way of life and warfare that had characterized nomads ever since these people domesticated the horse between 4800 and 4200 B.C.

- Life on the Eurasian steppe was severe, even under the best of conditions. The people of the steppes had to cope with an incredibly harsh climate and were in constant search of pasture land for their animals—goats, cattle, sheep, and above all, horses. Horses were essential for mobility, warfare, and herding. They originally were a form of food, providing both meat and dairy products.

- The people of the steppes were very much centered around their herds, and their social organization reflected this. They lived in kinship groups in homes called yurts, which were tents made of felt and wood.

- The Greek historian Herodotus, in the 5th century B.C., wrote of great caravans of Scythians, or Iranian-speaking nomads, on the steppes of what is today southern Russia. They had a diet consisting of meat, milk, yogurt, and kumis, or fermented mare’s milk.

Trade with Settled Peoples

- Through trade, the nomadic peoples of the steppes were in constant contact with those who lived by agriculture. Thus, the nomads had access to grains, beer and wine, vegetables, all sorts of finished products, salt, and even iron.
The way of life on the Eurasian steppe has remained remarkably consistent for 6,000 years.

- In turn, the nomads traded dairy products, hides, furs, felts, and animals. For example, nomads traded horses to the Chinese because China itself could not produce the type of horses that could carry cavalry.

- In their life on the Eurasian steppe, the nomads evolved certain attitudes. Steppe peoples were suspicious of urban populations—even wary of entering any building with a roof. They believed that to live in a city was to become enslaved to the ways of the Chinese, the Romans, or later, the Muslims of Iran and the Middle East.

- Whatever attitudes and prejudices the people of the steppes had, the settled people returned the favor. Roman, Greek, and Chinese sources, from the earliest times, spoke with fear of these people. In return, the nomads themselves expressed contempt and fear of others.
This interplay between the settled and the nomadic peoples created a frontier zone along the Chinese border, along the borders of the Middle East, and along the borders of Eastern Europe, in which steppe peoples and civilized peoples came to intermix. A particular type of frontier society grew up on those borders—a society that played an important role both for the steppes and the civilized zones.

**Invention of the Saddle and Composite Bow**

- The climate of the Eurasian steppe nourished a population hearty in hunting and war. One can argue that some of the greatest armies ever created were the nomadic warriors of the steppes. In earliest times, they rode light chariots, but from about 900 or 1000 B.C., in the period we call the Iron Age, the Scythians invented a type of wooden saddle that enabled warriors to ride and fight at the same time.

- What’s more, they perfected a form of cavalry warfare that would dominate the battlefields of Eurasia and many civilized zones into the 14th century—a type of warfare that would only become obsolete with the advent of handheld firearms.

- People of the steppes also evolved a composite bow made up of wood, bone, and sinew. By holding the bow in one hand and pulling it, a warrior could launch an arrow with an enormous amount of power, even while on horseback. Based on experiments with modern bows, effective ranges suggest that the cavalry could shoot at least 100 yards. In combat, the enemy would be much closer.

**Cavalry Warfare**

- Adept at cavalry warfare, the nomads would ride up to a foe in groups, launching disciplined attacks. They would shoot a volley of arrows into the opponent’s forces and encourage a chase. The enemy would lose cohesion, and then the horsemen would plow into the disorganized enemy and drive them off the battlefield.

- This strategy, based on stealth, rapidity, and brilliantly controlled fire, gave the nomads a distinct tactical advantage.
The nomads were not particularly well armored; the real value was in the use of the bow. And, eventually, the bowmen were combined with heavy cavalry, armed as lancers, who would push in after the cavalry had broken up the enemy’s organization. In the end, however, victory depended on the horse archers.

Influence of Geography

- The type of warfare that evolved on the steppes was also a function of geography. Geographic conditions dictated a great deal of how steppe nomads lived, how they moved, how they fought, how they traded, and even why they emigrated over the centuries into the settled zones.

- The Eurasian steppe consists of a 6,000-mile-long corridor stretching across Eurasia. When Kublai Khan, the grandson of Genghis Khan, died in 1294, the Mongol Empire stretched from the lower Danube, in the Carpathian Mountains—essentially the grasslands of Hungary today—in a corridor about 400 to 500 miles wide, across the whole of Siberia, ending at the forest of Manchuria.

- To the north were the vast taiga and tundra of Siberia. To the south were the arid deserts that split the central Asian steppes, and to the west were the great forests of Russia and Central Europe.

- The steppe zone has an incredibly harsh climate. Temperatures on the open steppes are extreme and restricted movement for both humans and animals, particularly in the winter.

- As a corridor, the steppes served as a kind of highway for people to move across inner and central Asia. This would have major consequences in the exchange of religions, cultural patterns, and profit-making along the Silk Road. The nomads played a vital role in the cultural exchange that enriched the great civilizations of China, India, the Middle East, and the Mediterranean world in Europe.
Mongol Dynasties
• The central Eurasian steppe areas and associated regions were divided between two separate Mongol dynasties. One was the dynasty of Hulagu, the so-called ilkhans, who ruled Iran, the Karakum Desert, the Kyzyl Kum, part of the steppes around the Aral Sea, and Transoxania.

• Most of the central steppes and the region around the Tarim Basin, with the caravan cities, were ruled by the family of Chagatai, one of the sons of Genghis Khan.

• The Mongolian homeland, the great eastern steppes that stretched from the Xinjiang to Manchuria, was the ancestral land of the Mongols—where Kublai Khan reigned.

Sources and Organization of Our Course
• This course uses a number of sources from the Western, Muslim, and Chinese worlds. An important point to remember is that very seldom do the steppe people speak to us directly; thus, we will have to supplement our information with archaeology and archaeobiology, such as DNA studies.

• Organization of this course falls into three broad chronological spans.
  o The first third of the course will deal with the nomadic steppe peoples from antiquity to 550 A.D. It will begin with the domestication of the horse by the earliest steppe peoples, known as Indo-Europeans, in the Pontic-Caspian steppes. We will carry that story through the interaction of steppe peoples with the civilizations of early China, the Near East, the Greeks, and imperial Rome.

  o The second third of the course will deal with the early Middle Ages. That period was dominated by the spread of Turkish speakers across the steppe zones; today, Turkish is still the language of the steppes.
The third component will deal with the Mongol impact, which began in the 12th century with the career of Genghis Khan. The 13th century is known as the Mongol century; we are still dealing with its ramifications today.

- With this course, you will begin to understand more about the nomadic peoples of the Eurasian steppe beyond the stereotypical image of the barbarian hordes sacking Baghdad. You will come to recognize the central role that these nomadic peoples have played in civilization and the influence and impact they still exercise today.

**Important Terms**

**caliph**: Ruler of the Muslim community. In 661, Muawiya established the first line of hereditary caliphs.

**ilkhans**: Meaning “loyal khan,” the title granted by Kublai Khan to his brother Hulagu in 1260. It was carried by his descendants, the Ilkhanids (1265–1353), who ruled over Iran, Iraq, and Transoxania.

**Scythians**: The general name applied by classical Greeks to the Iranian-speaking nomads on the Eurasian steppe.

**taiga**: Forest zones of Siberia.

**Tarim Basin**: An area that encompasses the valleys of the tributaries of the Tarim River between the Tien Shan and the Tibetan highlands. The central zone comprises the Taklamakan Desert, and the eastern end is dominated by the salt depression of the Lop Nur. Today known as Xinjiang or eastern Turkestan, the region was home to caravan cities on the Silk Road.

**Transoxania**: Lands between the Oxus and Jaxartes rivers; in antiquity, known as Bactria and Sogdiana.

**tundra**: Arctic zones of Siberia.

**Xinjiang**: Eastern Turkestan.
Xiongnu: Altaic-speaking nomads who forged the first nomadic confederacy on the eastern Eurasian steppe. In 56–53 B.C., the Xiongnu divided into the southern and northern Xiongnu.

yurt: The residence and social bonds of the kinship group of a ger.

Names to Know

Chagatai (b. 1183; r. 1227–1242): Mongol khan; the second son of Genghis Khan and Börte and founder of the Chagatai khanate. In 1227, he was assigned the ulus in central Asia, originally comprising the Central Eurasian steppes, Tarim Basin, and Transoxania. He was notorious for his violent temper, but he ruled justly and was praised for his adherence to Mongol traditions. He resented his brother Ögödei, but he supported Töregene as regent in 1241–1242.

Genghis Khan (b. 1162 or 1167; r. 1206–1227): Born Temujin, he was the son of Yesugei (died c. 1171). He was the greatest conqueror of the steppes and founder of the Mongol Empire. In 1180–1204, he defeated his rival, Jamukha, and united the Mongol tribes. In 1206, the kurultai acclaimed Genghis Khan “Universal Lord.” In 1209–1210, he compelled the Emperor Xiangzong (1206–1211) of Xi Xia to submit. In 1211–1216, he wrested northern China from the Jin (Jurchen) Empire. In lightning campaigns, he overthrew the empire of Khwarezm in 1218–1223 and, thus, opened the campaign against the Jin Empire. His generalship and organizational genius place him among the great captains of warfare. By his principal wife, Börte, he had four sons: Jochi, Chagatai, Ögödei, and Tolui.

Herodotus (c. 490–425 B.C.): Known as the father of history. A native of Halicarnassus, he traveled through the Persian Empire and the lands around the Black Sea. He wrote his History to explain the wars between the Greeks and Persians. He gives a detailed account of the nomadic Scythians on the Pontic-Caspian steppes in the fourth book of the History.

Hulagu (b. 1218; r. 1256–1265): Mongol ilkhan; the son of Tolui and founder of the ilkhanate. In 1256–1260, he waged a war of conquest of the Islamic
world, destroying Alamut, the seat of the Assassins, and sacking Baghdad in 1258. He halted his campaign against Mamluk Egypt and withdrew to support his brother Kublai Khan in his civil war against Arigh Böke. Kublai Khan bestowed on Hulagu the rank of *ilkhan*, “loyal khan”—the title held by his successors.

**Kublai Khan** (b. 1215; r. 1260–1294): Mongol khan; the second son of Tolui. Kublai Khan distinguished himself in campaigns against the Jin Empire in 1234–1235 and against Song China in 1257–1259. He was proclaimed khan by the Mongol army in 1260 and defeated his rival brother, Arigh Böke, in the civil war of 1260–1264. In 1268–1279, he completed the conquest of Song China. In 1274 and 1281, he launched two costly, abortive expeditions against Japan. In 1271, he assumed the Chinese temple name Shizu, the first of a new Yuan Dynasty (1271–1368). He founded a new capital, Dadu (Beijing), which Marco Polo called Kanbalu (Xanadu). Kublai Khan ruled through imperial servants of various nationalities rather than the Confucian bureaucratic classes. A convert to Buddhism, he assured the eventual triumph of Buddhism among the Mongol tribes.

**Suggested Reading**

Fyre, *The Heritage of Persia*.

Golden, *Central Asia in World History*.

Herodotus (Marcincola and de Selincourt, trans.), *The Histories*.

Hildinger, *Warriors of the Steppe*.

Saunders, *The History of the Mongol Conquests*.

Sinor, ed., *The Cambridge History of Early Inner Asia*.

**Questions to Consider**

1. Why did the Mongols epitomize the stereotypical ruthless barbarians of the Eurasian steppes? In what ways were the Mongol conquest and empire exceptional?
2. What are the determining geographic and climatic conditions across the Eurasian steppes that have shaped the course of human history? Where were the main points of contact between nomadic peoples and the sedentary literate civilizations based on cities and agriculture? What have been the usual interactions between the two?

3. How did terrain and climate produce a common way of life on the Eurasian steppes? What economic and social strategies did nomadic peoples evolve? How did these conditions lead to a distinct way of war?

4. What advantages did nomadic peoples possess down to the 15th century that allowed them to excel in warfare and trade? Why did they play such a decisive role in economic, religious, and cultural developments?

5. What are the main literary and documentary sources for our study? What prejudices and concerns do these authors of urban civilizations share in describing nomadic peoples? How have archaeology, anthropology, and biological and environmental studies transformed our understanding of these peoples?
The earliest nomads of the Eurasian steppe were those peoples dwelling in the Pontic-Caspian steppes. Because no writing survives from then, we depend on archaeology and linguistics to understand who these people were. In this lecture, we’ll examine the origins and development of the Indo-European language family. We’ll also look at what the archaeology of the area tells us about the landscape, the domestication of the horse, and the shift to nomadism that gave rise to the steppe nomads’ patterns of life and their distinctive way of waging war.

Proto-Indo-European

- The study of Indo-European linguistics has been an occupation of Western scholars since the 18th century. Previously, the Indo-European family of languages was known as the family of Aryan languages (arya means “noble” in Sanskrit). William Jones, a philologist working at the Asiatic Institute in Calcutta, discovered that Sanskrit, Greek, and Latin were related languages, whose common roots were Indo-European.

- An important point in studying languages is that people speaking a particular language can be from a variety of ethnic and racial backgrounds. Nomads, in particular, learn a variety of languages to communicate with trading partners and neighboring areas. In some circumstances, the nomads actually assimilate a larger settled population.

- Scholars who have studied the grammar and phonology of Indo-European determined that at some point, about 5000 B.C., there was a Proto-Indo-European (PIE) language. No one actually spoke Proto-Indo-European; it was essentially created by scholars. However, it gives us an idea of what the parent language is for some 75 percent of the world’s population.
Indo-European

- The oldest written texts in an Indo-European language were in the Hittite or Anatolian language family; those were represented in cuneiform tablets dating between 1650 and 1190 B.C.

- The Anatolian language family probably broke away first. It is speculated that sometime between 4000 and 3500 B.C., the ancestors of these people moved out of the Pontic-Caspian steppes into Asia Minor—what is now Turkey—and brought the Anatolian languages there.

- Another group of languages that broke off after the Anatolian is known as the Tocharian language family. People who spoke this language inhabited the Tarim Basin.

Centum and Satem

- Indo-European gave rise to a more familiar branch of families, the centum branch, which includes Germanic, Celtic, Italic, Greek, and possibly Armenian. The satem branch includes Baltic and Slavic languages and Iranian and Indic languages.

- The difference between centum and satem represents changes in the treatment of certain sounds. For example, the kw sound in Indo-European became a hard k in the western languages (centum is the Latin word for “100”). In the east, that sound weakened to an s (satem means “100” in Sanskrit).

- These languages became differentiated by about 2000 B.C. The other significant point that comes out of the study of the Indo-European language family is not only the relationship of the languages but also the origins and homeland of the original speakers of Proto-Indo-European.

- If we study the common cognates in Indo-European languages, they demonstrate that before the daughter languages broke away, they had a common vocabulary for such words as horse, chariot, wheel, and various steppe animals. As the groups of people broke
off and settled in other areas, distinct versions of the original words evolved.

**Domestication of the Horse**

- Archaeology tells us that around 6500 to 5000 B.C., humans moved onto the Pontic-Caspian steppes and shifted from hunting and gathering food to raising stock. They adopted nomadic patterns of life and domesticated various animals—most importantly, the horse.

- Around 6500 B.C., the vast majority of horses to be domesticated were found on those steppes. Very few horses survived in the rest of Eurasia; the species had died out in North America.

- The domestication of the horse, between about 4800 and 4000 B.C., was vital. Initially, it is speculated, the horse was domesticated for winter food. It was also a source of mare’s milk.

In 6500 B.C., estimates are that 50 percent of all horses were in the steppe zone; it makes sense, therefore, that the early Indo-Europeans domesticated this animal.
• By 4200 B.C., the steppe nomads began to ride horses bareback to help them herd animals. Herding on horseback meant that many more animals could be handled and expanded the range of the nomads.

Invention of the Wheel
• Another crucial invention was the wheel. People from the Russian steppes, identified as the Yamnaya, had learned to harness carts to oxen. The wheel meant people had mobility; they could move all their possessions in vast wagon trains in search of better pastures or to exploit seasonal advantages of water, move away from drought conditions, and find new homes.

• After the technology of carts and wheeled vehicles was perfected, spoked wheels were invented, which led to the light chariot. The light chariot became the weapon extraordinaire of the middle and late Bronze Age, from roughly 2000 to 1200 B.C. These chariots acted as platforms in battle, which gave the nomads a military edge.

Migrations East and West
• By 2500 to 2000 B.C., Indo-European speakers started to migrate both west and east. Migrations west took them into the forest zones of Western and Central Europe, which gave birth to the Germanic and Celtic languages. They also migrated into the Mediterranean world, which gave birth to the Greek language and to the Romance languages.

• Those who stayed in the original steppe zones moved into the forests of Russia and became the ancestors of the Baltic and Slavic peoples. But there was also a great eastern expansion; the majority of Indo-European speakers who spread east spoke a version of the Indo-Iranian languages.

• These people migrated out of their original homeland on the western steppes of the great arm of Eurasia to steppes north of the Aral Sea and then drifted down into Transoxania into regions acquired by the Greeks: Bactria and Margiana. There, they settled and brought
their distinct technology of chariots, use of domesticated horses, and language.

- The complex in Transoxania was the original homeland for the ancestors of Iranian speakers and for the speakers of Indic languages that gave rise to Sanskrit and, eventually, to the languages of modern India: Hindi and Urdu.

**Iranian and Indic Speakers**

- The early Iranian and Indic speakers who had moved into the area of Transoxania and northern Iran were in close association for a long time. Scholars have noted similarities in their two languages and parallels in cultural patterns, such as a sense of caste, or *varna*. They also worshiped many of the same gods.

- They broke off in two directions, one to the west and one to the east, and in so doing evolved into the later Indian and Iranian peoples.

- Among their common features was the horse sacrifice and the use of *soma*, an alcoholic beverage given as an offering to the gods. A branch of these people, generally known as the **Mitanni**, a military elite, moved into northern Iraq. The Mitanni spoke a language very close to Vedic and Avestan Iranian.

**New Techniques of Warfare**

- Migrations during the middle and late Bronze Age brought Indo-European speakers into the central steppes, into Iran, and even into the Middle East. The next major migration of nomadic peoples arose as a result of another pair of breakthroughs: the use of saddles to ride horses in battle and the development of the composite bow.

- These breakthroughs led to the second migration of Indo-Europeans, Iranian speakers, from the central Asian steppes into the Tarim Basin, where the Tocharians had eventually settled. This led to settlements farther east, to the fringes of the Chinese Empire. Scythians, or Iranian speakers from the southern Russian steppes, invaded the historic civilizations.
A group of people known as the Cimmerians apparently crossed over the Caucasus Mountains, invaded provinces of the Assyrian Empire, and smashed into the Phrygian kingdom of King Midas.

There are records of attacks extending from 1716 to 654 B.C. The Cimmerians disrupted the entire political order of the Near East, which tipped the balance to the emperors of the Assyrians, who united the Near East in the early Iron Age.

A Common Steppe Way of Life

In Transoxania, in the central Asian steppes, were a group of people known as the Sacae (or Scyths). A component of people who probably originated from Iran in the Middle East had moved into the Tarim Basin and intermixed with the earlier Tocharian people.

These people, who probably emigrated during the early Bronze Age, now intermixed with a new group of nomads, settled in the caravan cities, adopted civilized ways of life, and melded with the populations of the western zones.

The Iranian speakers, or Scythians, spread their way of nomadic life across the whole of the Eurasian steppe. By 500 B.C., from the lower Danube to the edges of the Manchurian forest, a common steppe nomadic way of life now prevailed.

Persians and Indo-Aryans

Most successful were the Medes and Persians, who came out of Transoxania and settled in Iran. The Persians would go on to build the most successful of the ancient empires, the Achaemenid Empire, which was based on cavalry armies.

Other members of the Indo-Iranian steppe people, the Aryans or Indo-Aryans, moved into India. They overthrew the Indus Valley civilization and moved into the upper Indus area, then into the Ganges basin area. They became the people who eventually blended with the local populations to create classic Indian civilization.
In the next lecture, we will move our focus east to the steppes of Mongolia. We will examine how the Iranian and Tocharian nomads came into contact with China, and the repercussions of their interaction for the great civilizations bordering them.

**Important Terms**

**Achaemenid**: The royal family of the great kings of Persia (559–329 B.C.).

**Anatolian languages**: The first language family to diverge from Proto-Indo-European (4000–3800 B.C.). Speakers of these languages who migrated into Asia Minor circa 2500–2300 B.C. were ancestors of those speaking Hittite, Luwian, and Palaic.

**Aryan**: From Sanskrit *arya*, meaning “noble”: (1) designation of related languages that has been replaced by Indo-European languages; (2) speakers of Sanskrit who entered India circa 1500–1000 B.C.

**centum languages**: Western language families that evolved out of Proto-Indo-European in 3000–2500 B.C. These language families shared common changes in sound and morphology. They include the language families of Celtic, Italic, Germanic, and Balkan Indo-European languages (the putative mother language for later Greek, Macedonian, Phrygian, Illyro-Thracian languages, and possibly Armenian).

**cuneiform**: The first writing system, devised by the Sumerians circa 3500–3100 B.C. The wedge-shaped writing was inscribed by a stylus on wet clay.

**Mitanni**: Indo-Aryan speakers who migrated from Transoxania into northern Mesopotamia in the 16th century B.C., where they established a kingdom over Hurrian- and Amorite-speaking populations. Their language is closely related to Sanskrit and Avestan Iranian.

**Proto-Indo-European (PIE)**: The reconstructed mother language of the Indo-European languages, circa 6000–5000 B.C.

**Sanskrit**: The sacred literary language of Hinduism.
**satem languages**: The eastern branch of language families that evolved out of Proto-Indo-European circa 3000–2500 B.C. The language families share sound changes and morphology. These include the Balto-Slavic and Indo-Iranian language families.

**Tocharian**: The name given to two, possibly three, related Indo-European languages spoken in the Tarim Basin and used to translate Buddhist texts between the 6th and 9th centuries. The ancestors of the Tocharians migrated from the original Indo-European homeland on the Pontic-Caspian steppes to the Altai Mountains and then the Tarim Basin in circa 3700–3500 B.C.

**varna**: From the Sanskrit for “outward appearance,” any one of the original four castes of Indo-Aryan society described in the Rigveda: Brahmins (priests), Kshatriyas (warriors), Vaishyas (merchants), and Shudras (laborers). Only the first three castes were considered twice born; the Shudras represented the subjected populations.

### Name to Know

**Midas** (c. 725–696 B.C.): King of Phrygia. Constructed a great royal tumulus near his capital, Gordion. He was remembered by Greeks for his patronage of the oracle of Delphi. He committed suicide after the Cimmerians, Iranian-speaking nomadic invaders, destroyed his kingdom.

### Suggested Reading

Anthony, *The Horse, the Wheel, and Language*.

Kelenkna, *The Horse in Human History*.

Mallory, *In Search of the Indo-Europeans*.

Mallory and Mair, *The Tarim Mummies*.

Okladnikov, “Inner Asia at the Dawn of History.”

Piggott, *The Earliest Wheeled Vehicles from the Atlantic Coast to the Caspian Sea*. 
Questions to Consider

1. How have philologists reconstructed the ancestral mother language (PIE)? What led to the divergence of this language into so many daughter languages? How has the field of comparative linguistics also contributed to our knowledge about the origins and early culture of the Proto-Indo-European peoples?

2. How has archaeology clarified the world of Proto-Indo-European speakers? Why was the horse domesticated? Why did the peoples of the Yamnaya culture (c. 3600–2300 B.C.) shift to a nomadic way of life?

3. How did the act of migration by the early Anatolian-speaking and Tocharian-speaking peoples transform their language and cultural identity? What was the nature of such migrations in the Bronze Age?

4. What accounted for the success of Indo-Iranian speakers in the middle Bronze Age (2000–1500 B.C.) and Iranian-speaking nomadic peoples in the early Iron Age (c. 1000–500 B.C.)? What were the long-term consequences of their success?

5. Why did chariots in the Bronze Age and cavalry in the early Iron Age prove so decisive in battle?
Interaction between the early steppe nomads and the Chinese had significant repercussions, which led to the movement of people from east to west. DNA has increasingly confirmed that nomadic peoples on the western and northwestern frontiers of early China were probably Indo-European speakers—using Tocharian, or Iranian-based languages. In this lecture, we begin with China because the excellent Chinese records allow us to take a close look at the first significant conqueror of the steppes: Modu Chanyu. He was the leader of the Xiongnu and, in many ways, was the prototype for many of the later conquerors, such as Attila the Hun, Genghis Khan, and Tamerlane.

Early Chinese Civilization

- Chinese civilization, which was based on the cultivation of millet in the Huang He valley and the cultivation of rice in the Yangtze, was in constant contact with nomadic peoples.

- Chinese civilization stretches back into the Neolithic, with the domestication of animals and plants. While China developed a distinct urban, literate civilization, it was clearly subject to outside influences in its formative period. What the archaeology proves is that this civilization owed a great debt to nomadic peoples.

- In tombs from the Shang Dynasty (around 1600 B.C.), jade and other objects from the Tarim Basin have been found. Another important indication of contact is evidence of chariots, horses, and wheels, especially spoked wheels. Chinese warfare was very much based on chariot warfare, yet the technology, even some of the vocabulary, clearly was not originally Chinese.

- Knowledge of horses, the wheel, and light chariots was due to trade or some other kind of contact with Indo-European speakers, probably Iranian or Tocharian nomads.
Origin of Chinese Writing

- Although the point is controversial, copper and bronze technology may have been transmitted by the nomadic peoples from the Near East to China.

- We see, in the early period of Chinese civilization, primitive forms of writing, oracle bones used in divination, particularly from the Shang period. There are also bronze tablets from the Zhou Dynasty that followed. Some scholars claim that these early forms of Chinese writing, using ideograms, could be read in as many as six different languages.

- An important question is whether or not the Chinese invented writing completely on their own. We do not have evidence of that; we do not see early developments from pictures to writing. The idea of writing might have come from the nomads, and then the Chinese put together their own writing system.

- What is key is that early Chinese civilization was the product of a number of different peoples. There may have been contact between the early Chinese and the nomadic peoples known as the Yuezhi. The Yuezhi were the ancestors of the Kushan, the Wusun, and the Xiongnu (hence, “Huns”).

The Xiongnu

- The first emperor of China, Shihuangdi, unified China in the Qin Dynasty, from 246 to 206 B.C. He ordered the burning of books; one speculation is that he was essentially centralizing the cultural and aesthetic traditions of his empire and eliminating other languages besides Chinese.

- Early Chinese rulers, especially the emperors of the Zhou Dynasty, became quite alarmed by the threat of various nomadic peoples, who had learned the art of horseback riding with a saddle and fought with the composite bow.
In the 3rd century B.C., the Xiongnu were the barbarians of most concern to the early Chinese emperors. In our best estimation, the Xiongnu spoke an **Altaic** language.

The Altaic language family consists of two important branches: Turkish and Mongolian languages. Those two languages and their offspring languages are much closer to each other than any of the Indo-European languages. They diverged much later.

**Warring States**

- In the early Iron Age, China consisted of a series of competing states that vied for power in the heartland of China, between the Huang He and the Yangtze. This central area was where the cities and the agricultural wealth were concentrated. It was the core of the classic **Han Dynasty**; everything else was extension.

- As these states battled for supremacy, they were far more concerned about their Chinese neighbors. Nonetheless, the northern states could not neglect their frontiers, and already as early as the 6th century B.C., some of these states were building walls along their northern frontier to protect themselves from the horse-riding nomads.

**Shihuangdi**

- An important change occurred in 246 B.C. One of the contenders, Shihuangdi, united the various states of China into the first empire. By doing so, he took control of China and its urban civilization.

- Shihuangdi was a brutal emperor. He carried out the burning of books; he ruthlessly reordered Chinese civilization along legalist principles. Legalism was one of the philosophical systems that emerged in the period of **Warring States**, along with Confucianism and the more mystical Daoism. He mercilessly mobilized labor. Above all, he had imperial ambitions.

- In contrast to many later Confucian emperors, Shihuangdi put military success at a high value. Now, Chinese expansion went
in different directions—to the northeast, toward Manchuria and Korea, and to the south, to control what we now know as Vietnam.

**Tribal Organization**

- Foremost of concern was the northern frontier, where tribes had been organized under a ruler, known as a *chanyu*, named **Touman**. Touman organized various clans consisting of Altaic speakers—the true Xiongnu—and other associated tribes.

- Turkish and Mongolian tribal structures consisted of the inner tribes of the original confederation, usually speaking the same or closely related languages, and the outer tribes, allies affiliated with the Xiongnu. This sort of organization was first perceived under Touman and his son and successor, **Modu Chanyu**.

- Shihuangdi commissioned his general **Meng Tian** to deal with the nomads. Meng Tian pursued the nomads north, leading a massive army up the valley of the Huang He. He tried to drive them into the arid zones across the Gobi.
- Meng Tian’s notion of victory was to take real estate on the frontier zones, mark it out, and define the northern frontier as China and everything on the other side as barbarian land. In that sense, the expedition was a success; Meng Tian, in fact, may have ordered walls to be linked together, a precursor to the Great Wall.

**A Military Disadvantage**
- Facing an enemy on horseback, Shihuangdi and the next set of emperors, during the Han Dynasty, learned that Chinese horses were just not strong enough to be ridden. The soil in China does not have enough selenium to allow horses to develop the kind of strong bones necessary to carry a mounted warrior. The Chinese had to resort to chariots of two or four horses.

- These chariots were inadequate for fighting nomads on grasslands in arid conditions. From the start, the Chinese found themselves at a military disadvantage. Their heavy infantry, their crossbows, and their chariots were not going to bring a Xiongnu army down in battle.

**Modu Chanyu**
- In 209 B.C., shortly after the death of Shihuangdi, Modu Chanyu came to power. He had an extraordinary reputation in successfully waging warfare, and he proved to be able, not only as a commander but also as an organizer. Modu Chanyu organized the Xiongnu into an illustrious confederation of inner and outer tribes. He was served by two subordinates: the righteous king of the right and the righteous king of the left.

- Modu Chanyu also appreciated the advantages of Chinese civilization. The Xiongnu used Chinese bureaucrats to facilitate trade. They developed a peculiar kind of writing that was clearly in imitation of the Chinese. Some of their political institutions, such as the notion of the mandate of heaven, were influenced by China.

- There was an enormous amount of cultural exchange going in both directions, and the advantages gained by the interaction
with the Chinese allowed the Xiongnu to organize themselves more successfully.

**Gaozu and the Han Dynasty**

- In 206 B.C., **Gaozu**, who originally started off his career as a jailer under the Qin Dynasty, turned rebel and eventually seized the throne and instituted the Han Dynasty.

- The Han Dynasty was the quintessential Confucian state. The first emperor of the Han created the Confucian order as we understand it. The Confucian order will dominate much of our discussion of the eastern sects.

- Gaozu also chose to confront the Xiongnu as a threat. He sent armies north to battle and encountered the same difficulties as his predecessor, Shihuangdi.

- There was an embarrassing defeat in 200 B.C. on the plateau near Mount Baideng, in today’s Shanxi province. The imperial army was badly beaten by the usual nomadic tactics.

**The Five Baits**

- In response, Gaozu shifted from confrontation to courting and accommodation. He developed the tribute system, or what the Chinese called the five baits. This plan was to court the leader of the Xiongnu by the assurance of marriage to a Chinese princess and by promises of silk, rice, and all the commodities that the Xiongnu needed to sustain life.

- If the Chinese could control and regulate trade, they could change raiding to trading and thereby secure their frontier. The five baits became a principle of diplomacy that would reappear in relationships between Chinese dynasties and the nomadic peoples.

**Deteriorating Relationships**

- For the Xiongnu, this was a splendid arrangement. There was no risk of combat, the Han regularly showed up with gifts, and Modu
Chanyu married a Chinese bride. Everything raised his esteem in the eyes of the righteous king of the right, the righteous king of the left, and all his subordinate rulers. This became a pattern of many nomadic conquerors: not to defeat China but to exploit China.

- In turn, the Xiongnu provided vital products to the Chinese—above all, an enormous number of horses—and they secured the trade of the beginning of what is known as the Silk Road.

- However, later Chinese emperors began to chafe under this exchange. For one, it challenged the fiction of the Middle Kingdom. The question was: If the son of heaven truly was the only ruler, why did he have to deal with the Xiongnu ruler as an equal?

- Eventually, the traditions of the Confucian state and the notion of the Middle Kingdom conflicted with the existing relations with the nomads. The arrangement rankled the Mandarin elite so much that the Han emperor Wudi, when he came to the throne about 140 B.C., decided to substitute war for diplomacy. As a result, he embarked on a crusade that was to have major consequences both to the Han Empire and the Xiongnu.

**Important Terms**

**Altaic languages**: A family of languages with common agglutinative grammar and syntax, vowel harmony, and vocabulary. The major branches are Turkic, Mongolian, and Tungusic; Korean and Japanese may also be branches of this language family.

**chanyu**: Meaning “son of endless sky,” this was the title of the ruler of the Xiongnu reported by Han and Song Chinese sources. In the early 5th century, the title was abandoned, and steppe nomadic rulers henceforth styled themselves as khan.

**Han Dynasty**: Rulers of imperial China as the Former or Western Han (206 B.C.–9 A.D.) and then as the restored Later or Eastern Han (25–220).
usurper Wang Mang, who overthrew the Former Han Dynasty, failed to establish his own Xin Dynasty (9–25).

**Oracle bones**: Inscribed divination bones of the Shang Dynasty (1600–1046); they are the first examples of Chinese writing.

**Qin Dynasty**: The dynasty (221–206 B.C.) founded by Shihuangdi (257–210 B.C.), when he unified China in 221 B.C.

**Shang Dynasty**: The first historical dynasty of China (c. 1600–1046 B.C.), centered in the lower and middle Huang He (Yellow River).

**Warring States**: Kingdoms in the period of political disunity in China following the collapse of effective rule by the Zhou Dynasty (481–221 B.C.).

**Yuezhi**: The Chinese name for Tocharian-speaking nomads who dwelled on the central Asian steppes north of the Tarim Basin. In 155 B.C., the Xiongnu drove the Yuezhi west into Ferghana, where Zhang Qian visited them in 128 B.C. These Tocharian speakers, called Da Yuezhi ("Great Yuezhi") were the ancestors of the Kushans.

**Zhou Dynasty**: The second imperial dynasty of China (1045–256 B.C.), ruling in the early Iron Age. After 481 B.C., Zhou emperors lost control over their vassals, and China lapsed into the period of Warring States.

---

**Names to Know**

**Gaozu** (b. 247 B.C.; r. 206–195 B.C.): First Han emperor of China. Overthrew the Qin Dynasty. Born Liu Bang and of humble origin, he preferred negotiation to war with Modu Chanyu after he suffered an embarrassing defeat at Mount Baideng in 200 B.C. Gaozu instituted the tribute system whereby nomadic tribes could be turned into allies dependent on Chinese silk and goods.

**Meng Tian** (d. 210 B.C.): The leading general of the Qin emperor Shihuangdi. In 221 B.C., he led a major expedition against the Xiongnu and
established the empire’s northern frontier. He directed the construction of the continuous Great Wall of China.

**Modu Chanyu** (b. c. 234 B.C.; r. 209–174 B.C.): Succeeded his father, Touman, as chanyu of the Xiongnu. He gave the tribal confederation administrative organization and effective leadership in raiding China, and he defeated the army of Han emperor Gaozu at the Battle of Mount Baideng in 200 B.C. Thereafter, he received gifts and silk from the Han court in return for an alliance and sale of horses to the Han armies.

**Shihuangdi** (b. 259 B.C.; r. 246–210 B.C.): Founded the Qin Dynasty and united the warring states of China. He took strong measures against the Xiongnu and ordered the construction of the Great Wall.

**Touman** (c. 220–209 B.C.): First known chanyu of the Xiongnu; organized the first nomadic confederation on the eastern Eurasian steppe. He warred with the Qin emperor Shihuangdi and with the rival Yuezhi (Tocharians) for control of the Gansu corridor.

---

**Suggested Reading**

Barfield, *The Perilous Frontier*.

Chang, *Shang Civilization*.

Hucker, *China’s Imperial Past*.

Kinoshita and Portal, eds., *The First Emperor*.

Waldron, *The Great Wall of China*.

Ying-shi Yu, “The Hsiung-nu.”

———. *Trade and Expansion in Han China*. 
Questions to Consider

1. How significant were the contributions of steppe nomads to the formation of early Chinese civilization? Why are these contributions, surmised from archaeology, so controversial and politically charged?

2. How successful was the Qin Shi Huang in confronting the threat posed by the Xiongnu? What were the strategic, tactical, and logistical challenges faced by Qin armies operating on the steppes?

3. What accounted for the success of Modu Chanyu in creating a confederacy of steppe nomads? How did Chinese institutions and ideas influence Xiongnu organization and material culture?

4. What were the advantages of the tribute system to Han emperors and the Xiongnu? Who had the superior position in this exchange?
In this lecture, we examine the relationship between the Han Empire of China and the confederacy of the Xiongnu. Wudi, one of the most important of the Han emperors, wanted to control the vital area between the steppes and the Tibetan plateau that linked the Tarim Basin with western China. Although the Han envoy Zhang Qian was captured, his reports provided important information about inner Asia and the movements of tribes from east to west. Wudi was partly successful; his victories committed Chinese emperors to the control of a narrow corridor, the Jade Gate, which would be important to the Silk Road. By 9 A.D., however, the Han Empire had fragmented.

Emperor Wudi
- The Han emperors found the five baits system of tribute humiliating. The Han minister Chao Cuo, who died around 154 B.C., wrote a memorandum to Emperor Wen advising how to battle the Xiongnu instead of courting them. In addition to recommending heavy infantry backed by men with crossbows, he recommended using barbarians as mercenaries and allies.
- By the time the emperor Wudi came to the throne, probably in 141 B.C., he already had a blueprint for how to deal with the northern barbarians.
- Wudi was perhaps the most important emperor of the entire Han Dynasty. Some would see him as the architect of not only the Confucian state but also the letters and aesthetics that we have come to associate with classical China. During his reign, education and mastery of the classics were emphasized. He also saw himself as ruling according to the principles of a well-ordered Confucian state.
- Wudi intended to expand the frontiers of the Confucian state. Not only did he want to destroy the Xiongnu, he also wanted to control
the vital area known as **Gansu**, the Hexi Corridor—a thin corridor of land between the steppes and the Tibetan plateau that linked the Tarim Basin with western China.

- After gaining control of that corridor, the plan was that Wudi would move Chinese armies into the Tarim Basin itself and secure the various caravan cities. They were extremely wealthy cities to tax. The region would also give him access to Ferghana, where the best cavalry horses were found.

**Zhang Qian**

- To seek out barbarian allies, Wudi chose an envoy named **Zhang Qian**. He was dispatched to the **western regions** to seek out allies among barbarian tribes that had been pushed westward by the Xiongnu. The Wusun were a nomadic tribe, possibly Iranian speakers, sometimes identified with the later Alani. Another group of Tocharian speakers, known as the Yuezhi, had also been driven from their homeland by the Xiongnu.

- The idea was to court these tribes into alliance. They had large cavalry armies and could help take on the army of the Xiongnu.

- Unfortunately, Zhang Qian was captured by the Xiongnu and married off to a Xiongnu wife. He lived in captivity for the next 10 years, had a son, and eventually escaped sometime around 128 B.C.

- He wrote up a report when he returned. Zhang Qian’s account proved vital, providing important information about inner Asia, the movements of tribes from east to west, and details about the coordination of arms, that is, cavalry with infantry, archers with standard shock phalanx infantry, and above all, in crossbows.
perceptions of the barbarians by the Han Chinese. Furthermore, he cast light on the Bactrian kingdom and the Parthian Empire.

Costly Campaigns
- In 127 B.C., Wudi began a series of campaigns against the Xiongnu that proved very costly. One particularly capable general was Wei Qing. He not only headed up the campaigns against the Xiongnu but also was involved in bringing many of the western districts under control.

- Wudi mounted a huge army—perhaps up to 100,000 men—and invaded the homeland of the Xiongnu in a series of columns commanded by different generals, with Wei Qing taking the lead.

- There was a systematic effort to hit the Xiongnu settlements. Repeatedly, Wudi’s forces would drive the Xiongnu back into the depths of Mongolia, try to pin them down, round up livestock, and drive off the captives.

- The Han losses were devastating. The Chinese had to cross the Gobi Desert, water was a problem, and they never had enough horses. Each campaign resulted in enormous numbers of deaths; the wars were ruinous and costly. The campaigns cannot be overlooked as having a long-term impact on the Han Dynasty, an impact that eventually led to its breakup and demise.

- On the other hand, the Han won several significant battles and broke, at least temporarily, the power of the Xiongnu. By 114 B.C., Wudi had essentially destroyed the effective field army of the Xiongnu; they were no longer a threat on the northern frontier.

Into the Tarim Basin
- Wudi then mounted a series of expeditions into the Tarim Basin. This proved a momentous turn of events not only for the Han emperors but for all of China. It henceforth committed Chinese emperors to the control of the narrow corridor called the Jade Gate, an important pass on the Silk Road.
Chinese Turkestan, which is today the Uighur Autonomous Region of Xinjiang, was a region with cities and trade routes; it could be incorporated and taxed. The caravan trade was highly lucrative.

The cities submitted to the Chinese, garrisons were built, and tribute was imposed. The envoy Zhang Qian was once again sent out to negotiate with the Wusun trade connections and form alliances to secure the northern frontier and mutual interests between the cities of Chinese Turkestan and the Chinese.

China now acquired an important western extension; control of this western extension would persist throughout Chinese history, into today.

**War of the Heavenly Horses**

- In securing this area, the Han emperors also realized that they were in close contact with Ferghana, the source of the supply of so-called heavenly horses, or cavalry horses.

- Two expeditions were mounted. The war is often known as the War of the Heavenly Horses. By the time the second expedition was over, most of the army had been lost. Only a couple of thousand horses ever made it back to China.

- Nonetheless, Chinese power had moved into a valuable region: a corridor that linked the central steppes with Iran and the Middle East. However, these victories over the Xiongnu and the Tarim Basin, along with the War of the Heavenly Horses, bankrupted the empire.

- Over the next 25 years, the Han emperors had increasing problems meeting their military obligations and faced repeated shortfalls in revenues, debasement of the currency, and increasing opposition within their empire. The nomads themselves did not topple the Han state; the collapse was a result of internal conditions.
Xiongnu Civil War
- In 58 B.C., the Han emperors were able to exploit a civil war within the Xiongnu and essentially disrupt the Xiongnu confederation into two groups. This was a significant change.

- The southern Xiongnu, dwelling immediately along the northern frontier of the Chinese Empire, along the Great Wall, were brought into alliance. The northern Xiongnu, in the Mongolian homeland and farther west into the central steppes, were targeted as the enemy.

- The idea was to use the southern Xiongnu to destroy the northern Xiongnu. The Chinese came to distinguish the inner barbarians from the outer barbarians.

- The inner barbarians dwelled in the Chinese frontier zones and intermixed with the Chinese population to form a kind of martial provincial Chinese society, part Chinese and part nomadic. They were important for the defense of future Chinese empires.

Emperor Guangwu
- The Han Dynasty eventually came to an end in 9 A.D. Wang Mang, a usurper, seized power, ended the Han Dynasty, and issued sweeping reforms. He renewed some of the wars against the northern Xiongnu. However, he alienated forces within China and, in 23 A.D., was overthrown by another member of the Han family, Liu Xiu, who took the dynastic name of Guangwu.

- In 25 A.D., Guangwu had secured power over the Han state and initiated the Later Han Dynasty, which ruled China until 220 A.D. Guangwu and his successors renewed imperial expansion into Korea and Vietnam and recommenced the war against the Xiongnu.

- The Tarim Basin and its important caravan route had fallen out of Chinese control during Wang Mang’s reign. The later Han emperors sent their best generals into the region to drive off the Xiongnu and eventually broke the power of the northern Xiongnu. That confederation finally dissolved somewhere around 50 A.D.
Thereafter, we really have very little evidence that the northern Xiongnu posed a serious threat.

- By 91 A.D., the Tarim Basin was in the power of the Han emperor. In addition, he set in motion a number of important administrative reforms that led to colonization of these regions.

Contact with the West
- In 97 A.D., the Chinese emperor sent out another envoy, Gan Ying. He was sent west to collect information rather than to seek out grand alliances.

- The route Gan Ying took gives us good idea of the routes used for the Silk Road. When Gan Ying arrived at the Persian Gulf, he received reports of a mighty empire to the west, Da Qin. This was the Roman Empire, and we have, for the first time, a Chinese report of the Western world.

The Three Kingdoms
- Han power disintegrated very rapidly in the 2nd century A.D. The empire did not so much fall as fragment into three warring states, often known as the Three Kingdoms.

- The northern kingdom, which was along the Great Wall, depended on nomadic cavalry power. The northern area had close contacts with the steppe peoples.

- The southern kingdoms had the bulk of the silk, rice, cities, and the Confucian tradition. These kingdoms were the true heir to the Confucian Han tradition.

- This dichotomy would persist until a new set of emperors from the frontier northern kingdom reunited China under the great Sui and Tang dynasties.
Important Terms

Gansu Corridor: The narrow zone between the Eurasian steppe and the Tibetan highlands that connects China with the Tarim Basin.

Jade Gate: The name for the strategic Yumen Pass on the Silk Road that connected the Tarim Basin to China.

Parthians: An Iranian-speaking tribe melded into a kingdom, and then a Near East empire of the Arsacid kings (246 B.C.–227 A.D.).

Sui Dynasty: The dynasty (581–618) that reunited China and founded the third great imperial order; immediately succeeded by the Tang Dynasty.

Tang Dynasty: Founded by Emperor Gaozu, the Tang Dynasty (618–907) represented the greatest imperial family of classical China.

Three Kingdoms: The period of political division (220–280) in China after the fall of the eastern Han Dynasty.

western regions: Also called Xiyu, the designation by the Han and Tang emperors of their provinces in the Tarim Basin.

Names to Know

Chao Cuo (c. 200–154 B.C.): Han minister and legalist writer; composed a memorandum to Emperor Wen (180–157 B.C.) in which he presented the strategy for battling the Xiongnu. The emperor Wudi (141–87 B.C.) based his strategy on the recommendations of Chao Cuo.

Gan Ying (fl. 1st c. A.D.): Han envoy; sent by Ban Chao on a mission to contact imperial Rome in 97. He visited Sogdiana, Bactria, Gandhara, and Parthi, and likely reached the shores of the Persian Gulf. He wrote the only Chinese account about the Roman world and gained important new information on the lands of the Near East and Transoxania.
**Guangwu** (b. 5 B.C.; r. 25–57 A.D.): Han emperor; restored the Han Dynasty and moved the capital to Luoyang. He pursued a defensive policy against the nomadic tribes, but he reimposed Chinese rule over what is now Korea and Vietnam.

**Wang Mang** (b. 45 B.C.; r. 9–23 A.D.): Usurper who overthrew the Former Han Dynasty and issued sweeping reforms. He failed to maintain the northern frontier against the Xiongnu.

**Wei Qing** (d. 106 B.C.): Han general of imperial descent; the strategic genius behind the victories over the Xiongnu. He and his nephew Huo Qubing captured the Mobei, the tent capital of Ichise Chanyu. Thereafter, he retired from active service and served as strategic advisor to Emperor Wudi.

**Wen** (b. 541; r. 581–604): Sui emperor; reunited China under the Sui Dynasty (581–618). He promoted Buddhism, secured the northern frontiers by reconstructing the Great Wall, and initiated the Grand Canal.

**Wudi** (b. 157 B.C., r. 141–87 B.C.): Han emperor; presided over the territorial expansion of China. In 133 B.C., Wudi initiated war against Gunchen, *chanyu* of the Xiongnu. By campaigning across the Gobi in 127–119 B.C., his general broke the power of the Xiongnu. In 121–115 B.C., Wudi’s armies imposed Han suzerainty over the western regions (Tarim Basin). His wars, however, proved costly and nearly bankrupted the imperial treasury.

**Zhang Qian** (200–114 B.C.): Official of the Han court. Sent by emperor Wudi as envoy to the Yuezhi (Tocharians) to form an alliance against the Xiongnu in 137–125 B.C. Zhang Qian failed in this mission; twice he was captured by the Xiongnu. His account of the western regions is an invaluable source on the customs of the Xiongnu and the reigns of the *chanyus* Gunchen (161–126 B.C.) and Ichise (126–114 B.C.). His account was incorporated into the *Shiji* (“Historical Records”) by the historian Sima Qian in the 1st century.
Questions to Consider

1. Why did the emperor Wudi favor war over diplomacy in dealing with the Xiongnu? How effective were Han armies? Why did they fail to bring the Xiongnu to decisive battle?

2. How important were the caravan routes and cities of the Tarim Basin to both Xiongnu and Han emperors? What accounted for Han success in controlling the western regions (Xiyu)?

3. What were virtues of the tribute system devised by the Han emperors? Who benefited most from these exchanges? Why did the Xiongnu need access to Chinese markets and tribute? How meaningful was the Xiongnu acknowledgment of the mandate of the Han emperor in practice?

4. How did the Han conceit of ruling the Middle Kingdom influence their dealings with the Xiongnu? What do the accounts of Xuan Zhang in 129–119 B.C. and Ban Chao in 97 A.D. reveal about Chinese attitudes to the nomadic peoples?

5. What were the consequences of the Sino-Xiongnu War (133–154 B.C. and 73–88 A.D.) for China the Eurasian steppes?
In this lecture, we’ll turn to the western and central steppes and the Scythians, an Iranian-speaking nomadic people. The patterns of trade and movement of peoples that evolved with the Scythians would repeat themselves in later periods. In many ways, the Scythians wrote the script for how to dominate the western Eurasian steppe. They accomplished this by exploiting trade and by accommodation with the civilized states. As we will see, however, there was always the danger that the system would be undone by newcomers pressed east because of the wars between Chinese emperors and other nomadic peoples on the eastern steppes.

Western and Central Steppes

- The western and central steppes fell into two main zones. The western zone, the original homeland of the Indo-European speakers, extended from the Volga and Ural rivers in the east to the middle and lower Danube in the west. Importantly, in the western steppes, the rivers run north to south—a fact that accounts for a different history and trade patterns between the nomads and the settled peoples.

- The rivers of Russia flowing into the Black Sea linked the steppe peoples with the populations of the Black Sea, Mediterranean world, and Baltic Sea. The Darial Pass, known as the Gates of Alexander the Great, and the Derbent Pass offered access to the Middle East.

- The central steppe region extended from the Caspian Sea in an arch eastward to the upper banks of the Jaxartes River. Here again, interaction between steppe and settled peoples was much more accessible than on the eastern steppes.

- The river offered grasslands on both sides, and the nomads migrated south into the region we call Transoxania. Transoxania was the focal
point of interaction between nomads and settled peoples. It was known in antiquity as the **upper satrapies** of the Persian Empire.

**Reports of Herodotus**

- These regions were occupied by the Scythians, who dwelled there from the early Iron Age (900–800 B.C.) to around 300 B.C. They are largely known to us through archaeology, but we also have excellent literary sources—most notably, the Greek historian Herodotus.

- In 450 B.C., Herodotus visited the city of Olbia, a Greek colony on the shores of the Black Sea. There, he had direct contact with Scythians.

- Herodotus describes the inner tribes, the royal Scythians, who dominated a wide range of steppes and imposed a loose hegemony. These inner tribes summoned up the various dependent tribes whenever they went to war. The royal Scythians exploited trade, which proved highly significant in bringing the Scythians into contact with the Greeks and the wider Mediterranean world.

- Grain was in great demand in the Greek world. It was grown by the dependent tribes of the Scythians, usually dwelling along the shores of the Black Sea or in the river valleys, and it was extracted as tribute by the inner tribes and exported. The profits, of course, went primarily to the inner tribes, the royal Scythians.
The Scythians

- In addition to grain, the Scythians offered other principal products to the Greek world: flax, timber, amber, and slaves. The Scythians pioneered a unique relationship between the Mediterranean world and the northern worlds of the Baltic, Central Europe, and the Russian forest zones.

- They were the intermediaries who dominated the river systems of Russia. They controlled the transit of goods from the Baltic to the Black Sea or along the Volga to the Caspian Sea. This would be a pattern of trade taken over by later Turkic confederations, notably the Khazars and, finally, by the Mongol Golden Horde itself.

- The Scythians were admired for their military ability, especially as cavalry riders and archers. They were hired as mercenaries by the armies of Greek tyrants who seized power in Greek city-states. They were later hired into the armies of the Hellenistic kings, the successors to Alexander the Great. In Athens, a bodyguard of Scythians was retained as the police force.

- Furthermore, Scythian jewelry and other objects were highly prized. The exchange between Greeks and Scythians was very productive and persisted through the classical age.

King Cyrus of Persia

- The Scythians also came into contact with the peoples of the Near East: in Asia Minor, the Fertile Crescent in Iran, and the upper satrapies known as Transoxania.

- In 550 B.C., Cyrus the Great of Persia deposed his overlords and united most of the Near East, creating the Persian Empire. The Persian Empire, or Achaemenid Empire, was built by Iranian speakers, themselves descendants of nomads who had moved into this area in the middle to late Bronze Age.
• They brought with them the traditions of horses and cavalry. King Cyrus, whose ancestors were nomads, based his armies on mounted horse archers, not infantry.

• The Achaemenid Empire was a great bureaucratic state. The empire had possessions from Europe to the Indus. The Persian kings, as a result of their successes, inherited a long northern frontier, a frontier shared with the Scythian world.

**King Darius I**

• The great king of Persia had to establish a way of dealing with the nomadic peoples. That meant patrolling the borders of the Caucasus and the two great passes that provided entrance into the Near East. Areas that had fallen under the control of the Persian kings were Transoxania, the Jaxartes River, and the western frontier along the Black Sea regions and the lower Danube.

• Around 512 B.C., King **Darius I**, the third of the great kings of Persia, marched an army across a bridge of ships at the Dardanelles, crossed Thrace, and invaded the Pontic-Caspian steppes, attacking the Scythian homeland.

• The expedition proved a fiasco. In many ways, Darius was frustrated by the typical steppe tactics. The Scythians refused to come to battle.

• An anecdote in Herodotus captures the essence of the campaign. The Scythians had sent a message to the Persians: a bird, a mouse, a frog, and five arrows. The immediate reaction of Darius was that this was an indication of surrender, on earth and water.

• One of his ministers, however, said the message meant that unless the Persians can fly like birds, burrow into the ground like mice, or leap across water like frogs, they would be full of Scythian arrows—and that is essentially what happened.
• The Scythians pursued a scorched-earth policy, and eventually, Darius had to call off the expedition. Darius’s experience would be repeated by many armies in the future. Fighting steppe nomads was extremely difficult. Few armies, either in classical or medieval times, ever devised the proper tactics and strategy to deal with the steppe nomad armies.

**Alexander the Great**

• The next ruler to come into contact with the Scythians was Alexander the Great. From 334 to 327 B.C., Alexander, king of Macedon, overran the Persian Empire. He was, without a doubt, one of the mightiest conquerors of all times.

• His success meant that he inherited the frontiers of the Persian Empire and the problem of the nomads. He confronted them on the Danube and, by some clever tactics, beat back a group of them, punished them, and secured the frontier. However, he did not make the mistake of waging a war of conquest against them, as Darius had done.

• Later, Alexander ran into those same Scythians on the Jaxartes River. Already, the cities of this region were engaged in the beginnings of a caravan trade across the Tarim Basin to China. Furthermore, these upper satrapies, or Transoxania, were home to powerful Iranian nobles who had to be brought under control.

• Alexander initially tried to set up a border, establishing military cities, such as Alexandria Eschate. He quickly realized that the best way to deal with nomads was to regulate the migration of tribes and the flow of trade—and then to tax it.

• By the time he withdrew from this region to invade India and, eventually, march home, Alexander had established a number of colonies in Bactria on the Oxus River. These colonies evolved into Greek-style cities under the Greco-Bactrian kingdom. With Alexander’s death in 323 B.C., his empire was partitioned.
Greco-Bactrian Kingdom
- The region known as Bactria, today encompassing parts of Afghanistan and Turkmenistan, eventually broke away under its own rulers. In 250 B.C., Diodotus rebelled and set up his own independent Greek kingdom.

- This kingdom was known in Chinese sources, thanks to the reports of the Han envoy to the Xiongnu, Zhang Qian, who reached the Greco-Bactrian Kingdom somewhere around 128 B.C.

- Zhang Qian was very impressed by this area, which he called Daxia. His account also mentioned other important groups of people. Foremost were the Yuezhi, or Kushans. They probably called themselves Tocharians. Both the Sacae, who were Iranian speakers, and the Kushans were courted by the Chinese as allies.

- Around 140 B.C., the Sacae destroyed the Greco-Bactrian kingdom and subsequently invaded India. But the Tocharians, ancestors of the Kushans, settled in the prosperous area of Bactria. They took over the Greek cities and brought an end to Alexander’s political legacy there, although the Hellenistic civilization persisted.

The Sarmatians
- The collapse of the world of the Persian Empire taken over by Alexander and his successors was caused by movements resulting from the wars between the Xiongnu and Han Chinese.

- The wars had pushed the Tocharian and Iranian speakers westward from their homes on the frontiers of the Chinese Empire. This was a pattern that would repeat itself. The nomadic tribes eventually entered into Transoxania in the Middle East.

- The Scythians, farther west, disappeared sometime in the 3rd century B.C. They gave way to a new people known as the Sarmatians. These were Iranian nomads whom the Romans would encounter. The Sarmatian migration, east to west, is surmised to be yet another spinoff of the Xiongnu-Han conflict.
• The ancestors of the Sarmatians had started out in the regions around the Aral Sea in the central steppes. They migrated westward and, sometime shortly after 300 B.C., took over the Scythian confederation and dominated the western Eurasian steppe.

**Important Terms**

**Golden Horde**: The western part of the Mongol Empire (1240–1502), established by Khan Batu.

**Khazars**: Members of the Ashina clan and western Turkish khaganate, who established their own khaganate (c. 670–967) over the Pontic-Caspian steppes. The Khazar court converted to Judaism in the late 8th century. Circa 965–967, the Khazar capital was sacked by Prince Svyatoslav of Kiev and the Pechenegs.

**Names to Know**

**Alexander III, the Great** (b. 356 B.C., r. 336–323 B.C.): King of Macedon; son of Philip II (359–336 B.C.) and the Epirote princess Olympias (375–316 B.C.); arguably the greatest commander in history. In 334–329 B.C., he conquered the Achaemenid Empire and defeated King Darius III of Persia (336–329 B.C.). He subdued Bactria and Sogdiana (Transoxania) in 329–327 B.C. and the Indus Valley in 327–325 B.C. Alexander defeated the nomadic Saeae, secured the Upper Satrapies (Bactria and Sogdiana), and established a frontier on the upper Jaxartes. His Greco-Macedonian military colonies in the Upper Satrapies were the basis for the Greco-Bactrian kingdom (c. 250–125 B.C.).

**Cyrus the Great** (b. c. 590 B.C., r. 559–530 B.C.): Achaemenid king; founded the Persian Empire, conquering Lydia in 546 B.C. and Babylonia in 539 B.C. He was hailed in classical sources as the greatest conqueror before Alexander the Great. He was killed in a frontier war against the Massagetai, a Scythian tribe, north of the Jaxartes River.

**Darius I** (b. c. 550 B.C.; r. 521–486 B.C.): Achaemenid king of Persia; succeeded to the throne during the Great Revolt of 522–521 B.C. He
organized the satrapies of the Persian Empire and built the capital of Persepolis. In 515 or 512 B.C., he waged unsuccessful war against the Scythians on the Pontic-Caspian steppes.


### Suggested Reading

Cribb and Herrmann, eds., *After Alexander.*

Herodotus (de Selincourt, trans.), *The Histories.*

Frye, *The Heritage of Central Asia.*

Fuller, *The Generalship of Alexander the Great.*

Holt, *Alexander the Great and Bactria.*

Melyukova, “The Scythians and Samartians.”

Reder and Treiser, *Scythian Gold.*

Sulimirski and Taylor, “The Scythians.”

Tarn, *The Greeks in Bactria and India.*

### Questions to Consider

1. What accounted for the success of the Scythians? How was trade conducted, and how did it enrich and transform Scythian society?

2. In what ways was Scythian contact with Greeks and Persians comparable to the later exchanges between the Xiongnu and Han China? In what significant ways did it differ?

3. Why did the Persian kings Cyrus and Darius I fare so poorly in fighting the Scythians? What accounted for the success of Alexander the Great? What were Alexander’s strategic aims in the Upper Satrapies (Transoxiana)? Did his frontier policy promise long-term success?
4. What was the relationship between the Greco-Bactrian kings and their subjects with the Scythian nomads in the 3rd and 2nd centuries B.C.? How did this contact contribute to increasing trade across the Tarim Basin that linked the Hellenistic world and Han China?
In this lecture, we will study the Parthians, the Iranian-speaking nomadic peoples who were an offshoot of the Scythians. The Parthians were remarkably versatile and successful for 400 years. They ruled Iran and the wider Middle East from horseback. They were interlopers, but by a judicious combination of diplomacy with the Romans and the Kushans, by promoting the Silk Road through their domains, and by coming to terms with the existing populations, they created the first nomadic empire in the Near East ruled from the steppes. Their culture provided a model for the later and more successful nomads from the steppes, the Seljuk Turks.

**Seleucid Kings**
- Between 247 and 129 B.C., the Parthians carved out a large empire stretching from what is Iraq today into parts of Afghanistan and Turkmenistan. They wrested control of the Iranian heartland from the Seleucid kings.

- The Seleucid kings were a family of Macedonian generals who had fought with Alexander the Great. In 312 B.C., the founder, King Seleucus, took the title king of Babylon, and he and his successors ruled over the Asian sections of the empire of Alexander.

**The Parthians**
- In 247 B.C., the Arsacid kings of Parthia—governors in the Seleucid Empire—asserted their independence. It had been increasingly difficult for Seleucid kings to keep control over distant provinces. In one area along the northern frontier, there was a tribe of Iranian speakers known as the Parni who migrated into the northern districts of Iran. They exploited the Seleucid weakness to create their own principality.

- Two brothers, Arsaces and Tiridates, carved out a realm. From Arsaces, we get the name Arsacid. The son of the first Arsaces,
Arsaces II, who ruled between 211 and 191 B.C., united various groups in that region and took the name Parthian.

- Arsaces II was an astute and adroit king, who considered himself a vassal of the Seleucid king, Antiochus III. Antiochus marched off to India and eventually made his way back to the Mediterranean world.

- Unfortunately, Antiochus’s activities came to the attention of Rome, and in 190 B.C., the Romans destroyed his army at the Battle of Magnesia. This was a great victory that demonstrated the superiority of the Roman legion over the Macedonian phalanx. Seleucid power began to fragment rapidly thereafter, which presented an opportunity for the Parthian rulers to assert their independence.

Mithradates I

- The turning point came during the reign of a king known as Mithradates I. Mithradates had several important achievements to his name.

- In 140 B.C., he decisively defeated and captured Demetrius II, the Seleucid king. That victory assured that the Parthian kings would gain control of Iran, particularly the ancient lands of Media and Persia.

- Increasingly, the Parthian kings came to assume many of the roles of the king of Persia. Mithradates defeated the Greek kings ruling in Bactria.

- Although the Seleucids tried to make a comeback in 129 B.C., the Parthian kings eventually came to rule the eastern half of the former Seleucid Empire. It was a stunning achievement by nomads.

- The reign of Mithradates also marked another important turning point. From now on, the Parthian kings ruled not only the nomadic peoples along the northern frontier of the Iranian world but also the heartland of Iran itself and the wealthy cities of Babylonia, including the city of Babylon.
Parthian Silver Coins

- The Parthian kings began to change the way they represented themselves, as we see on Parthian silver coins. These silver coins have come down to us in great numbers.

- The coins document how the Parthians, nomadic invaders, came to terms with the traditions of a bureaucratic state. It is significant, for instance, that the Chinese envoy Zhang Qian remarked how impressive Parthian silver coins are because they carry the portraits of kings.

- The coins acted as an important record and guide to Parthian political and cultural pretentions. Starting with Mithradates I, royal portraits were increasingly modeled after Seleucid kings.

- On the coins, the Parthian king discards the traditional nomadic felt cap and begins to wear the diadem—the pearl headdress used in ancient Persian royalty, which was adopted by Alexander the Great and many of the Hellenistic monarchs.

- It is also significant that the coins carry their inscriptions in Greek, which was recognized as an administrative and commercial language across much of the Near East.

- This tradition persisted on Parthian coinage to the end of the dynasty, 227 A.D., when they were defeated and overthrown by a native Persian dynasty, the Sassanids. The Sassanids restored the traditional Persian bureaucratic state and eliminated Parthian interlopers.

Lateral Succession

- The Parthians proved themselves adept conquerors and employed some of the techniques Modu Chanyu used in building his confederation of the Xiongnu.

- The Parthian king came to terms with numerous rulers within his empire, with the kings of Persia, with rulers in Mesopotamia, and with rulers on the eastern frontiers. The Parthian king
invested these lesser kings with titles and ruled them much like a tribal confederation.

- In particular, in the eastern areas, where the Parthian kings faced serious threats from the Sacae and the Kushan emperors, they entrusted control to one of the leading families, known as the Suren family.

- This was a hereditary group of commanders who ruled as a combination of local princes and satraps, as well as marshal commanders of the Arsacid armies. A member of the Suren family defeated the Roman army at Carrhae in 53 B.C.

- The Parthians were always children of the steppes. One could argue that they ruled their Iranian Empire from horseback. That meant that they also practiced lateral succession. There was no strict succession from father to son.

- When an Arsacid king died, the next senior male relative was in the best position to take over. That always risks the danger of civil war, particularly if there were several possible candidates. This is what plagued the confederacy of the Xiongnu, which the later Han emperors exploited. It is a weakness we see in the Parthian state.

**Four Eurasian Empires**

- The Parthians, through their conquests, gained an important segment of the Silk Road, and they reaped great profits from it. While they themselves did not engage in trade, their subjects did.

- The Parthians, however, had a major strategic problem. If we look at the political world order in the year 1 A.D., there were four great Eurasian empires: the Han Empire of China, the Kushan Empire of central Asia and north India, the Roman Empire in the Mediterranean world, and the Parthian state. The other empires exerted constant pressure on the Parthian state.
The Roman Empire

- On their western frontier, the Parthians faced a ruthless and dangerous opponent: Rome. In 69 B.C., **Lucius Licinius Lucullus** won the Battle of Tigranocerta in one of the greatest Roman victories. That battle made Rome the arbiter of the Middle East. Henceforth, Roman power stretched to the Euphrates.

- The Romans, in 53 B.C., under **Marcus Licinius Crassus**, attempted to conquer the Parthian Empire. That ended in a disaster. The Suren, using a combination of heavy cavalry and horse archers, lured the legions of Crassus onto the battlefield of Carrhae and wiped out a Roman army of some 50,000.

- It was a major disgrace for the Romans, and it assured that the Parthians could keep the upper Euphrates as their frontier. It also taught the Romans to respect Parthian cavalry on the plains and grassland of the Middle East and Iran and the high tableland of Armenia.

- That victory presaged a new set of relationships between Rome and the Parthians. The Romans wanted revenge. However, the emperor **Augustus**, after settling the Roman revolution and consolidating and creating the Roman Empire, preferred to negotiate rather than to invade.

- By a diplomatic settlement in 20 B.C., Augustus regained the lost honor of Rome by recovering whatever captives were left from Carrhae, as well as the legionary standards.

- The diplomatic arrangement by Augustus suited both empires. The Parthians had not the means to conquer Rome. The Romans, on the other hand, really did not have the means to conquer the Parthians, although Rome in many ways was the superior military power.

**War of Armenian Succession**

- The diplomatic arrangements of Augustus were maintained for almost 75 years, when in 54 A.D., a war erupted with the ruling
king of Parthia, **Vologeses I**, who tried to put his brother on the throne of Armenia. This led to a war of the Armenian succession, and it, too, ended in a diplomatic settlement.

- The king of Armenia would be a Parthian prince crowned by Rome. Both states could rest satisfied that Armenia was protected. It was the borderland and the route between the two empires, as well as the entrance ramp for the barbarians coming off that steppe highway over the Caucasus.

- It was in the joint interest of the Romans and Parthians to maintain a peace settlement. There were successive wars against the Romans, but the campaigns waged by Rome against the Parthians ultimately contributed to the undermining of the Arsacid state.

**The Sassanid Empire**

- The Romans picked up important real estate in the Middle East and emerged from these wars as the dominant power. The weakening of the Parthian state in the end would come to plague the Romans, however.

- In 227 A.D., the Parthians were overthrown by a rebellion headed by none other than their vassal king of Persia, who defeated and killed the last Parthian king and proclaimed a new neo-Persian Empire, the Sassanid Empire.

- The Sassanid Empire was a bureaucratic state that was Zoroastrian in faith and committed to the reconquest of all the domains of the older Persian Empire, including the eastern half of the Roman world. The Romans were far better off dealing with the Parthians than they ever were with the Sassanid shahs.
**Important Terms**

**Arsacid**: The royal family of the kings of Parthia (246 B.C.–227 A.D.).

**Sassanid**: The dynasty of Zoroastrian shahs of the neo-Persian Empire (227–651).

**Suren**: The hereditary commander of the Drangiana and Arachosia (today, western Afghanistan and Pakistan). The Suren had the right to crown the Arsacid king of Parthia.

**Antiochus III, the Great** (b. c. 241 B.C.; r. 223–187 B.C.): Seleucid king. Restored the power of his empire. In 309–203 B.C., he conducted an eastern expedition and received the homage of the Parthian prince Arsaces II and the Greco-Bactrian king Euthydemus. At the Battle of Panium in 200 B.C., he defeated the Ptolemaic army, conquering Phoenicia, Coele-Syria, and Judaea. He was decisively defeated by the Roman consul Lucius Cornelius Scipio Asiaticus at Magnesia in 190 B.C. Thereafter, the Seleucid Empire fragmented.

**Arsaces I** (246–211 B.C.): Prince of the Iranian-speaking tribe Parni and founder of the Arsacid Dynasty in northeastern Iran. His descendants ruled as the kings of Parthia.

**Arsaces II** (211–191 B.C.): King of Parthia and a vassal of the Seleucid kings. In 190 B.C., he asserted his independence after the Romans decisively defeated the Seleucid king Antiochus III (223–187 B.C.) at the Battle of Magnesia.

**Augustus (Gaius Julius Caesar Octavianus)** (b. 63 B.C., r. 27 B.C.–14 A.D.): Roman emperor; the nephew and adopted son of Julius Caesar (101–44 B.C.). Augustus ended nearly 60 years of civil war and, in 27 B.C., founded the principate.
Crassus, Marcus Licinius (115–53 B.C.): Roman senator and consul in 70 and 55 B.C.; a leading commander of the republic and a member of the First Triumvirate. He was defeated and slain by the Parthians at the Battle of Carrhae in 53 B.C.

Demetrius II Nicator (b. c. 160 B.C.; r. 147–141 B.C., 129–125 B.C.): Seleucid king and son of Demetrius I Soter (161–150 B.C.). This dashing monarch was defeated and captured by the Parthian king Mithradates I in 141 B.C. Demetrius lived in gilded captivity at the Arsacid court and married the sister of Phraates II. In 129 B.C., King Phraates II, at war with Demetrius’s brother Antiochus VII, released Demetrius to raise a rebellion in Syria. Demetrius regained his throne but failed to restore Seleucid power.

Lucullus, Lucius Licinius (118–56 B.C.): Consul in 74 B.C.; assumed the command as proconsul against Mithradates VI, king of Pontus, in 73–66 B.C. In 69 B.C., his victory at Tigranocerta over King Tigranes II of Armenia and Mithradates VI made Rome the premier power in the Near East.

Mithradates I (171–138 B.C.): King of Parthia, defeated and captured the Seleucid king Demetrius II in 140 B.C. and then the Greco-Bactrian king Eucratides. He conquered Media, Persia, Mesopotamia, Margiana, and Aria.

Seleucus I Nicator (b. 358 B.C.; r. 312–281 B.C.): Macedonian noble and general. A minor figure in the initial succession wars after the death of Alexander the Great in 323–321 B.C. In 320 B.C., he obtained the satrapy of Babylonia, and between 312 and 281 B.C., he fell heir to the Asia domains of Alexander’s empire.

Vologeses I (51–78): Arsacid king of Parthia. Supported his brother Tiridates to the throne of Armenia in a war against Rome. In 66, he concluded a peace with the emperor Nero, whereby Tiridates retained the Armenian throne but recognized the hegemony of Rome.
Suggested Reading

Curtis and Stewart, eds., *The Age of the Parthians*.
Debevoise, *A Political History of Parthia*.
Frye, *The Heritage of Persia*.
Isaac, *The Limits of Empire*.
Shavegan, *Arsacids and Sasanians*.
Tacitus (Grant, trans.), *Annals of Imperial Rome*.
Yarshater, ed., *The Cambridge History of Iran*.

Questions to Consider

1. What factors led to the emergence of the Parthians as heirs to the eastern lands of the Seleucid Empire? What were the decisive points in the Parthian conquests?

2. In what did the Arsacid kings remain nomadic warriors, ruling their empire from horseback? What institutions of their subject peoples did the Arsacid kings adapt?

3. How did the Arscid kings promote commerce and culture? What contributions did they make to the development of the Silk Road? In what ways were they philhellenic kings? In what ways did they pose as the heirs to the Achaemenid kings of Persia? Why are coins such an important sources about Parthian political ideology?

4. How should the Parthian achievement be evaluated? In what ways did the Parthians anticipate the Sejuk Turks?
Kushans, Sacae, and the Silk Road  
Lecture 7

In this lecture, we’ll look at two nomadic peoples: the Sacae and the Kushans. While the Parthian kings were conquering Iran and Mesopotamia, these peoples were moving to the east of them in Transoxiana and, ultimately, in India, and these migrations were extremely important. The Tocharians were driven west and smashed into the Sacae, who were dwelling in the valley of the Jaxartes in Ferghana. About 140 B.C., the Sacae then moved into Transoxiana and ultimately ended up in India. About a decade later the Tocharian speakers essentially followed the route of the Sacae and also arrived in India. These migrations led to the rise of important kingdoms in India and the great Kushan emperors.

The Sacae

- The Sacae were an Iranian-speaking people. Classical sources usually identify them with the Scythians. We have depictions of them as early as the reign of King Darius on the Behistun Rock. They undoubtedly had been dwelling on the central steppes since the early Iron Age, from about 900 to 600 B.C.

- Some of the Sacae had moved east and southeast. They settled in the southwestern corner of the Tarim Basin, particularly around the city of Khotan. The Sacae established a symbiosis with the cities of Sogdiana and Bactria, the two districts of Transoxiana in the ancient period.
  - The Sogdians, also an Iranian-speaking people, lived in towns and were engaged in farming. They inhabited an important city called Maracanda.

  - Bactria was at the south end of Transoxiana, in the upper valley of the Oxus River. It was densely populated, with cities and agriculture.
• These two areas were collectively called the Upper Satrapies. They came under the control of Alexander the Great in 329/328 B.C., and Alexander quickly learned that the only way to secure Transoxiana was to win the elites of the cities, the merchant princes. He also found that he could regulate the movement of the nomads but not stop it.
  o Alexander initially tried to set up fortifications on the Jaxartes. That would’ve prevented the Sacae from crossing over and engaging in trade with the cities and the agriculturalists of Transoxiana.

  o When those cities rebelled against Alexander, they called in their nomadic allies. This would be a common pattern in Transoxiana. Both Iranian-style cities and Greek cities needed contact with the steppes, particularly to obtain horses and camels.

• Somewhere around 145/140 B.C., this symbiosis fell apart. The Sacae were forced to leave their homes and migrate into Transoxiana. They probably came from several routes and disrupted the Bactrian kingdom along the way. They ended up on the borders of what is today southeastern Iran, the region of Sistan.

• These migrations were catastrophic for the Greek cities, which existed not only in Bactria but also in northern India, all tracing their origins back to colonies of Alexander the Great. Many of these cities fell to the Sacae. The Sacae are probably responsible for extinguishing the political legacy of Alexander the Great, but they embraced the Hellenistic culture.

• We have limited information about the Sacae, sometimes called Indo-Sacae or Indo-Scythians. We have a number of coins that bear a strange mixture of both Greek and Indian elements in their iconography. One of the most important kings we know from the coins is Azes, who ruled from perhaps from 57 B.C. to around 30 B.C.
Tocharian Speakers

- The Kushans, Tocharian speakers, are first discussed in Chinese sources and eventually moved west. They were noticed by Greek sources and discussed in Buddhist sources, particularly their greatest emperor Kanishka, who ruled in the early 2nd century A.D. and was remembered as a convert to Buddhism.

- The nomadic peoples known as the Yuezhi were a people on the western borders of China, just above the Gansu corridor. They had been in early contact with China and had absorbed a great deal of Chinese civilization. They were perhaps behind the earliest trade from the Tarim Basin around Khotan to the early Shang emperors, then later, the Zhou Dynasty. They were still an important force in the time of the Han.

- These Tocharian speakers were quite formidable. Our diplomat in 128 B.C. and reported that they were a great power. A number of defeats had steadily driven these Tocharian speakers west, out of the orbit of China and essentially into Transoxiana. Once they showed up in Transoxiana, they pushed the Sacae south and southeast into India and into Transoxiana in eastern Iran.

- These Tocharians quickly took over the Greek cities of Bactria and began issuing coins. They embraced Hellenic culture and followed some of the same routes as the Sacae. They clearly were a confederation of five tribes, participating in some kind of partnership, with a rotating leader among the tribal rulers.

- One of these early rulers issued coins in the Greek style. The coins show a man clearly from the steppes, with evidence of the ritual deforming of the head as a child to result in a high forehead.

Sources on the Kushans

- Until recently, we were in the dark about how these nomads turned themselves into the Kushan emperors. But an unusual set of sources has come to our assistance. The key source is an important
inscription found in 1993 near the site of Rabatak, a town in Afghanistan today.

- This monumental inscription was set up by the Kushan emperor Kanishka I. It provides us with a list of four important Kushan emperors: Kujula Kadphises, who ruled in the early 1\textsuperscript{st} century A.D.; his son, Vima Taktu; another king known as Vima Kadphises; and finally, Kanishka himself. From other sources, we know that Kanishka’s son was Huvishka.

- These emperors collectively stretched throughout most of the 1\textsuperscript{st} and 2\textsuperscript{nd} centuries A.D. They are contemporary with the Roman emperors from Tiberius to Marcus Aurelius.

- The inscription also tells us that Kanishka switched from the official language of Greek to an Aryan language, which could have been Bactrian, an Iranian language, or a vernacular of Sanskrit. This was the first conscious effort in the early 2\textsuperscript{nd} century A.D. to create a Kushan Empire without dependence on Greek.

- Further, the inscription tells us that Kanishka set up images of his ancestors to worship and that the various ancient Iranian gods were invoked, particularly the goddess Nana.

- In addition to the inscription, we have a gallery of portraits of these emperors on stunning coins, particularly gold coins, which began to be issued in the reign of Vima Kadphises. The reverses of the coins show various gods and inscriptions. The coins dovetail with the inscription beautifully.

- The emperors are often depicted with halos and carrying ceremonial maces. Sometimes, they are shown in portrait; other times, as standing figures at sacrifice. The inscriptions are in both Greek and the Kharosthi script, which was used to write a vernacular of Sanskrit. Their titles are clearly those of great power and divinity.
Interestingly, this greatness is proclaimed by rulers who are wearing traditional steppe nomadic costumes. They have clearly been exposed to Chinese civilization and are projecting themselves essentially as the nomadic version of the Son of Heaven.

The coins also show an array of gods. One of the most frequently seen is Oesho, an old Iranian god. He’s shown with the attributes of the Greek god Heracles, but he closely resembles Shiva. The Bactrian goddess Nana appears virtually as Tyche, the Greek goddess of good fortune. Some coins show seated figures who may be the Buddha.

- The coins and inscription together now allow us to get some sense of the boundaries that these five emperors ruled over.
  - Starting with the first emperor, Kujula Kadphises, the Kushans came over the Hindu Kush and began to conquer the Indus Valley. That was not finished until probably the end of the 1st century A.D.
  - By the time of Kanishka’s reign in the early 2nd century A.D., the Kushan Empire extended from the Jaxartes and beyond to the cities of the Tarim Basin, across Transoxiana, Afghanistan, the Indus Valley, and most of the Ganges. This emperor ruled over a vast territory, including the cities on the middle Ganges where many of the important Buddhist sites were located.

**The Kushan Emperors**
- It is now clear that Kanishka, who was fondly remembered in Buddhist texts, built a state which was ultimately on par with the early Mauryan Empire, the empire of Ashoka. The Kushan Empire was an Indian empire plus parts of the central Asian steppes and Transoxiana. In some ways, it also anticipated the great empire of the Mughal.
- The Kushan emperors were also behind the development of the Silk Road, which became the first great international trade system. They
controlled the middle portion of those routes that linked the Middle East and Rome with China. In so doing, they encouraged the development of cities and enabled the dissemination of Buddhism across the Silk Road, where it would become the second great cultural influence on the steppes after China.

- In addition, the Kushan emperors embraced the Greek arts, and under their auspices, the art of Gandhara developed. This is a composite of Indian and Greek traditions that produced the first great images of the Buddha, seen on the great gates of the stupa at Sanchi.

- Under the Kushans, Buddhism transformed itself into a universal religion and, in the process, won East Asia. Ironically, at the same time, the Kushans began to lose their homeland in India. The Kushan Empire fell to the Gupta emperors in the 4th century, who mounted a recovery of Hinduism.
Bactria: Today, northern Afghanistan. This is a fertile region of the upper Oxus River. Its principal city, Bactra, was the nexus of routes of the Silk Road between central Asia and India.

Kushans: Tocharian speakers who forged an empire embracing the central Asian steppes, Transoxania, and northern India (30–230). They promoted Buddhism and trade along the Silk Road.


Mughal Empire: The last Muslim empire (1526–1857) in India; established by Babur (1526–1530), a descendant of both Genghis Khan and Tamerlane.

Rabatak: The site in Afghanistan where a Kushan royal inscription in the Bactrian language was discovered in 1993. The Kushan emperor Kanishka I (127–147) gives his genealogy and names the tutelary gods of the empire.

Sacae: An eastern branch of the Scythians dwelling on the central Asian steppes. In 145–135 B.C., they migrated across Sogdiana and Bactria into the Helmand Valley, then via the Bolan Pass into India in the early 1st century B.C., where they were known as the Indo-Scythians.

Sogdiana: Lands of northern Transoxania and the Fergana Valley; the Sogdians spoke an eastern Iranian language that was long the commercial language of the Silk Road.

Upper Satrapies: The Greek designation of the satrapies of Bactria and Sogdiana (Transoxania) in the Achaemenid Empire of Persia (550–329 B.C.).
Lecture 7: Kushans, Sacae, and the Silk Road

Names to Know

**Azes I** (c. 58–38 B.C.): Indo-Scythian king, conquered the Indus valley, and was remembered by Buddhists, who took his year of accession as the first year for reckoning by the Vikrama era.

**Huvishka** (147–180): Kushan emperor, succeeded Kanishka I. He consolidated Kushan rule in India and patronized Buddhism and the leading Hindu cults. His coinage reveals that he venerated all the gods of his empire.

**Kanishka** (127–140): Fourth Kushan emperor; revered as convert to Buddhism, although he was more likely a patron who promoted favorable conditions for the spread of Buddhism into central Asia and Han China. He is credited, anachronistically, by a later Buddhist tradition with summoning a Fourth Buddhist Council in 78.

**Kujula Kadphises** (30–80): Kushan emperor; crossed the Hindu Kush and conquered Taxila and Punjab. He forged a confederation of the Tocharian tribes in Bactria into a bureaucratic state. He is hailed in the Rabatak inscription as the founder of the Kushan royal family.

**Vima Kadphises** (105–127): Kushan emperor; received envoys from the Roman emperor Trajan. He extended Kushan domains in India and introduced gold coinage.

**Vima Taktu** (80–105): Kushan emperor; the son and successor of Kujula Kadphises. He is known from the Rabatak inscription and minted an extensive coinage but without the royal name.

Suggested Reading

Frye, *The Heritage of Central Asia from Antiquity to the Turkish Expansion*.

Gupta and Kulashreshtha, *Kuśāṇa Coins and History*.

Hill, *Through the Jade Gate to Rome*.

Mallory and Mair, *The Tarim Mummies*.
Narain, “Indo-Europeans in Inner Asia.”
Tarn, *The Greeks in India and Bactria*.

**Questions to Consider**

1. Why did the rise of the Xiongnu on the eastern Eurasian steppes in the 2nd century B.C. generate the first major migrations from east to west? What were the natures of these migrations? How did migrations change or create new identities?

2. Why did the Sacae migrate into India around 145 to 125 B.C.? What impact did they have on the cities of the Sind and Gandhara?

3. How did the Tocharian-speaking tribes known to the Chinese as the Yuezhi turn themselves into the imperial Kushans between the late 1st century B.C. and the early 1st century A.D.?

4. Why did the Kushan emperors pursue such generous policies to their diverse subjects? What accounted for the cultural diversity and changes in the Kushan Empire? How was Buddhism transformed from an Indian into a world religion?
In this lecture, we’ll look at a group of people known as the Sarmatians. They were Iranian speakers, remote kinsmen to the Parthians and the Sacae; however, they operated on the steppes immediately to the west. They came to dominate the Pontic-Caspian steppes, which was the original homeland of the Indo-European speakers. These Sarmatians appear in classical sources starting in the beginning of the 2nd century B.C. Later, they controlled important trade from the Baltic to the Black Sea. Even more so than the Scythians, the Sarmatians were prized as mercenaries.

The Sarmatians in the Southwestern Steppes

- The Sarmatians originally dwelled in the lands to the east of the Ural Mountains, that is, the steppes north of the Caspian and Aral seas. They moved into the important corridor stretching from the northern shores of the Caspian to the Aral Sea and the upper Jaxartes, probably in response to local circumstances, such as the need for pastures, severe droughts, and clashes with neighboring tribes.

- The region occupied by the Sarmatians is what we today call the southwestern steppes. On its southern borders is the Black Sea. To the north stretch the great forest zones of Russia, leading to the Baltic. Not only was this area ideal for stock raising, but it also encompassed the great river systems of the Volga, the Don, the Dnieper, the Dniester, and the Bug.

- The Sarmatians came to control trade going from the Baltic to the Black Sea or the Caspian Sea. They exploited the transit of this trade by taxing and levying customs on it, by providing protection, and by offering markets themselves. All the products of the forest came through essentially Sarmatian domains and headed to the Greek ports on the Black Sea, particularly the cities of the Crimea.
The Sarmatians were prized as soldiers, especially as mercenaries, even more so than the Scythians. We have a number of reports of Sarmatian mercenaries being hired in Hellenistic and even Roman armies. As a result of mercenary service, many Sarmatians intermarried with Greek or Greek-speaking populations and brought back a taste of goods from the Mediterranean world. This taste, of course, fueled additional trade.

After 100 B.C., the Sarmatians began to move out of the Pontic-Caspian steppes. We know them from several different tribes that are offshoots of the Sarmatians and are recognized as independent groups in Greek and Roman sources. Among these are the Jazyges, the Roxolani, and the Alani.

The first two groups traveled westward and southwestward, moving into the region known today known as the Dobruja, which is the delta of the Danube, a heavy marsh area that’s attractive for nomads herding their animals during the winter. They also occupied eastern Hungary and the Hungarian plains. The Sarmatians were essentially looking for new grasslands and new areas to exploit. Undoubtedly, they subjected and assimilated preexisting populations.

Military Technology and Tactics

The Roxolani and the Jazyges came into contact with central European cultures, including the Dacians, who dominated most of what is today eastern Romania and the Carpathian Mountains. They also came into contact with Celts and, eventually, Germanic peoples. As a result, there was a great deal of trade and intermarriage, and the Sarmatians gained an enormous amount of metal technology. The Sarmatian aristocracy amassed great wealth, with which they acquired horses and arms.

By the time of the emperor Trajan (98–117 A.D.), the Sarmatian tribes that bordered on the Danube provinces had long been in contact with Romans and the Germanic peoples of central Europe. Reliefs from this era show that the Sarmatians still depended on the mounted horse archer.
Lecture 8: Rome and the Sarmatians

Sarmatian forces were likely 90 percent cavalry, with a significant 10 percent heavy cavalry.

They wore heavy lamellar armor, that is, armor with overlapping sets of scales, and were called by the Greeks and Romans cataphracti. They also wore distinct conical helmets.

- Steppe cavalry armies were no longer just horse archers. They probably started with an attack by horse archers, but they also carried well-mounted cataphracts, that is, lancers who could enter a melee and destroy the enemy close up.

- In any Sarmatian cavalry force, out of 10,000 cavalry, enemies could expect to encounter some 1,000 to 2,000 heavily armed cataphracti. In fact, the Romans themselves, starting in the 2nd century A.D., mounted such cavalry and hired Sarmatians as Roman auxiliary units.

Roman reliefs, such as those on Trajan’s Column, offer a number of depictions of Sarmatian cavalry.
• The Sarmatians also had an effective system of regimental commands. The Romans tell us that Sarmatians went into battle in military units distinctly designated by such symbols as inflated leather dragons, or *dracones*. These dragons were ultimately of Chinese origin and were used by the Sarmatians to spur troops into battle.

• We have an unusually good tactical manual by a man named Arrian that deals with a group of Sarmatians who attacked into Roman Asia Minor, or Anatolia.
  o Arrian commanded a force of about 11,500 legionaries and assorted auxiliary units. He had with him some 5,000 cavalry. He records a detailed order of march and explains how the battle line was drawn up, with legionaries in the center, supported by wings of advanced auxiliary infantry with many archers. The back two lines were archers, infantry, and horse archers shooting over the infantry as a barrage.
  
  o The Roman cavalry was held in reserve, and the idea was to draw in the nomadic cavalry and punish it with the fire of the infantry archers. When the nomads closed, the Roman cavalry would charge out, encircle, and destroy them. Such tactics required remarkable discipline and perfect timing, but it was the only response that an army from an urban civilization could come up with to gain any kind of tactical advantage against the nomadic cavalry.

Sarmatians and Romans
• On the upper and lower Danube, the Sarmatian tribes essentially became Roman allies. The Romans understood that in order to patrol these frontiers, they had to control trade routes and access, and they had to regulate settlement and the use of pasture lands within the Roman world. They did not try to draw a Maginot Line but, instead, built a set of highways and fortified blocks to regulate the flow of barbarians over the frontier.
  o The tombstone of a Roman governor of the province of Moesia, Tiberius Plautius Aelianus, relates how he broke
up an attack by the Roxolani and took measures to secure the province thereafter.

- He took hostages from the barbarians north of the Danube and selectively settled 100,000 of these people as colonists. Some Dacians and probably some Germanic peoples were also scattered through the provinces to relieve the pressure that would cause them to migrate.

- This sensible policy was pursued for the next 200 years along the Roman frontiers.

- The Alans seem to have migrated out of the Pontic-Caspian steppe region into the Kuban and the grasslands just north of the Caucasus. They proved to be a common foe to both the Romans and the Parthians.

- We have a number of reports of Alan attacks; a famous one in 72 A.D. was recorded by Josephus, in which perhaps 10,000 or 20,000 Alans crossed over into the Caucasus and raided across Mesopotamia.

- The passes through the Caucasus became extremely important, and the Romans and Partians came to some kind of agreement over Armenia, in part to ensure that the routes leading over the Caucasus and into Armenia were monitored and regulated as early warning signals for attacks of Alans and other nomadic peoples.

- The Sarmatians, well-armed and with excellent trade routes, became addicted to Roman goods and never acquired the kind of great leader who could weld the various tribes into an effective confederation. The Sarmatian tribes never gained much of a political sense of how to organize themselves against the Romans.

- In part, this is explained by the fact that the Romans never dealt with barbarians in the same way that other peoples did. The Roman
emperor was a military dictator who represented a republic, and he was still a magistrate. The idea of sending princesses to marry Sarmatian rulers, as the Chinese had sent to the Xiongnu, was impossible under Roman law. Thus, there was never the same kind of political exchange between Rome and the Sarmatians that would allow the Sarmatian tribes to learn the political institutions and organization that other nomadic tribes did by exposure to the Chinese or Persian empires. The tribes remained divided.

- In the 3rd century A.D., a people from Scandinavia, the Goths, left their home in Scandinavia. They traveled the trade routes onto the Pontic-Caspian steppes, and starting from about 235 to 250 A.D., began to raid and attack the Roman Empire. They subjected the Sarmatian peoples, turning them into clients and allies. They learned horse-riding techniques from the Sarmatians and set up a loose confederacy on the Pontic-Caspian steppes, but the Goths, too, never managed to establish an effective political organization. They were driven back in the 3rd century and remained in a loose Roman alliance down to the arrival of the Huns in 375.

- The Roman experience with Sarmatian tribes seems to have led the Romans to a sense of complacency and self-satisfaction. These tribes were relatively easy to divide and conquer and to manipulate into following traditional Roman policies; the Romans merely had to regulate their trade. When a serious threat came off the steppes in the 370s from the east, Rome didn’t know how to handle a great steppe confederacy. That situation would contribute directly to the breakup of the western Roman Empire in the 5th century A.D.

**Important Terms**

**Alani**: Sarmatians who settled on the steppes north of the Caucasus in the 1st century B.C. In A.D. 375, many Alani submitted to the Huns, while others, along with Goths, migrated west. The Alani entered the Roman Empire as allies of the Vandals in 406–407.
cataphracti: Heavily armored shock cavalry wearing chain mail or lamellar armor. This heavy cavalry, first attested among the Sarmatians, was adopted by the Romans during the reign of Hadrian (117–138).

Jazyges: Sarmatians who settled as allies of Rome on the eastern Pannonian grasslands west of Dacia in the mid-1st century.

lamellar armor: Armor of overlapping plates sewed together and often worn as a second layer of protection over chain mail armor.

Roxolani: Sarmatians who settled on the grasslands between the Carpathian Mountains and the Black Sea in the 1st century.

Sarmatians: Iranian-speaking nomads who succeeded the Scythians on the Pontic-Caspian steppes between the 3rd century B.C. and the 3rd century A.D. The tribes included the Alani, Roxolani, and Jazyges.

Names to Know

Arrian (Lucius Flavius Arrianus) (86–160): Native of Nicomedia (Izmit); a Roman senator and historian who composed a history of Alexander the Great. He also wrote a treatise of his battle line against the Alani in 135, when he was governor of Galatia-Cappadocia.

Plautius Silvanus Aelianus, Tiberius (c. 15–85): Roman senator and consul (45 and 74) of patrician lineage. As legate of Moesia in 66–67, he repelled Sarmatian attacks against the Greek cities and secured the lower Danube against nomadic invaders.

Suggested Reading

Agusti, Sources on the Alans.

Bachrach, A History of the Alans in the West.

Burns, A History of the Ostrogoths.

Goldsworthy, The Roman Army at War, 100 B.C.—A.D. 200.
Questions to Consider

1. In what ways did the Sarmatians differ in their political organization and effectiveness from the Scythians or Xiongnu? What might have accounted for the failure of the emergence of a powerful confederation?

2. What were the routes and possible reasons for migrations of the Sarmatians westward? How did these migrations transform and create distinct tribal entities for the Alans, Roxolani, and Jazyges?

3. How did trade with Rome, Dacia, and the Germanic peoples transform Sarmartian society? What accounts for the less imposing kurgan and grave goods from the Sarmartian period? Does this archaeological record necessarily document an economic decline or, rather, a change in social practices and religious outlook?

4. How did the Roman imperial army respond to the threat of Sarmatian horse archers? How formidable were the cataphracti? Why was the order of battle adopted by Arrian against the Alans so effective? What frontier policies did Rome adopt vis-à-vis the Sarmatians?
In this lecture and the next, we will turn our attention to the Silk Road. This term was coined in 1877 by a German explorer, and it conjures up images of the exotic, of luxury goods being shipped from China to Rome. It’s both a popular image and one that embodies a great deal of truth. In this lecture, we’ll look at the legendary Silk Road and all its trade connections—running from Samarkand across the Tarim Basin to the Jade Gate and extending into China, the steppes, northern India, and across the Middle East. We’ll also look at the corresponding and complementary oceangoing routes, which appeared in the 1st century B.C. as part of this wider trade network.

Routes of the Silk Road

- Probably the most important points in the entire network of the Silk Road were in Han China, the great capitals of Luoyang and, later, Chang’an. These two imperial cities were the jumping-off points for trade that would move west. Silk was the main commodity that drew foreign merchants into these Han capitals.

- Leaving those cities meant leaving the protection of the Han emperors, as envoys sometimes learned to their dismay. Heading west, travelers reached the Gansu Corridor, a narrow strip of land connecting the upper areas of China to the Tarim Basin to the north of the steppes; to the south is the great Tibetan Plateau. There was the Yumen Pass, popularly known as the Jade Gate, through which all the trade had to pass.

- The northern route from this point skirted the Taklamakan Desert, an alkaline desert that was almost impossible to cross except in small nomadic groups. This route moved along the northern fringe of the desert among various oasis cities. The southern route also skirted the desert. The nexus of the two routes was the city of Kashgar.
• From Kashgar, travelers crossed over the formidable Pamir mountain range, which led into one of three river systems, all of which headed in different directions to the west.
  o The northern system descended into the river we know as the Jaxartes. This route led travelers into the region of Ferghana where the famous horses were found. From there, one could go on to the Aral Sea and, following the steppe routes across the Aral Sea, eventually reach the ports of the Black Sea.
  o The middle route descended into a river that is today called the Zeravshan. That route, too, led into Transoxiana and, ultimately, to the cities of central Asia, such as Bukhara, and across the cities of northern Iran to the ports of the Mediterranean.
  o The third route led into the Upper Oxus River, now known as the Amu Darya; in antiquity, the great city there was Bactra, the capital of Bactria. This was the center of that Greco-Bactrian kingdom and a major jumping-off point for routes going into India, crossing the Khyber Pass.
  o The city of Samarkand was the lynchpin of the middle and northern routes. From there, the way led down to Merv and Bukhara.

• At the same time, there was a complementary sea route that was pioneered largely by the peoples of the Mediterranean world. Around 116 to 114 B.C., a fellow named Eudoxus of Cyzicus is credited with understanding how to use the monsoon seasons to propel ships across the Indian Ocean.
  o By the opening of the 1st century B.C., there was regular communication by sea from Egypt, which was controlled by the Greek dynasty of the Ptolemies, down the Red Sea, across the Indian Ocean, to the ports on the western shores of India. This trade route did not displace the Silk Road. It was, in a way, a spur or an extension of the Silk Road.
o Once Rome secured the Mediterranean world (by 31 B.C.), the imperial court and the city of Rome developed an appetite for Chinese silks, Indian spices, and gems from Indian mines. Enormous levels of trade went down the Red Sea to what the Romans called Arabia Felix (Yemen), then made their way over to Indian ports, where they could obtain Chinese silks.

**Moving Goods**

- Moving goods from one point to another along these routes was an arduous task. Both wheeled vehicles and pack animals were used for overland travel. One of the great breakthroughs of the 2nd century B.C. was the extensive use of camels, which offered several advantages.
  o Camels could travel much farther and for longer periods than horses, mules, or donkeys. Further, using packs of camels allowed merchants to increase their carrying capacity by at least 50 percent. Camels can carry 300 pounds, whereas a good mule can carry perhaps 200 pounds.
  o Unlike wheeled vehicles, camels don’t break down, and they’re extremely efficient animals, conserving food and water in their systems. They became the prime beast of burden that made possible trade on the Silk Road.

- Some of the great caravans that traveled along the Silk Road had as many as 600 to 1,000 camels and hundreds of merchants, along with military detachments, usually nomads, hired to protect them. Such caravans were virtually miniature moving cities and could travel thousands of miles. With rest periods and stops to take on new goods, they might take six months to reach their final destinations.

- In addition, many lesser trade groups moved along the same routes. The cities in the Tarim Basin have produced 4th-century documents that discuss some of these lesser groups.

- There was constant movement of goods along these routes, and often, merchants dealing in one commodity carried along tag goods,
that is, lesser items picked up along the way, such as interesting Buddhist manuscripts.

- Every major participant in the Silk Road trade had something of great prestige and value to trade. The Romans had grape wine, certain types of aromatics and spices, finished products, and purple dye. The Chinese had the silks. The Sogdians also had grape wine, along with linens.

**Family Networks**

- From the earliest trade records we have from the Middle East, it seems that goods were moved through networks of families and something like family guilds. Certain types of families speaking specific languages did much of the carrying trade.

- Most of the people moving goods on the overland routes spoke Aramaic, a Semitic language widely used in the Fertile Crescent and later displaced by Arabic. It is the language that Jesus would’ve preached in.
  - Aramaic-speaking merchants from such cities as Bostra or Palmyra had kinsmen in all the key cities of the Silk Road trade.
  - When they set out from Palmyra, they knew they could stop in these cities, where they had friends and kinsmen who could provide credit, stand surety with the local authorities, provide translations, and relate information about markets and prices.
At Merv, this network was taken over by Sogdians, who spoke an Eastern Iranian language related to Persian. They were located in Maracanda, the future Samarkand. Documents discovered in the early 20th century indicate that Sogdian merchants had the same kind of networks linking Chang’an and Loyang, the Han Chinese capitals, through Dunhuang, the cities of the Tarim Basin, and all the way back to Maracanda.

- We have some remarkable documents of these Sogdian merchants. One of them is a report in which a merchant in the city of Dunhuang expresses concern about the reported sacking of the Chinese capital in 313. The merchant hasn’t heard anything from his family concern in that city for three years.

- Another one is a moving letter about a woman and her daughter left without enough money to pay for their passage back to Samarkand.

These trade routes were made possible for two reasons. First, from the 2nd century B.C. to the 2nd century A.D., there were four great imperial orders that imposed peace over most of the routes: the Han Empire of China, the Kushan Empire that extended from the southern cities of the Tarim Basin across Transoxiana into northern India, the Parthian Empire, and the Roman Empire. In addition, there were powerful tribal confederacies that appreciated and benefited from the trade.

**Silk Road Commodities**

- The emperors of China profited immensely from the production and regulation of silk. We will see the development of the silk industry, especially in the Tang and Song period. This was in response to this overseas market. Some would argue the building of the great canal system to link the Yellow River to the Yangtze was in part to move silk up to the northern capitals and then to export.

- Also traded along the Silk Road were the spices and aromatics of India. These made their way to China, as well as to the Roman world. Roman glassware, grape wine, and aromatics crossed the
Silk Road, while the peoples of the steppes profited immensely from the sale of horses and leather goods and products.

- Finally, one commodity that’s often forgotten in this exchange is people. The ease of travel made possible by the use of camels, security, and the trade networks set up by merchants, allowed different types of individuals who were not merchants to pass over the Silk Road.
  - The great courts constantly sent missions to one another. For example, we’re told that the emperor Augustus in Rome received musicians and other emissaries from the raj of Taprobane (Sri Lanka) via the sea.
  - Craftsmen were another group who traveled over the Silk Road, attested by a papal envoy to Güyük, a great Mongol khan.
  - Above all, especially in later medieval periods, slaves were one of the most important commodities. In the Islamic period, young Turkish men between the ages of 13 and 16 were often captured, sold into slavery, converted to Islam, and drilled to be bodyguards or elite forces of Turkish rulers.
  - Perhaps the most important people traveling on the road for the wider cultural ramifications of the civilization of Eurasia were missionaries, monks, and merchants who had embraced new faiths, such as Christianity, Manichaeism, and Buddhism. The Silk Road brought these religions to the peoples of the steppes and, with them, writing and a wider view of their own world. In turn, this would lead to the organization of more effective states on the steppes and would draw the peoples of the steppes into increasingly closer relationships with the literate, urban civilizations.
**Important Term**

**Silk Road**: The network of caravan routes across central Asia that linked China with Europe and the Mediterranean world. The German explorer Ferdinand von Richthofen coined the term in 1877.

**Name to Know**

**Eudoxus of Cyzicus** (fl. c. 130–90 B.C.): Greek navigator for King Ptolemy VIII (126–116 B.C.); credited with the discovery of the use of the monsoon season to sail the Indian Ocean.

**Suggested Reading**

Bulliet, *The Camel and the Wheel*.

Golden, *Central Asia in World History*.

Hansen, *The Silk Road: A New History*.

Harl, *Coinage in the Roman Economy, 300 B.C.–700 A.D.*

Liu, *The Silk Road in World History*.

Ying-Shi Yu, *Trade and Expansion in Han China*.

**Questions to Consider**

1. What stimulated the demand for the different luxury goods that gave rise to the Silk Road? What were the prime routes, and why did Aramaic and Sogdian merchants and the nomadic tribes play such a vital role?

2. What were the major routes on the Silk Road? How was trade organized and conducted? Why was the domestication and spread of the camel so important for the expansion of trade?

3. What were the profits of trade, and how did they transform caravan cities in the Tarim Basin and the nomadic peoples?
4. What material culture, knowledge, and organizational skills were gained by steppe peoples that allowed the creation of later Turkish khaganates and the Mongol Empire?
In the last lecture, we discussed the various commodities exchanged along the Silk Road, but this lecture will concentrate on the exchange of ideas and, above all, religions. Perhaps the most important items that were transmitted along the Silk Road to nomadic peoples were various religions, especially Buddhism, but there were others, including Nestorian Christianity, Manichaeism, Zoroastrianism, and, even later on, Judaism. These religions were appealing for a number of reasons, not only to the caravan cities but also to the nomadic peoples who participated in the process of moving goods along the Silk Road. They presented a new world vision and brought missionaries, monks, and even merchant princes who introduced the art of writing to the nomadic peoples.

The Success of Buddhism

- Buddhism was clearly the most successful of the religions between the 4th and 8th centuries A.D., and it was appealing to people along the Silk Road for a number of reasons. Among these was the fact that the teachings of the Buddha had been reinterpreted for a wider appeal.

- In addition, Buddhism represented a reaction to the caste structure, to the sacrifices administered by the Brahmins.
  - Siddhartha Gautama himself was a mentor of the Kshatriya caste, that is, the warrior caste that produced the princes and kings of northern India; they were the highest of the twice-born caste. The Brahmins were supposed to be second, but already in the time of the Buddha, the Brahmins were beginning to assert themselves as the top caste, and that is what is recognized today in Hindu India. Below them was a merchant class, followed by the Shudras, and finally, those with no caste.

  - Caste, or varna, was a way of defining one’s position in society, as well as an individual’s relationship in the cycle of life. Buddhism represented a rejection of this. All people who
embraced the enlightenment and the teachings of the Buddha were able to achieve *moksha*, liberation from the eternal cycle of life, and a type of nirvana, an extinction of one’s individual soul into the greater soul of the universe.

- From the start, there were debates about the meaning of the Buddha’s message. How broad ranging was it? What was the role of monks who would achieve enlightenment? What was the relationship between the monastic community and the laity that supported it?

- Several Buddhist councils were held, the first one around 400 B.C. The third one, in 247 B.C., was particularly important. This council was held under the auspices of the Mauryan emperor Ashoka, who had come to embrace Buddhism. The councils led to a division within the Buddhist community into, essentially, the Theravada and
the **Mahayana** schools of Buddhism. These divisions were based on questions about the original teachings and whether the teachings should be translated into the vernacular.

- Another important point that came out of these debates was that anyone who embraced the teachings of the Buddha, even at the lowest levels, could achieve some level of enlightenment. In the Mahayana (Greater Vehicle) tradition, all individuals had the potential to achieve some understanding and potentially become buddhas themselves. This vision was extremely appealing to merchants and rulers who were not Indian; hence, it was this vision that was exported along the Silk Road.

- There were two forces at work disseminating Buddhism along the Silk Road: the profits of trade and the translation of Buddhist texts by monks who traveled the routes.
  - Many members of the **Vaishya** caste, the merchants in Hindu India, came to embrace Buddhism because it was their *dharma* to conduct trade and prosper. Thus, merchants often acted as unofficial missionaries in the caravan cities and among the nomadic tribes with which they came into contact.
  - In addition, the monks who began to travel along the Silk Road, particularly under the Kushan emperors and later, translated Buddhist texts into languages that were readily used along the routes. In this way, Buddhist texts were disseminated across Transoxiana and central Asia in a variety of languages that were readily understood by the literate classes who were engaged in trade.

- The monks themselves settled in monasteries, large complexes in which the ascetics were supported by the donations of believers. For instance, the early rock monasteries in India at Ajanta were beautifully decorated with murals that were probably donations made by wealthy merchants.
• It was from this context along the Silk Road that Buddhist missionaries arrived in China and began to translate various texts into Chinese. This was already taking place in the 2nd century A.D. and probably earlier. These translations were from, perhaps, Sanskrit originals or Sogdian and Tocharian originals. By the 3rd century A.D., there were a number of Buddhist texts, **sutras**, available from a variety of Buddhist schools.

• The most remarkable figure coming out of this Buddhist world created on the Silk Road was a Chinese pilgrim named Xuanzang (602–664). He traveled along the Silk Road in search of manuscripts and went on a long pilgrimage, first to central Asia, then into northern India. He brought back to China many Sanskrit texts and was commissioned to do more accurate translations that became extremely important in the dissemination of Buddhism under the Tang and, later, the Song empires. Xuanzang is representative of the process of turning what was almost a spinoff of Hinduism into a universal faith in East Asia.

**Dualistic Manichaeism**

• The religion known as **Manichaeism** represents the teachings of Mani, perhaps one of the most enigmatic and remarkable figures to burst upon the Silk Road and the Middle East. He was apparently born into some kind of Christian Jewish community about 216 A.D. in what is today lower Iraq. He was crucified in 276 A.D. on orders of the shah for teaching essentially heretical messages that were at odds with Zoroastrian traditions.

• Mani taught various schemes of cosmic redemption involving the battle between light and darkness. The Mani Codex, discovered in Cologne, which contains the life of Mani and his early teachings, shows us a well-worked-out religion that had certain similarities to Buddhism. It also had a system of levels of reality that was not too dissimilar from the Buddhist notions of successions of reincarnation through **dharma** and improved **karma**, leading to **moksha**.
- Again, Manichaeism was universalist in appeal, and merchants found it extremely attractive because it justified their position. We know of a 8th-century Turkish monarch, Khagan Bogü, who officially converted to Manichaeism and brought his whole tribe, the Uighurs, over. The Uighurs remained Manichees well into the 9th and 10th centuries and brought the religion into the Tarim Basin, where they migrated after their khaganate collapsed in 840.

- Manichaeism was another faith that brought new values and ideas to the nomadic peoples. The Manichee missionaries were apparently behind devising a script for writing Uighur Turkish. They also were regarded as people who had skills and expertise, such as in organizing taxes and assessments for would-be nomadic rulers.

**Christianity on the Steppes**

- A third religion that made its way onto the steppes via the Silk Road was Christianity, perhaps next successful after Buddhism and Manichaeism. This is not the Christianity we associate with the Roman Empire. In fact, these are the losers in the Roman Empire in a way. This version is often called Nestorian Christianity.

- The Nestorian Christians were followers of Nestorius, who had been patriarch of Constantinople from 429 to 431. He held that Mary gave birth only to the man Christ, and the Christ logos entered after his birth; thus, Mary is not the Mother of God. That position was struck down at the Third Ecumenical Council in 431. Rather than give up their faith, the Nestorians moved across the frontier into the Persian domains of the Fertile Crescent and adapted their Christianity to local conditions.

- The Nestorians adopted Aramaic as their liturgical language, abandoning Greek. They culturally assumed the mores and traditions of the people of the Middle East, including multiple marriages. They quickly turned themselves into a Middle Eastern version of Christians who could travel along the Silk Road, following the same routes as the merchants and winning converts.
They had a particularly powerful network of bishops in the cities of central Asia, particularly Samarkand.

- The Nestorian monks and ascetics were apparently seen as local versions of **shamans**. The ability of these Christian monks to carry out healing cures is what probably endeared them to a number of Turkish tribes. We have some interesting reports from the 6th century A.D. of Turkish tribes that had embraced Nestorian Christianity because, reputedly, the Turks had been protected from a plague by the sign of the cross.

**The Coming of Islam**

- In the 12th and 13th centuries, Islam increasingly moved in and displaced these religions. Particularly, there would be something of a duel between the Buddhists and the Muslims for the religious loyalties of the steppe peoples. As a result of the Silk Road, on the eve of the Islamic conquest, these religions had made an immense impact on the nomadic peoples and the caravan cities.

- All of these religions were represented with major shrines, and all had important recommendations. First, they were carried by scholars, monks, ascetics, and healing miracle men who could be associated with shamans and traditional healers in nomadic society. They also were responsible for bringing writing and organizational skills that would allow the nomadic peoples, particularly the Turkish peoples, to organize more effective confederacies and kingdoms than the Xiongnu or other peoples on the steppes. Finally, they put the nomadic peoples in close contact with urban centers.

- Up until 751, all of these religions were practiced and embraced by different individuals, tribes, and monarchs. In 751, the armies of the Abbasid caliph won over the armies of the Tang emperor of China at the Battle of Talas. Although that battle has been exaggerated and misunderstood, it was the first sign of a new religion on the Silk Road, a religion that was now associated with victory: Islam.
Brahmin: In Hinduism, the first or priestly caste.

dharma: In Hinduism, the moral law that dictates the cycle of reincarnation.

karma: In Hinduism and Buddhism, the individual merit acquired by an individual through meritorious deeds.

Kshatriya: In Hinduism, the caste of warriors.

Manichaeism: The dualist, monotheistic faith proclaimed by the prophet Mani in Sassanid Mesopotamia. The faith was popular among Sogdian merchants of the Silk Road; the khagan of the Uighurs converted to Manichaeism in 763.

Mahayana Buddhism: The “Greater Wheel” was the school of Buddhism that emerged in India in the 1st century B.C., stressing the divine status of the Buddha. The schools of Mahayana Buddhism today are in East Asia (Tibet, Mongolia, China, Korea, and Japan).

moksha: The liberation of an enlightened Hindu who is freed from the cycle of rebirths, according to dharma.

Nestorian Christianity: The Christian church that followed the teachings of Patriarch Nestorius of Constantinople (429–431), who taught that Mary gave birth only to the man Jesus rather than man and God. The Nestorians, condemned at the Third Ecumenical Council (431), spread their faith across the Silk Road, converting Turkish and Mongol tribes.

shaman: A mystic prized for insights gained by contact with the spiritual world through trances often induced by hallucinogens, notably hashish.

Shudra: In Hinduism, the caste of laborers or peasants.

sutra: A Buddhist sacred text of aphorisms.
**Uighurs**: Turkish-speaking nomads who founded the third Turkish confederation on the eastern Eurasian steppe (744–840). They converted to Manichaeism in 763.

**Vaishya**: In Hinduism, the caste of merchants.

### Names to Know

**Bögü Khan** (759–780): Uighur khagan; promoted trade and settlements within the Uighur khanate. In 762, he converted to Manichaeism.

**Gautama, Siddhartha** (563–483 B.C.): The Buddha, a prince of the Kshatriya Shakya clan, was the sage who founded Buddhism. Around 534 B.C., he assumed an ascetic life to achieve understanding of human suffering. In the deer park at Sarnath, he achieved enlightenment and went on to teach the noble truths of the Middle Way, the fundamental tenets of Buddhism.

**Xuanzang** (596–664): Buddhist monk and Chinese pilgrim; wrote an account of his travels in the western regions and India in 629–645. He visited the court of Harsha Vardhana (606–647) at Kannauj on the Ganges. He revealed the international network of Buddhist monasteries in central Asia and India on the eve of the Islamic conquests.

### Suggested Reading

Elvergskog, *Buddhism and Islam on the Silk Road*.

Fowden, *From Empire to Commonwealth*.

Golden, *Central Asia in World History*.

Foltz, *Religion of the Silk Road*.

Lieu, *Manichaeism in the Roman Empire and Medieval China*.
Questions to Consider

1. What were the respective appeals of Buddhism, Manichaeism, and Christianity to the caravan cities of Transoxiana and the Tarim Basin and to the Eurasian nomads?

2. Why was Buddhism such an attractive religion to merchants? How did commerce and travel along the Silk Road profit from the creation of a Buddhist network of monasteries?

3. How did the Chinese pilgrims Faxien and Xuanzang reflect the world of Buddhism during the heyday of the Silk Road? Why did they pen such perceptive accounts of their travels? Why are their accounts such important sources?

4. Why was the translation of scriptures of the new faiths into Tocharian, Sogdian, and Turkic so important? Why were merchants so important in promoting religious beliefs?

5. What accounted for the success of Buddhism over the other new religions on the Silk Road? Why did Buddhism succeed in China whereas the other faiths remained those of foreign minorities?
This lecture begins a series that deals with the end of antiquity and the role of the steppe nomadic peoples in the transition from the ancient world to the Middle Ages. We will look at several nomadic peoples, first and foremost, the Huns. We’ll devote two lectures to the Huns, both because we have a good bit of information on them, particularly on Attila, and because they play a pivotal role in the collapse of the Roman world and the advent of the Middle Ages, at least in Europe and the Mediterranean world. In later lectures, we’ll look at other groups, including the Hephthalites and the Turks.

Goths versus Huns

- Around 376 A.D., the Goths fought a major battle against the Huns. They were overwhelmingly defeated, and their king, Ermanaric, committed suicide out of the grief. The defeat was quite a shock, not only to the Goths but also to the Romans. For some 150 years, the Goths and their Sarmatian subjects had been in alliance with the Roman Empire.

- The last Roman coins to celebrate a victory over a specific barbarian people were coins issued by Constantine celebrating his victory over the Sarmatians and, by extension, we suspect, the Goths. But this confederation came crashing to an end.

- The Germanic poets and, later, the Norse poets in the Viking age remembered this Gothic-Hun conflict in a very distorted way. The Goths themselves, who petitioned to be admitted to the Roman Empire to escape the Huns, appeared on the Lower Danube in the next year, and the emperor Valens reputedly brought 150,000 or 200,000 Goths from the barbarian side to the Roman side of the frontier. This made sense from Valens’s point of view because he needed soldiers for his war against the Persians.
• Information we have from **Ammianus Marcellinus**, a Roman officer involved in diplomatic and administrative military affairs, paints a rather frightening picture of the Huns from the Roman viewpoint. The Goths were regarded as particularly savage among the Germanic peoples, but the Huns were barbaric on a whole new level. Over time, even the name “Hun” became associated with extreme ferocity.
  o Ammianus tells us that they lived on fermented mare’s milk. They didn’t cook their food but sliced off chunks of meat from animals, put it under their saddles, and hoped the friction of riding would heat it up. They decorated their horses with severed heads and turned the heads of their opponents into drinking goblets.
  
  o At the same time, the Huns were ferocious and invaluable warriors; one Hun was equal to five Goths, and every Roman knew that one Goth could outfight any other German barbarian.

**Origins of the Huns**

• There has been great speculation about the origin of the Huns. It’s clear that when Attila ruled the Huns, from approximately 434 to 453 A.D., it was a confederation of many different peoples—Germanic, Iranian, and apparently Proto-Turkish speakers. A good argument can be made by studying graves on the Russian steppes that seem to date to this period that the inner tribes of the Huns were probably Turkic speakers. They had East Asian features,
although they obviously intermarried with all sorts of people, and the population was very mixed.

- There is also a suggestion that somehow, they were scions of the Xiongnu. There’s a belief that “Xiongnu” in ancient Chinese may have been pronounced closer to “Hunna.” The Xiongnu, as you recall, were a great confederacy that Han emperors had fought for close to 300 years before finally breaking their power.
  - There had been a civil war in 58–54 B.C., in which the Xiongnu had broken up into northern and southern groups. The southern group dwelled in the regions that today would be called Inner Mongolia. They became allies of the Han emperor. The northern group was considered outer barbarians and was targeted by the Han emperors.
  - Eventually, Han armies and their southern Xiongnu allies pushed the northern Xiongnu further west. Ultimately, the northern confederation was broken up by the campaigns of the Han general Ban Chao from 75 to 102 A.D.

- It’s thought that the northern Xiongnu on the central and east-central steppes of Eurasia probably broke up into different tribes, and the Huns who appeared in Europe about 370 A.D. were a spinoff from that confederacy. They probably took the name Xiongnu, Hunna, or Hun because it was considered ferocious.

- It is significant that somehow the ancestors of the Huns had come into close contact with Chinese civilization. Their tribute system in particular suggests a collective tribal memory of the five baits system of the Chinese.

- No written text of the Hun language survives, but the suspicion is that it was some kind of Turkic or Proto-Turkic language—not Indo-European. If so, they are the first Turkish speakers to appear in Europe. The arrival of the Turkish speakers across the steppes marked the turning point from the ancient world to the Middle Ages for at least the peoples of the Eurasian steppes.
**Hun Expansion**

- After the Huns achieved their victory over the Goths, they took possession of the Pontic-Caspian steppes. From that position, they invariably expanded, first, to the south, toward the Caucasus Mountains. There, they met up with the Alans, who guided them toward raiding into the Middle East.
  - There are reports of Hun invasions across the Caucasus and into the Sassanid Empire in the late 4th and early 5th centuries. The Huns ransacked Armenia, Mesopotamia, and northern Syria.
  - After taking plunder, these Huns withdrew, refusing to face the full Sassanid army and leaving the Sassanid shahs with the need to defend against a new threat from the northwest. This resulted in cooperation between the eastern Roman court and the Sassanid shahs to try to garrison and control the passes over the Caucasus.

- The Huns also moved west, following routes that the Sarmatians followed. They were naturally drawn to the grasslands of the Danube, today, the regions of the Hungarian plain in Transylvania and the Wallachian Plains of eastern Romania. All of these are traditional grasslands that would attract nomadic peoples from the steppes of southern Russia into Central Europe.

**Eastern and Western Views of the Huns**

- The appearance of the Huns in Central Europe, as opposed to the eastern steppes, posed an interesting problem for the Roman imperial government. These movements began probably around 395.
  - By the time the Huns arrived in Central Europe, the Roman Empire was divided in two. There was a western Roman emperor ruling from the city of Milan; the first one was the emperor Honorius, who came to the throne in 315 A.D. at the age of 11. His elder brother took over the eastern half of the Roman world, centered in the city of Constantinople.
  - The two courts were often at loggerheads over the first half of the 4th century. The western court was under the control of,
essentially, a military strong man, who commanded various armies largely made up of barbarian mercenaries. In the eastern court, the emperors were just as ineffectual but ruled through a civil bureaucratic class that maintained control of the government.

- This division of the two courts was very much to the advantage of the Huns. The eastern court saw the Huns initially as an annoyance and, eventually, a major threat, whereas the western court saw the Huns as rather useful allies. The warlords of the western empire hired Huns as mounted soldiers to keep the German barbarians in line along the Rhine and Danube. The late Roman Empire of the west was essentially a game of the Roman master of the soldiers (*magister militum*) maintaining control using Hun mercenaries.

- This was an ideal situation for the Huns to exploit. We hear of a pair of brothers, *Rugila* and *Octar*, who ruled the Huns resident in Central Europe in the early 5th century. Rugila, in particular, was closely allied with the western court, especially with the general *Aetius*. From Rugila and Octar, Aetius had on command 60,000 Hun and Hun-allied soldiers. Aetius turned a blind eye to Hun raids into eastern Roman territory.

- The eastern Roman emperors at Constantinople had a very different view of these Huns. They were much closer to the locus of Hun power—the Pontic-Caspian steppes—and the Hun raids became increasingly difficult to contain.
  - Initially, the imperial government had been concerned about Goths. As we said, they entered the Roman Empire in 395 and sacked Rome in 410, an event that is often taken as a symbol of the breakup of Roman power. The Goths who had been pushed into the Roman Empire eventually migrated to carve out an independent kingdom with Roman blessings in southern Gaul. That would be the first of a series of Germanic barbarians being accommodated within the Roman Empire.
When those Goths moved into the Roman Empire and east, that meant the Huns now bordered on the lower and middle Danube, that is, the frontier of the eastern Roman Empire, and were dangerously close to Constantinople. They raided repeatedly into the eastern Roman Empire for captives and gold.

- One response was to build the great walls of Constantinople. These included a trench, 25 feet deep and 50 to 60 feet across; a 25-foot-high outer wall with towers and fortified gates; and a 40-foot-high inner wall. These walls sealed off Constantinople from direct attack, although the government was forced to accept the fact that the Huns could still ravage their European provinces; at least the capital was preserved, and the Huns could not cross over into Asia Minor. It was the construction of the walls that turned Constantinople, the capital of the eastern empire, into the queen of cities and the bastion of the future Byzantine Empire.

- Another response to the Hun threat was to try to pursue a tradition of divide and conquer, that is, to play different Hun rulers off one another.
  - That approach worked only until a figure arrived on the scene to unite the various tribes, and that was Attila. Until his appearance, eastern diplomatic policies were rather sound and, in some ways, corresponded to the Huns’ activities and traditions.
  - The Romans really had no experience in dealing with a great nomadic confederacy, but that would change dramatically with the emergence of Attila. He would organize a confederacy that bore no resemblance to any nomadic threat the Romans had ever faced and one that would threaten the very existence of the Roman world.
Huns: Altaic-speaking nomads who conquered the Pontic-Caspian steppes circa 375 and, under Attila, forged a barbarian empire from the Rhine to the Volga that challenged the Roman Empire. The Huns were probably descendants of subject or allied tribes of the northern Xiongnu.

*magister militum*: “Master of the soldiers,” the supreme commander of field armies in the Roman Empire. From the reign of Constantine I (306–337), commanders of the cavalry and infantry commanded regional field armies. After 395, their supreme commander was designated *magister militum*, one for the western and one for the eastern Roman Empire.

**Names to Know**

**Aetius** (d. 454): A *magister militum* (425–454) from a military family in Moesia. By his influence with King Rugila and, later, Attila, Aetius secured Hun *foederati* so that he dominated policy at the court of the western emperor Valentinian III. His policy of alliance with the Huns was ruined by the invasions of Attila in 451–452. In 454, Aetius was executed on grounds of treason.

**Ammianus Marcellinus** (c. 325–391): A historian of imperial Rome, a native of Antioch, and a staff officer. He wrote a history of the Roman world from the reign of Trajan (98–117) to Valens (364–378). His work provides invaluable information on the Goths, Alani, and Huns, as well as Roman relations with the Sassanid Empire.

**Ban Chao** (30–102): Han general who completed the subjection and organization of the western regions in 75–91 and ended the power of the northern Xiongnu.

**Ermanaric** (d. 376): King of the Goths; committed suicide upon the defeat of his people by the Huns. He was remembered in the Norse legend of the Volsungs as the tyrant Jörmunrek.
Octar (c. 420–430): Ruled over the western Huns on the Pannonian grasslands; he was the father of Attila (434–453) and Bleda (434–445).

Rugila (c. 420–434): King of the Huns; ruled over the eastern tribes of the Huns between the lower Danube and the lower Volga. His brother Octar (c. 420–430) ruled over the western Huns on the Pannonian grasslands. He was succeeded by his nephews Attila and Bleda.

Uldin (r. c. 395–412): King of the Huns. Directed attacks of the Huns into the Balkans to extort subsidies and trading privileges from the eastern Roman emperor Arcadius. He commanded Hun contingents sent on request of the western Roman emperor Honorius in 406.

Suggested Reading

Ammianus Marcellinus (Hamilton, trans.), *The Later Roman Empire (A.D. 354–378)*.

Gordon, *The Age of Attila*.

Meaenchen-Helfen (Knight, ed.), *The World of the Huns*.

Sinor, “The Hun Period.”

Thompson, *The Huns*.

Questions to Consider

1. Why did the defeat of the Goths by the Huns in 376 excite such fear and attention in the Roman world? How accurate is the description of the Huns by Ammianus Marcellinus?

2. What was the composition of the Hun confederation in 376? What factors might have led their ancestors to migrate from the eastern Eurasian steppes? How did their conquests and migrations into Central Europe transform the Huns?

3. Why did the rival Roman imperial courts at Constantinople and Ravenna pursue different policies toward the Huns? How did the Hun kings Uldin...
and Rugila exploit the rivalry and the Roman Empire? In what ways did they anticipate Attila, the Hun Scourge of God?

4. What accounts for the image of the Huns as the quintessential nomadic barbarians in Western literature thereafter? Why did the Romans and Germans agree that the Huns represented new, outlandishly ferocious barbarians? How did their view compare to those voiced by Chinese writers of the Han Empire about the Xiongnu?
In the last lecture, we introduced the Huns as the first Turkic-speaking nomads or Proto-Turkic–speaking nomads to enter the steppes of southern Russia and move into the grasslands of Central Europe. In this lecture, we will finish the history of the Huns, particularly Attila, the Scourge of God, who succeeded to sole rule over the Huns after apparently orchestrating the murder of his brother while hunting, an incident dated usually to around 444 or 445 A.D. The image of Attila as a pitiless conqueror has endured for centuries.

The Legend of Attila

- The image of Attila has inspired novels, films, and artwork over the centuries, and he has been admired by later rulers. For instance, the Arpad kings of Hungary, who were Magyars, identified themselves with Huns or Hungarians because the name Attila struck such fear in the hearts of Western Europeans. They even claimed to have the sword of Attila.

- The Ottoman Turks—having no direct connection to Attila—also identified with the steppe conqueror because they saw themselves as ghazi warriors, warriors of the steppes. Indeed, the names Attila and Genghis are still popular in Turkey today.

- In European traditions, especially among the Germanic peoples who were subjects of Attila, he lived on as a great lord. Roman sources who visited Attila’s court (thought to be somewhere near Budapest) describe it as a great hall, like something out of Beowulf. In Norse legend, Attila was known as Atli and seen as somehow responsible for the destruction of the Burgundian family of Gunnar.

- All these images that have come down to us resulted because Attila is the first steppe conqueror of whom we have a real sense of identity. Attila had a profound effect on both the eastern and
Attila even appears in Romantic paintings of the 19th century, particularly some by French painters who conjured up images of the destruction of Gaul by hordes of Huns.

western Roman Empires and an important influence in dictating the course of European history.

**Rise to Power**

- Attila and his brother **Bleda** came to the throne jointly in 434, succeeding their uncle, Rugila, who had a longstanding alliance with the western Roman court. The brothers shared power and initially pursued traditional Hun policy, that is, attacking and looting in the east and allying with the west.

- The brothers lent their horse archers and Hun vassals to the armies of Aetius and the western Roman emperor. At the same time, they began systematic attacks into the Balkan provinces, a loose region called Illyricum that is today largely Bulgaria. These provinces came under increasing attack in the 440s, enabling Attila and Bleda
to capture large numbers of Roman specialists, such as urban and military engineers.

- Starting in the 440s, the Huns not only raided but began capturing Roman cities. They were able to storm the heavily fortified masonry architecture walls of cities in the Balkans that had controlled the Roman road network. The Huns must have had good information about the goings on at the imperial court because they timed their attacks generally when the eastern arm was preoccupied elsewhere.

- Attila seems to have had knowledge of the overall geographic dimensions of the Roman world, which allowed him to frame rather sophisticated attack strategies. The Hun victories netted plunder, captives, and gold—the ingredients that sustained the Hun Empire.
  - Attila probably never envisioned a methodical conquest of the Roman Empire. His subjects, including the German tribes, numbered perhaps 800,000 or 1 million, compared to the Romans’ 55 or 65 million. This disparity was a determining factor in the strategies of Attila.

  - His objective was to wrest control of certain crucial border areas to break down the barriers on the Danube and gain easy access into the Roman provinces; there, he could acquire plunder to reward all his vassal rulers and sustain his position. The goal was to ensure that the Roman frontier stretching along the Danube became a highway, allowing the movement of Huns.

  - This is clearly the thrust of a treaty negotiated in 447 by the Roman envoy Anatolus, who was then the master of the eastern Roman army and a representative of the emperor Theodosius. This treaty promised very heavy tribute—2100 pounds of gold. It also essentially dismantled the Roman frontier along the Danube. And it ensured that Attila would be recognized as the leader of the Hun confederation, with some sense of equality to the western Roman emperor.
In 444 or 445, Attila had a falling out with his older brother, Bleda, and dispatched him in a hunting “accident.” From that point on, Attila was the unquestioned ruler of the various Hun tribes—essentially a barbarian counter-empire to the Roman world. He waged war ruthlessly in the eastern Roman Empire and destroyed the imperial frontier. The Roman cities in the European provinces existed only on the sufferance of Attila.

**Western Invasion**

In 445 A.D., Attila was at the height of his power. He commanded a confederation and a number of nomadic warriors clearly on the order of the Xiongnu confederation under Modu Chanyu. Many scholars believe that at this point, he dramatically changed his policy and invaded the western empire, which hitherto had been his ally. To understand this change, we need to look at the politics of the western imperial court and some aspects of Roman law and nomadic customs.

In 450 A.D., Attila received a ring and apparently what he took as a marriage proposal from the Empress Honoria, the elder half-sister of the then-reigning western emperor, Valentinian III. Valentinian was a weak and ineffectual emperor, dominated by his mother and his master of the soldiers, Aetius, who hated each other. Honoria likewise resented Valentinian. She felt that she had a better claim to the throne than her half-brother, which meant that anyone she married would have a better claim, as well.

Finally, Valentinian and Aetius decided that the only way to neutralize her was to marry her to an elderly boring senator. But Honoria sent a ring to Attila, who interpreted it as a marriage offer and, thus, recognition that he was the greatest lord in the world. Attila replied that he would accept control of Gaul and Spain as his bride’s dowry.

This was unacceptable to the Roman emperor, who still operated under the laws of the republic. Valentinian’s refusal of Attila’s proposal was tantamount to an act of war. In early 451, Attila levied
a huge barbarian army, probably 50,000 to 100,000 strong, with large numbers of mounted horsemen.

- These forces swept over the Rhine and began to sack the cities of Western Europe as thoroughly as they had sacked the cities of the Balkans. Many late Roman cities known today by their modern names—Strasbourg, Worms, Mainz, Cologne, and others—fell to the Hun armies. One of the few major cities not to fall was Paris because the local Saint Geneviève appeared and allegedly warded off the Hun hordes.

- Otherwise, the Huns did a thorough job of destroying eastern and central France, which ultimately destroyed the very military basis of the western Roman state. Aetius had no choice but to seek allies among the Visigoths and other Germans settled within the Roman Empire. He put together a coalition army of Romans and largely German federate allies to oppose this great Hun invasion.

**The Battle of the Catalanian Plains**

- Aetius raised a siege of Orleans, and Attila began to withdraw east, in the general direction of what today is the city of Châlons. In the summer of 451, the two met at the Battle of the Catalanian Plains, which was likely fought between Châlons and Troyes.

- The Hun army was enormous, drawn up in three forces. The best forces, Attila’s nomadic cavalry, the Huns, were in the center, with various allied forces on the flanks, including Ostrogoths, Alans, Burgundians, and others. For his part, Aetius put his weakest forces in the center to receive the Hun attack. Then he stationed his more powerful forces, the Visigoths, on the right and Romans and Franks on the left.

- The battle opened with a charge of the Hun cavalry that drove deep into the Roman center and scattered it. It seemed as if the Roman army would be broken in half. The two Gothic forces, Attila’s Ostrogoths and Aetius’s Visigoths, clashed in a violent attack. The Romans and
Franks plowed into the exposed flank of Attila and eventually forced him to quit the battlefield. The fight ended in a draw.

**Aftermath of the Battle**

- Attila withdrew east, making a beeline back to his capital and vowing to return the next year, which he did. In 452, he invaded northern Italy with another huge barbarian army. He penetrated to the Po Valley, and it seemed as if the way to Rome was open. There were no imperial forces opposing him because the German federates had no interest in fighting for Italy.

- It was there that Pope **Leo I** met Attila and convinced him to withdraw, for reasons that are still obscure. Attila pulled back to his capital and celebrated in a great marriage festival. He had married a German girl, Ildico. He drank to excess, and in the night a blood vessel burst in his head, and he drowned in his own blood. The girl was killed on suspicion that she had murdered him. She would live on in Norse legend as Gudrun, the Germanic princess who avenged the death of her relatives at the hands of Attila.

- Attila’s death resulted in the fragmentation of his empire. The subject tribes were raised in rebellion, complements of money paid by the new eastern Roman emperor, Marcian, a tough soldier-emperor who had actually supported the western government in its struggle against Attila. Attila’s sons ruled some Hun tribes on the Pontic-Caspian steppes, but they were never again the force they had been.

- The real victors at Châlons and in the invasion of northern Italy were the Germanic tribes who were left to partition what was left of the Roman Empire into independent kingdoms. Meanwhile, the eastern court had learned its lesson well: Trust in the walls surrounding Constantinople and make sure that no future Attila ever emerged on the steppes. The emperor invented Byzantine diplomacy to prevent the revival of another steppe conqueror.
ghazi: The epitome of the heroic nomadic warrior, prized by Turks.

Magyars: Finno-Ugric nomads who migrated from the Siberian forests east of the Urals to the Pontic-Caspian steppes in the 9th century. In 896, they settled on the Pannonian grasslands; they are in fact ancestors of the Hungarians.

Names to Know

Attila (b. c. 410; r. 434–452): Regarded as the second greatest conqueror of the steppes. He and his brother Bleda succeeded their uncle Rugila as joint kings of the Huns. Circa 445, Bleda was murdered by Attila. In 442–443 and 447, Attila launched devastating raids into the Balkans, earning the sobriquet “Scourge of God.” In 451, he invaded Gaul and suffered at Châlons a strategic defeat from a Roman-Gothic army under Aetius. In 452, he invaded northern Italy but withdrew due to the intercession of Pope Leo I. Attila died in 452 from overindulgence at his wedding celebrations. The Hun Empire collapsed within two years after his death.

Bleda (434–445): King of the Huns and elder son of Octar. He ruled jointly and clashed repeatedly with his brother Attila, who ordered Bleda’s murder.


Leo I, the Great (b. c. 390; r. 440–461): The first pope of a noble Roman family. Leo upheld papal primacy against the patriarch of Constantinople. He defined the creed of the western church in his Tome (449), accepted at the Fourth Ecumenical Council in 451. He won a moral victory by convincing Attila to withdraw from Italy in 452.

Theodosius II (b. 401; r. 408–450): Flavius Theodosius, the son of Arcadius and Eudocia (daughter of the Frankish general Bauto); succeeded as a minor. The emperor was directed by his ministers and his older sister, Aelia
Pulcheria. Theodosius agreed to humiliating treaties dictated by Attila the Hun in 443 and 447.

Valentinian III (Flavius Placidius Valentinianus) (b. 419; r. 425–455): Son of Galla Placidia and Constantius III. As western Roman emperor, Valentinian lost the remaining provinces in Spain and North Africa. His mother, who directed affairs of state, clashed with the powerful magister militum Aetius. Valentinian III, murdered by a clique of senators, left no heirs; thus, the western Roman Empire disappeared within 20 years of his death.

Suggested Reading

Ferrill, *The Fall of the Roman Empire*.

Gordon, *The Age of Attila*.

Meaenchen-Helfen (Knight, ed.), *The World of the Huns*.

O’Flynn, *Generalissmos of the Western Roman Empire*.

Sinor, “The Hun Period.”

Thompson, *The Huns*.

Questions to Consider

1. What accounts for the enduring popularity of Attila as one of the greatest barbarian conquerors? How do these perceptions match or differ from the sources on Attila?

2. What were the qualities that made Attila such a remarkable conqueror? How much did he depend on the prowess of the Huns as horse archers? How much did he depend on the weakness of the Roman Empire?

3. Why did the eastern and western Roman Empires pursue different policies with regard to Attila? Were Attila’s aims consistent throughout his career? Why did his empire fragment so quickly upon his death?
4. What was the impact of Attila’s invasions of Gaul and Italy in 451–452? Was the Battle of Châlons decisive?

5. How did Attila’s career mark the beginning of the medieval world for both Europe and the south Russian steppes?
Sassanid Shahs and the Hephthalites
Lecture 13

In this lecture, we’ll cover two new nomadic peoples known as the Hephthalites, or “White Huns,” and the Gök Turks, actually ancestors of many of the Turkish peoples living today in the Middle East and central Asia. In the last two lectures, we dealt with the Huns, who in some ways represent the climax and conclusion to the nomadic steppe peoples of antiquity on the western steppes. In this lecture, we’ll turn to the central steppes, the regions that essentially are around the Caspian and Aral seas and Transoxiana, and deal with events taking place there at the same time the Huns were assailng the Roman Empire.

The Sassanid Empire

- The Sassanid Empire was the contemporary empire and rival to the late Roman world. We talked about the Sassanids briefly in our lecture on the Parthians because the shahs Ardashir I and his son Shapur I restored the great bureaucratic Persian Empire known as the Sassanid or Neo-Persian Empire that saw itself as the direct successor of the Achaemenid Empire of the 5th through the 4th centuries B.C. They had overthrown the Parthian rulers and founded an effective bureaucratic state.

- The Sassanid shahs saw themselves as the vice-regents of a new Zoroastrian state. Zoroastrianism was a monotheistic religion centered on a supreme god, Ahura Mazda, the god of lightness, good, and truth. The ancient fire altar became the symbol of Ahura Mazda, and fire altars were set up across the Sassanid Empire as symbols of his power. Animal sacrifice was ended, and a much more devotional worship took its place.

- The monarchy was closely tied to the veneration of Ahura Mazda. On some of the Sassanid coins, the fire altar appears flanked by two guardians, perhaps royal figures or military attendants but not magi or priests. In some instances, within the flames of the fire altar
is apparently Ahura Mazda conceived in human form, and in one case, it may well even be the portrait of a king.

- There was a close association between the king and Ahura Mazda. Both the king and the god were locked in internal battle with the forces of evil, represented by the counter-god Ahriman. This struggle was also reflected in human affairs between the shah and his political rivals, such as the Roman emperor or, later, the kings of the Hephthalites and the **khagans** of the various Turkish tribes.

- The Sassanid state was much better organized than the Parthian and, with its tax collection, could support a far more professional army. The Sassanids could capture and rule cities in a way that the Parthians never could and posed a considerable danger to the Roman emperors.

**Clashes with Rome**

- In the 3rd century A.D., starting with the first shah, Ardashir I, down through the shah Narses, Roman and Sassanid armies clashed for control of Armenia and Mesopotamia. In the end, the Romans won this round of fighting but not before suffering some humiliating defeats, particularly in the reign of Shapur I. One Roman emperor, Gordian III, is shown on Shapur’s victory reliefs as defeated and slain. The successor of Gordian III, Philip I, known often as Philip the Arab, is shown as a suppliant to Shapur.

- These events occurred in 243 to 244 A.D. In 260, Shapur defeated the emperor **Valerian**. He lured the emperor into a conference and captured him. Valerian, too, is shown on the reliefs in a subordinate position to the shah. These victories exalted the power of the Sassanid shah over Rome because the shah demanded the eastern half of the Roman Empire as part of his legacy. However, the Romans regrouped and counterattacked, and by 300 A.D., the shah signed a treaty relinquishing provinces to the Roman emperor.

- That situation lasted for about 60 years. Then, a new war erupted, which ended in the defeat of the Roman emperor Julian III in 363
by Shah **Shapur II**. The result was a series of treaties starting in 364 that gave the shah the better position in the Middle East, with formerly Roman fortresses in Mesopotamia and control over Armenia.

### Pressures on the Sassanids
- The Persians discovered that the door prize for their victories over the Romans was dealing with the nomadic peoples coming over the Caucasus by way of the Dariel and Derbent passes. In particular, the Derbent Pass, which is close to the Caspian Sea, led directly into Azerbaijan, a large grassland that was instinctively attractive to nomadic peoples. The Huns broke in repeatedly, and the shah had to deal with them throughout the 4\(^{th}\) and into the 5\(^{th}\) centuries.

- At the same time, the shah faced new pressures on the northeast in Transoxiana, along the upper regions of the Jaxartes. Those pressures arose from two new groups, the first of which was the **Hephthalites**, or “White Huns.” These were probably Tocharian speakers, along with some Iranian speakers and Turkish elements, who had been pushed into the Tarim Basin as a result of the collapse of the Han Empire in China.
  - The immediate reaction of the Sassanid shahs was to hire the Hephthalites as mercenaries in their attempts to further expand their empire. The Sassanids had taken over the core areas of the Parthian Empire, but that was not enough. They sought to acquire the regions that are today Afghanistan, Pakistan, and the central Soviet Republic.
  - The first two shahs, Ardashir and Shapur I, had imposed their authority over Transoxiana and the Kushan princes ruling in northern India, doubling the size of the Sassanid state. In the 3\(^{rd}\) century A.D., these domains provided gold and silver and access to nomadic tribal allies, all of which had enabled the shahs to wage expensive wars against the Romans.
  - That convenient situation began to break down at the end of the 4\(^{th}\) century, when the Hephthalites appeared on the banks
of the Jaxartes. Initially, the shahs sought to settle them on the frontiers as allies and auxiliaries, but the Hephthalites realized the advantages of controlling the caravan routes of Transoxiana and quickly turned from allies to rivals.

- The Hephthalites overran much of Transoxiana for most of the 5th and early 6th centuries and ruled under their own titles. As a result, the shahs found themselves losing valuable provinces to the east.

  - Shah Peroz I, who ruled in the mid-5th century, mounted several campaigns against the Hephthalites, and in one, he was captured and eventually forced to ransom himself and his son in a humiliating treaty. It’s even reported that the then-ruling eastern Roman emperor Leo I offered to help pay part of the ransom because he found it far more convenient to deal with the Persian shah than Hephthalites running over the Middle East. Shah Peroz regained his throne but was killed in battle in 484.

  - His son Kavadh came to the throne but was challenged by his uncle and chased out of Persia. He eventually cut a deal with the Hephthalites to form an army of horse archers to put himself back on the Persian throne and, in return, agreed to a treaty confirming essentially the Oxus River as the boundary between the Sassanid and Hephthalite empires.

  - This was a severe blow. It was a major territorial loss and resulted in the emergence of an impressive Hephthalite state controlling Transoxiana, dominating at least the western cities of the Tarim
Basin, the central steppes, and parts of northern India. This Hephthalite state looked increasingly like the old Kushan Empire.

- The shahs were never reconciled to this loss and took a number of important measures to counter this eastern threat, including constant exchanges with Constantinople to cement good relations with the Byzantine emperor.
  - They also erected an impressive set of fortifications known as the Gorgon Walls that extend east of the Caspian Sea and cut off key passes that would give access to nomads coming from the steppes. These fortifications were probably manned by between 15,000 and 30,000 guards.
  - But the best way to defeat nomadic horse archers is to hire other nomadic horse archers, and that’s what a new shah did. Shah Khosrow I, who came to the throne in 531, contacted possible allies, the Gök Turks, who could help him beat this new menace that controlled the valuable eastern lands.

**The Gök Turks**

- In 557, Khosrow entered into negotiations with a leader of the Turks, Istami. The Gök Turks (“Sky Turks”) were the newest nomadic power on the eastern steppes and had rapidly expanded across the steppes. The shah wasn’t aware of how large this confederation really was. He contacted these potential allies and made arrangements to conduct a joint war against the Hephthalites and share the spoils.

- That was a momentous decision. The shah agreed to take a Turkish princess, the daughter of Istami, into his harem. He also released great numbers of steppe cavalry to help the Turks wipe out the Hephthalites.

- As always the case with Turkish horse archers, they did their jobs well. The Hephthalites left, and their possessions in India essentially fell into the hands of Indian native rulers. Central Asia fell under the control of the Gök Turks. Now, the shah realized that
he had a far more powerful foe than he had ever imagined in his former allies.

- Quite unwittingly, Khosrow I brought into the Middle East a new people, the Gök Turks, who had numerous advantages and political and military organizations that previous nomads had not. What the shah had done was to open a new chapter in the history of the steppes. The Turks were destined to propel the Eurasian steppes and all of its associated civilizations out of antiquity and into the early Middle Ages.

### Important Terms

**Ahura Mazda**: The supreme god of creation in Zoroastrianism.

**Gök Turks**: The “Celestial Turks” who overthrew the Avar khanate in 551–552. Khan Bumin established the senior Gök Turk khaganate (551–744). His brother Istami (551–575) established the western Turkish khaganate (553–659) on the central and western Eurasian steppe. In 681, after ending Tang Chinese overlordship, the western khaganate was reconstituted as the Confederation of the Ten Arrows.

**Hephthalites**: The “White Huns” were Tocharian-speaking nomads, driven from the eastern Eurasian steppe by the northern Wei emperors of China and Avar khagans. They founded an empire (408–670) encompassing the western Tarim Basin, Transoxania, and northern India.

**khagan**: Meaning “khan of khans,” a Turkish term denoting a great royal figure ruling over many subordinate khans.

**Zoroastrianism**: The monotheistic religion of the Iranians, based on the teachings of Zoroaster, born circa 628 B.C. The Sassanid shahs favored Zoroastrianism as reformed in the 3rd century.
Ardashir I (227–240): Shah of Persia; overthrew Parthian rule and founded the Sassanid Neo-Persian Empire. He initiated the first of a series of wars by the Sassanid shahs to conquer the eastern provinces of the Roman Empire.

Istami (553–575): Yabgu of the western Gök Turks; brother of Khagan Bumin, who commissioned Istami to pursue the Avars, who had fled west. Istami established western Turks on the central Eurasian steppe. In 557–561, in alliance with Shah Khosrow I, he occupied Transoxania and ended the Hephthalite Empire.

Khosrow I (531–579): Sassanid shah; waged two wars against Justinian, emperor of the eastern Roman (Byzantine) Empire, in 530–532 and 550–545. He sought prestige, plunder, or subsidies of gold under treaty from Justinian rather than conquest. In 557–561, he allied with Istami, yabgu khagan of the western Turks, to defeat the Hephthalites.

Peroz I (457–484): Sassanid shah; was deposed by his brother Hormizd II. He regained his throne with a Hephthalite army provided by King Khush-Nevaz. Peroz twice waged campaigns against his former ally Khush-Nevaz. In either 469 or 472, Peroz suffered a defeat and had to pay a ransom for his release. In 484, he was slain near Herat, enabling the Hephthalites to raid deep into Iran.

Shapur I (240–270): Sassanid shah; waged three major wars against the Roman Empire, in 242–244, 253, and 254–260. In the third war, he took the Roman emperor Valerian captive. His victories are celebrated on the rock reliefs at Naqsh-e Rostam. Shapur failed to conquer Roman territory, and in 262, he faced a counterinvasion by Odenathus, merchant prince of Palmyra and ally of Rome.

Shapur II (309–379): Sassanid shah; waged two wars against the Roman Empire, in 335–350 and 358–363. He repelled the Roman invasion of lower Mesopotamia led by the emperor Julian II. The retreat and death of Julian enabled Shapur II to conclude a favorable treaty from the new emperor, Jovian, who relinquished the strategic fortresses of upper Mesopotamia.
Valerian (b. c. 193; r. 253–260): Roman emperor; waged two Persian wars. He was captured by Shah Shapur I and died ignominiously in captivity. As a result of Valerian’s defeat and capture, Shah Shapur ravaged Roman provinces in eastern Asia Minor and northern Syria in 260. He ordered the second empire-wide persecution of Christians in 258–260.

**Suggested Reading**

Canepa, *The Two Eyes of the Earth*.

Daryae, *Sasanian Persia*.

Pourshariati, *Decline and Fall of the Sasanian Empire*.

Sinor, “Establishment and Dissolution of the Türk Empire.”

**Questions to Consider**

1. How successful were the Sassanid shahs in creating a new bureaucratic monarchy in the Near East? How effective was the shah’s power? What was the value of Zoroastrianism to the shah?

2. How did the Sassanid Empire differ from the Parthian Empire, whose Arsacid kings ruled from horseback? How did the Sassanids view the nomadic peoples of the steppes?

3. Why did the Sassanid shahs wage so many wars against imperial Rome? How did these wars compromise defense along the northern frontiers?

4. Who were the Hephthalites? Why were they considered Huns? In what ways did the Hephthalites re-create the Kushan Empire?

5. Why did the collapse of the Hephthalite Empire benefit the Gök Turks?
With this lecture, we move our course into the early Middle Ages, that is, the period from roughly the 6th century A.D. to the end of the 11th century A.D. This period is defined particularly by the emergence of the Turks. We will first shift our focus back to the eastern steppes—the grasslands of Mongolia—where we will see the origins of the Turks and look at the interaction between the early Turks and China after the Han Dynasty. Turning back to the western steppe zones, we will deal with the relationship between the Turks and Byzantium, and finally, we will explore the interaction of the Turks with the peoples of the Middle East in the central steppe zone.

**Emergence of the Turks**

- The Turks apparently emerged in the Orkhon Valley. Ironically, with their expansion into the central Asian steppes, the Turks lost their homeland in Mongolia.

- The Turkish languages are closely related and show far less divergence than Indo-European languages. They diverged from the parent Proto-Turkish language relatively late, perhaps in the 1st century B.C. or the 3rd century A.D. The constant reinforcing of traditional Turkish as different groups intermarried and assimilated across the steppes also contributed to the homogeneity of the Turkish languages.

- This is seen quite well in two modern Turkish languages: Uzbek, which has been heavily influenced by Persian languages, and the Turkish of the Turkish Republic. In the 5th century A.D., all the Turkish tribes spoke what we might call dialects that were probably mutually intelligible. They didn’t diverge into independent languages until the 11th century.
The Avar Khagans

- The Avars emerged in the 4th century B.C. Their rulers—khagans—put together the first significant confederacy of Turks on the steppes.

- By the opening of the early Middle Ages, the Turks had acquired superior saddles and stirrups, which allowed archers to guide their horses and use both hands for their weapons.
  - There were also certain improvements in the composite bow, and the Turks perfected the forging of iron and steel. Turkish speakers living in the Altai Mountains were known for producing fine armor, conical helmets, scimitars, and battleaxes.
  - Thus, at the start of the Middle Ages, the Turkish nomadic warriors were far better equipped and armed than any of the earlier nomadic peoples. Invariably the nomadic armies now had heavy cavalry—lancers—and large numbers of horse archers.

- The Avars were Turkish speakers who dominated the eastern steppes from about 330 A.D. down to 551 or 552. Their effective armies enabled them to negotiate terms with the dynasties then ruling in China, particularly the emperors of the northern Wei Dynasty. They also engaged in border wars with the Hephthalites, and as a result, they participated in trade to acquire silks and other goods.

- Sometime in 551 or 552, a vassal ruler of this confederacy, a man named Bumin, ruler of the Gök Turks, overthrew the Avars. This was essentially an internal rebellion. Bumin had a private quarrel with the last Avar khagan; he had been denied a royal marriage. Bumin’s followers were particularly well armed because they were the people producing the weapons that armed the confederacy of the Avar khaganate.

- As a result, Bumin, who died soon after the rebellion, established the second great khaganate on the steppes. He seized the Orkhon Valley and was acclaimed khagan, probably by an assembly of khans and princes, who gave their approval for this man to lead the confederation.
Eastern and Western Gök Turks

- The Gök Turks did not confine their activities to just the eastern steppes. They were responsible for a rapid expansion of the Turks across the central and western steppes. In the course of the 6th century, Turkish speakers extended all the way into the Pontic-Caspian steppes, penetrating to the shores of the Black Sea and to the steppes around the Caspian and Aral seas. They came into contact with the Sassanid Empire and the Byzantine Empire, as well as with the various kingdoms in China.

- That expansion saw several important changes, including a linguistic transformation of the steppes. The Turks proved extremely adaptable in assimilating other steppe peoples, who up until this point mostly spoke Iranian languages. With Turkish becoming a common language, the various steppe peoples also became culturally united.

- Bumin gave his brother Istami the commission to go west and pursue the Avars, who eventually ended up in western Europe, trying to flee the Gök Turks and enter into alliance with Constantinople. After Bumin died, the Gök khaganate essentially divided into two: the eastern Gök khaganate, centered on the traditional homelands, and the western Gök khaganate, centered on the central lands and with aspirations to bring the western steppes under control.
  - This division was not just a matter of lateral succession but also a matter of size. The military abilities of the Gök Turks were so great that they were able to incorporate much of the steppes under a single confederacy. Thus, the political division was forced as a result of considerations related to time and communication.
  - Bumin was ruling in the Turkish heartland, in what is today central Mongolia—3,000 miles away from where his brother was operating on the shores of the Caspian or fighting the Sassanid shah in Transoxiana. This state could not be ruled from a single center.
This partition of great khaganates became a feature ever after and was seen in the Mongol Empire conquered by Genghis Khan.

The eastern khaganate drew the attention of the Chinese emperors, particularly the Tang emperors. In 618, the Tang emperors unified China into a great military state and immediately targeted the northern lands as a region to bring under control. They waged major wars against the Gök Turks, culminating in a campaign in 629–630, in which the Chinese general Li Jing destroyed the army of the khagans. The eastern khaganate collapsed, and thousands of Turks were captured and sent back to China to serve in the Chinese army or were settled as colonists.

In 657, Tang armies also inflicted a serious defeat on the western Turks in central Asia. From this point down into the 680s, the central and eastern steppes were ruled by the Chinese emperor. This was a major achievement; no other urban civilization of the entire Middle Ages or even of antiquity ever won such victories as the Tang emperor did.

However, this situation could not last, and the Tang Empire went into a decline, particularly brought on by the An Lushan Rebellion, which broke out from 755 to 763. The weakening of the Tang Dynasty allowed the Turks to reestablish their independence. They shook off Tang control in a rebellion in 680–681. We have a remarkable set of inscriptions that were set up by these restored Turkish khagans in the Orkhon Valley—the earliest examples of Turkish.

The Orkhon inscriptions are written in a runic script. They describe a yabgu—a subordinate

The Orkhon inscriptions represent our first direct evidence from the Gök Turks and are regarded as a World Heritage site today.
khagan—named **Tonyukuk**, who put the khagan **Bilge** on the throne.

- In the inscription, Tonyukuk warns his khagan and his people not to become too assimilated to Chinese ways, not to build Daoist temples or Buddhist stupas, and above all, not to lose their military virtues.

- The Orkhon inscriptions mark the height of the Gök Turk khaganate. Within 20 years of the inscriptions, the khaganate was overthrown by a subject tribe of the confederation who were also Turks.

**The Uighurs**

- Between 742 and 744, a new group of Turks, known as Uighurs, constructed the third khaganate, which in some ways represented an improvement over the previous two. Essentially the western zones, even much of the central steppes, were loosely affiliated with this khaganate.

- The Uighurs quickly came to embrace Manichaeism, developed their own script, and established settlements. They turned their tent encampments into what looked like insipient towns. The Uighurs established a close relationship with the caravan cities and the later Tang emperors. As a result, important cultural influences emanating from China and the caravan cities of the Silk Road entered into the eastern and central steppes. For this reason, the Uighurs were regarded as the most accomplished and civilized among all the Turks.

- This view is documented in their political dealings with the Chinese Empire. At least half of the Uighur khagans married Chinese princesses, who would have arrived from the Tang court, along with artisans, entertainers, and scribes. The Uighurs were receptive to all these cultural influences.

- They were also tolerant of all religions, even though they favored Manichaeism. They allowed the dissemination of Nestorian Christianity and Buddhism across the eastern steppes.
• The Uighur khaganate lasted for about a century before it was overthrown, again, by subject tribes. The capital was destroyed in 845. Many of the Uighurs migrated into the cities of the Tarim Basin and eventually merged with the sedentary populations, bringing their language and traditions.

• These three Turkish khaganates—the Avars, the Gök Turks, and the Uighurs—were the dress rehearsals for the great Mongol Empire of Genghis Khan. They forged more impressive political organizations and brought the Turks into intimate contact with settled civilizations, particularly the civilization of Islam. Indeed, the interaction between the Turks and Islam would change the life of the steppes and change the emerging Islamic world.

Important Terms

**An Lushan Rebellion**: A rebellion (755–762) raised by the Tang general An Lushan against the emperor Xuanzong (712–756). The revolt, even though it failed, wrought great destruction throughout China and compelled the emperor to withdraw garrisons from the Tarim Basin.

**Avars**: Peoples who founded the first confederation of Turkish-speaking tribes on the eastern Eurasian steppe (330–551). In 551–552, Bumin of the Gök Turks overthrew the Avars, who then migrated west to establish a new khaganate on the Pannonian plains (580–796).

**khan**: Turko-Mongolian royal title, meaning “king.”

**northern Wei Dynasty**: Sinicized nomadic rulers (386–535) of northern China and the Gansu Corridor. They promoted Buddhism along the Silk Road. They were Turkish-speaking Tuoba, the royal clan of the Xianbei tribes.

**Orkhon inscriptions**: The earliest memorial inscriptions in Turkish (722); written in a distinct runic alphabet.

**yabgu**: The subordinate of a khan or khagan; among the Khazars, the leading commander of the army.
Bilge (b. c. 683; r. 717–734): The fourth Ashina khagan of the Gök Turks (or eastern Turks) since the end of the Tang overlordship in 681. The protégé of his yabgu and father-in-law Tonyukuk, Bilge restored the power of the Gök Turks on the eastern Eurasian steppe. His deeds are celebrated on the memorial inscriptions in the Old Turkic language in the Orkhon Valley (today Mongolia).

Bumin (546–553): Khagan of the Gök Turks and a member of the Ashina clan. He ruled as vassal king to the Avars over the Turks dwelling in the Altai Mountains. In 552–553, he overthrew his Avar overlord Anagui and established the Gök Turk khaganate on the eastern Eurasian steppe.

Li Jing (571–649): Tang general and chancellor; proved the ablest commander under emperors Gaozu and Taizong. In 629–630, he defeated and captured Khagan Illig, thereby ending the eastern Turkish khaganate.

Tonyukuk (646–726): A yabgu of the eastern Turkish khaganate and advisor to Bilge Khan (717–734). He restored the power of the khaganate after the end of the Tang overlordship in 681. In 716, he erected a memorial inscription of his deeds and his advice in the Old Turkic language at Bayn Tsokto in the Orkhon Valley (today Mongolia).

Suggested Reading

Barefield, *The Perilous Frontier*.

Golden, *Central Asia in World History*.

———, “The Peoples of the South Russian Steppes.”

MacKerras, “The Uighurs.”

Sinor, “The Establishment and Dissolution of the Türk Empire.”
Questions to Consider

1. Why did the expansion of Turkish-speaking nomads across the Eurasian steppes prove so important? Where did the Turks find new homes? How does this wide distribution of Turkish speaking peoples still influence the world today?

2. What decisive advantages did Turkish horse archers enjoy over other foes?

3. What led to the rapid rise and fall of the Avar, Gök Turk, and Uighur khaganates? How did these khagans seek to make their power effective among so many diverse tribes within these confederations? In what ways did these efforts anticipate the Mongol Empire?

4. How did trade and the reception of new religions, such as Buddhism, Manichaeism, or Christianity, transform these early Turkish empires? Why did the civilization of China have such a profound impact?
In the last lecture, we talked about three early Turkish khaganates: the Avars, Gök Turks, and Uighurs. The last two of these khaganates were brought down by rebels who had been egged on and financed by Chinese emperors. That brings us back to the role that China played vis-à-vis the nomadic peoples of the eastern steppes. This lecture, then, provides an update on events in China since the fragmentation of the Han Dynasty in 220 A.D. Then, we look at the interaction between the Chinese and the Turkish-speaking peoples who settled in northern China. Finally, we consider the unification of China under the Sui and Tang emperors and their relationship with both the Gök Turks and the Uighurs.

The Northern Wei and Sui Dynasties

- As mentioned earlier, the empire of the Han (206 B.C.–220 A.D.) was roughly contemporary with the Roman Empire. The Han Empire initiated many of the policies and priorities on the Chinese political agenda that actually continue down to this day. Successive Chinese emperors were influenced by that notion that the Middle Kingdom had the right to rule the various areas along the northern frontier and into central Asia to control the vital Silk Road.

- In 220, the Han Empire fragmented into three competing kingdoms. They were briefly united by the Jin emperors but then collapsed into 12 or 15 competing principalities. In this political landscape of civil war, rebellions, and migrations, there are a couple of important facts to keep in mind.
  - First, the locus of Chinese civilization shifted from the Yellow River south into the Yangtze River basin. The southern regions of China offered a great deal more opportunity to exploit the landscape, support great cities, and become the repositories of Chinese civilization. Already in the period of the 3rd, 4th, and 5th centuries A.D., there was a migration of Chinese to the south.
Another important feature in this period is that nomadic peoples begin to migrate inside of China. Specifically, in the 4th century, Turkish speakers moved into the northern regions of China. They were contemporary with the Avar khagans, but they carved out their own frontier kingdom in the Yellow River basin and began to rule as if they were Chinese emperors. These emperors took the Chinese dynastic name Wei.

The northern Wei rulers set the pattern for future nomadic conquerors of China, including the Mongols. The Wei learned that the Chinese could not be ruled by horseback. It was necessary to co-opt the Chinese administrative class and to tax the peasantry, rather than simply plundering it. Above all, these rulers were great sponsors of Buddhism, and it is because of these early emperors that Buddhism entered China and spread across the population.

In 581, Emperor Wen began a series of campaigns to reunite China. By 589, he had battled his way to control the entire Middle Kingdom. The northern Wei were brought under his control. All the southern kingdoms were reunited, and once again, China was a single imperial state.

The second emperor of the Sui Dynasty, Yangdi, got involved in wars against the Koreans and with steppe nomads. He left no powerful successor, and when he died (617/618), he was succeeded by Li, a duke, who established the Tang Dynasty.
The Tang Dynasty

- The Tang Dynasty was essentially a continuation of the Sui. Li, who took the throne name Gaozu, was from a powerful military family, and he and his son Taiyüan (Taizong) proved to be extraordinary emperors.

- The Tang Dynasty is looked upon as the apex of early Chinese civilization. In one sense, it was the empire in which China achieved its greatest territorial extent. However, it is significant that the Tang Empire was not purely a Chinese empire. It owed a great deal to the frontier society along the northern Chinese border. The Chinese people and the nomads there had been interacting at least since the 3rd century B.C.

- Gaozu and Taizong were not typical Confucians; they were known to be great equestrians and reveled in battle. They commanded armies, were involved in military reforms, and hand-picked excellent generals. In the early Tang period, the army was reorganized into seven divisions. These were powerful field armies, with 20,000 men and at least 4,000 cavalry assigned to each division.
  - The logistics of the Chinese army were clearly superb. Tang armies numbering between 50,000 and 150,000 are reported to have mobilized against distant objectives in Korea, against the steppe nomads, and in the south, along the borders of what today would be called Vietnam.
  - The general Li Jing and his colleagues were behind this military reorganization, and they perfected the strategy and tactics to bring the nomads to battle.

- In 628, after some humiliating defeats at the hands of the Gök Turks, the emperor Taizong decided to reckon with the Turkish khagan, Illig. A huge army was mobilized; one, commanded by Li Jing, penetrated into the Turkish homeland, and on May 2, 630, brought the Gök Turk army to bay. The khagan himself was captured, and the eastern Gök khaganate collapsed. Turkish tribes acknowledged the authority of Taizong.
• By the late 640s, the Tang armies had swept through the Tarim Basin and brought that entire area back under Tang control. In 657, a Tang army won an even more significant victory over the western Gök Turks and forced them to acknowledge the authority of the emperor of China. By 660, all the central and eastern nomadic zones were essentially ruled by the Chinese emperor. It was without a doubt the greatest imperial order on the globe at this point.

• The Tang Dynasty was extremely successful, and we have a wealth of information about how the emperors organized what they called the four garrisons.
  ○ The Tarim Basin was divided into four garrisons based on caravan cities and put under the command of four military governors, with an overall superintendent of the entire region. The garrisons had Chinese military colonists, as well as native populations and many nomadic peoples.

  ○ Surviving documents of the military garrisons show that the Chinese had a major impact in stimulating the development of cities in the Tarim Basin. For example, soldiers were paid in “cash coins,” which monetized markets in the caravan cities. Chinese settlers and pilgrims came to the region, and the Chinese language became well known.

• The Tang established an impressive political order, but it was expensive to maintain. Already at the end of the 7th century, the imperial budget faced increasing military and frontier costs.
  ○ These resulted from the fielding of great armies and garrisons, notably in the western region, and from expeditions in Korea and to the south.

  ○ Further, the Tang emperors repaired and manned the Great Walls and began to link the various canal systems into what would eventually become the Grand Canal. The canal systems were necessary for moving forces and supplies between northern and southern China and for shipping silk out of the south.
Costs were also associated with maintaining the northern frontiers.

**End of the Tang**

- In 751, the Tang Dynasty suffered three significant defeats on the frontiers. The first was in Korea; the second was in the region that would be Yunnan today, another border area; and the third—the one that really hit home—was the defeat on the Talas River.
- At the Talas River, a Chinese army for the first time ran into an army of the Abbasid caliphs. Both sides fielded nomadic cavalry. The Chinese army had state-of-the-art crossbows and heavy infantry. But the Tang’s nomadic allies, the Turks, deserted over to the Muslim side. The result was a decisive win for the Muslims.
- That accomplishment would make Islam the religion of victory in the eyes of the nomadic peoples, and it was a significant blow to the credibility of the Tang emperors.

- Those defeats, which fed into the fiscal demands and weaknesses and into the perceptions that the Tang emperors had lost the mandate of heaven, resulted in the explosion of the An Lushan Rebellion. This was led by a Uighur Turkish general who had fallen out of favor. In the end, the Tang emperors triumphed. They put the rebellion down, but it turned out to be a demographic and fiscal disaster.
- The Chinese armies were withdrawn from the western garrisons. The Tibetans controlled the Tarim Basin and Silk Road for the next 75 years. Although Tang armies reappeared in the 840s and 850s and reimposed some authority over the Tarim Basin, it was never the same.
- The Tang emperors made deals with warlords to regain the throne, and by 907, the Tang Dynasty fragmented, just as its predecessor, the Han Empire, had. As a result, China once again became home to competing warlords and new nomads settling in the Middle Kingdom.
Above all, the defeat on the battlefield of Talas marked a turning point in the history of the steppes and of China: For the first time, the power of Islam had projected itself over the steppes.

### Names to Know

**Gaozu** (b. 566; r. 618–626): Tang emperor of China. One of the greatest soldier-emperors of Chinese history. Under the Sui emperors, Gaozu, or Li Yuan, ruled strategic borderlands in Shanxi. In 618, he seized power. He waged war against the Gök Turks of the eastern khaganate.

**Illig Khagan** (r. 620–630): Ruled over the eastern Turkish khaganate. His raids into northern China precipitated war with the Tang emperor Taizong. In 626–630, the Tang general Li Jing defeated and captured Illig, thereby ending the eastern Turkish khaganate and imposing Chinese overlordship in 630–681.

**Taizong** (b. 598; r. 626–649): Tang emperor of China. Defeated the Gök Turks in 629–630 and brought the eastern Eurasian steppe under Chinese rule. His generals Li Jing and Li Shiji subjected the Tarim Basin, defeated the Tibetans, and advanced Chinese influence to the Jaxartes River.

**Yangdi** (b. 569; r. 604–618): Sui emperor; reorganized the imperial army, recruiting Turkish cavalry. He initiated the conquest of what is now Vietnam, but expeditions against Korea proved costly failures. His assassination precipitated a brief civil war, whereby the general Li Yuan seized the throne as Gaozu, first emperor of the Tang Dynasty.

### Suggested Reading

Barefield, *The Perilous Frontier*.


Lewis, *China between Dynasties*.

Li, trans., *The Great Tang Dynasty Record of the Western Regions*.

Questions to Consider

1. What role did the nomadic barbarians play in the disunity in China in 330–581? Why did successful Turkish generals and princes embrace Chinese institutions and aesthetics whenever they carved out a kingdom in northern China? What impact did the nomads have on the society and mores of northern China?

2. What accounted for the success of the northern Wei as Sinified rules? Why did they fail to unite China? What accounted for the success of the Sui emperors? Why did they fail to deal with the Turkish khaganates?

3. What accounts for the extraordinary success of the Tang emperors Gaozu and Taizong against the nomadic Turks? How important was Li Jing as general and strategist in Tang success?

4. What was the impact on Tang civilization of the nomadic peoples and the cities of the Tarim Basin in the 7th and early 8th centuries?

5. How did setbacks in frontier policy lead to the An Lushan Rebellion? How were fiscal weakness, oppressive taxation, and rebellion ultimately linked to the costs of imperial defense? How did the later Tang emperors fail?
In this lecture, we will shift our focus away from the eastern Eurasian steppes and the Chinese world, back across those steppes to the western arm. That would be the region stretching from essentially the lower and middle Danube River to the Ural River that empties into the Caspian Sea. We want to focus on the interaction of the Turkish peoples with the greatest Christian civilization of the early Middle Ages, that of the Byzantine Empire, centered on Constantinople, or New Rome. In the next three lectures, we’ll look at the relationship between Byzantine civilization and the peoples of the steppes.

Lessons Learned by the Byzantines

- To understand the Byzantine perception of the northern nomads, recall that the emperors who ruled in Constantinople saw themselves as heirs to the Roman Empire going back to Augustus, and they were particularly conscious of the crisis that late Roman emperors had encountered from the Huns in the 5th century A.D.

- The emperors had drawn several important lessons from their dealings with Attila the Hun. One was to pursue a policy of divide and conquer to undermine any kind of insipient confederacy on the steppes. It has often been remarked that Byzantine diplomacy is perhaps the most contorted and clever of all diplomacies ever created. It was largely devised for dealing with steppe nomads.

- The other important lesson the Byzantines learned was to trust the walls of Constantinople. The walls were such an effective barrier that no nomadic conqueror, no matter how sophisticated his engines of war, could possibly breach them. The Roman masonry architecture defied any invader until the advent of artillery. Even provincial cities, such as Thessalonica, were well fortified and could defy nomadic invaders.
The Byzantines, who had problems dealing with the Islamic world and their own internal religious issues, failed to have the same kind of impact on the peoples of the western Eurasian steppes that the Chinese and, as we shall see, the Muslim world had on steppe nomads. The nomadic peoples dwelling on the steppes from the Danube to the Caspian never embraced Orthodox Christianity.

**Negotiations and Alliances with the Turks**

- The first time the Byzantines encountered the Turks was during the reign of the emperor Justinian I, who ruled from 527 to 565 and attempted to reconquer the western provinces. Avar envoys arrived at the court at Constantinople, seeking to enter into an alliance with the Byzantine emperors. They were seen as an exotic people, quite beyond the imagination of those living in Constantinople.

- The Gök Turks claimed that these Avars were wayward vassals. This opened up a series of negotiations between the court in Constantinople and the rulers of the western Gök Turks. One of the big stumbling blocks in these negotiations was the question of the Avars, whom the Byzantines hope to use as possible allies.

- Another issue was the question of trade routes. The Byzantines sought access to an extension of the Silk Road from the southern shores of the Aral Sea across the steppes to ports on the Black Sea. This issue was raised repeatedly between the imperial government and the nomadic tribes of the steppes.

- Meanwhile, the Avars turned out to be not the best of allies. To escape the control of the Gök Turks, they moved west and settled on the Hungarian plain, the same area that Attila had controlled. Having escaped the power of the western Turkish khagans, they began to raid into the Byzantine Empire.
  - Like all nomadic rulers, the Avar khagan needed gold to pay off his various followers. In addition, the Avars found that the imperial frontiers along the Danube were particularly vulnerable, largely because the imperial government had commitments elsewhere.
In the late 6th century, the Avars followed the river systems of the Balkans and ravaged many of the same cities once ravaged by the Huns.

The imperial government responded in part with diplomacy and gifts. There’s a famous story that the emperor Maurice Tiberius (r. 582–602) sent an elephant and a gold couch to the Avar khagan as novelties to try to convince him to ally with the Byzantines. The gift backfired, suggesting to the nomads that they could acquire more exotic gifts if they further pressured the Byzantines.

Maurice Tiberius is also credited with writing a strategic manual, the Strategikon, in which he described how to cope with nomadic cavalries. This document reveals that the Byzantines were now mounting cavalry with metal stirrups, had adopted some of the cavalry tactics of the steppes, and were hiring nomadic horse archers.

The difficulty for the Byzantines in dealing with nomadic invaders was the fact that they were at war with Persia, the Sassanid shahs. These wars dragged out over the 6th and 7th centuries, erupting in 568 and continuing on and off down to 628. Indeed, Persian and Byzantine emperors were in almost constant warfare over Armenia, Syria, and the traditional battlefields of the Middle East for almost 90 years.
In 590, the legitimate Sassanid emperor, Khosrow II, was overthrown by one of his generals, and civil war broke out in Persia. Maurice Tiberius lent Khosrow the Roman army, which put him back on the throne in 591. That bought the Byzantine Empire a brief respite from Persian wars, allowing Maurice to go after the Avars.

Maurice blundered in trying to have his army winter on the steppes of eastern Russia, and his forces rebelled in 602. They murdered Maurice and put a man named Phocas on the throne, who turned out to be incompetent. The Persian shah took advantage of this situation by invading the Byzantine Empire and, between 602 and 626, came very close to overthrowing the empire in Asia.

The Avars saw their chance. They entered into an alliance with the Sassanid shah and, in 626, besieged Constantinople on the European side. This alliance failed, largely because of the brilliant campaigns of the emperor Heraclius. While his capital was besieged, the emperor moved the imperial army by sea into Armenia and hooked up with the Gök Turks. Together, they waged a war against the Sassanid Empire that ended in total Byzantine victory by 628.

As a result of this victory, Heraclius recovered all of his Asian provinces in Egypt, and the Turks occupied strategic passes of the Caucasus and Transoxiana. The Persian Empire was bankrupt and reduced to its Iranian core. The Persians became vulnerable to Arab attack and, in 639, came crashing down.

In one sense, the Byzantine victory over the Persians was a poison legacy because the Byzantine Empire lost its most wealthy provinces in Syria, Egypt, and North Africa to Arab armies. However, the Byzantine state reconfigured itself as a regional power based on Asia Minor, the Balkans, and Italy. There, the Byzantines had to deal with nomadic peoples as a potential threat to their state.
End of the Avars

- Very soon after the initial Muslim conquest, Constantinople was able to stabilize its frontiers and come to an understanding with the caliphate, but the nomadic peoples were another matter.
  - For instance, the Avars—sometimes allies, sometimes raiders—dominated the steppes of eastern Europe; they repeatedly invaded the Balkans and disrupted imperial control there. Meanwhile, the Lombards, Germanic peoples, crossed the Alps and invaded Byzantine territory in Italy.
  - Slavic peoples moved in and settled the Balkans, resulting in an ethnic transformation from Latin- and Greek-speaking provinces into the Slavic principalities and kingdoms of the later Middle Ages.

- The Avars had suffered a significant check when they failed to take Constantinople in 626. The result was that Avar power receded. In the course of the 7th and 8th centuries, the Avars refocused their attacks on western Europe.

- Those attacks drew the Avars to the attention of the Franks, who reunited western Europe, especially under the emperor Charlemagne (r. 768–814). Charlemagne eventually captured the main settlement of the Avars and broke their power in 796. But the Avars had shown that a steppe nomadic conqueror could mobilize the power of the Slavic tribes, challenge Constantinople, and extort gifts as either tribute or plunder.

The Bulgars

- The successors to the Avar policy were a group of people called the Bulgars. They were apparently a Turkish tribe that had migrated west to escape the power of the western Turkish khagans. In 681, the Bulgars crossed the Danube into imperial territory and were initially admitted as imperial federates or allies. The relationship between the Bulgars and the Byzantine Empire was a major feature of the 9th and early 10th centuries.
• Up until the mid-860s, when the khagan Boris I converted to orthodox Christianity and began to build cities and rule as a Byzantine-style monarch, the rulers of the Bulgars were essentially nomadic khagans ruling in the Balkans and the eastern European steppes. With that power of Slavic infantry and nomadic cavalry, they repeatedly attacked the Byzantine Empire and inflicted embarrassing defeats on imperial armies.
  ○ The most famous one was in 811, when the khagan Krum destroyed the army of Emperor Nicephorus I, killed the emperor, and turned his skull into a drinking goblet.
  ○ These defeats forced the Byzantine state to acknowledge that most of the Balkans had passed under the authority of the Bulgar khagan.

• In 864, the situation improved for the Byzantines. In that year, Khagan Boris converted to Orthodox Christianity. As a result, Boris, now Tsar Boris, started to organize a Byzantine-style kingdom, collect taxes, establish cities, and initiate a major economic recovery in the Balkans. In the process, the Bulgars became Bulgarians; that is, the Turkic ruling class was assimilated into the wider Slavic population.

• The second son of Tsar Boris waged two major wars, from 894 to 897 and from 911 to 924, in an attempt to become the Byzantine emperor. His attempts failed and, in the end, so weakened the incipient Bulgarian kingdom that it was later incorporated back into the Byzantine Empire.

• Constantinople may have drawn some incorrect lessons from the conversion and assimilation of the Bulgars, believing that future nomadic people who threatened the security of Constantinople could likewise be turned into subjects of the emperor. That would have fateful consequences when the Byzantines dealt with new nomadic peoples on the steppes, particularly the Seljuk Turks.
Strategikon: Byzantine military manual, attributed to the emperor Maurice, with sound recommendations for countering nomadic cavalry.

Names to Know

Boris I (r. 858–899): Tsar of Bulgaria; converted to Orthodox Christianity in the 860s and, thus, assured the conversion of the southern Slavs. He presided over the conversion of the Bulgar khanate into a Christian Slavic kingdom.

Charlemagne (Charles the Great) (b. c. 747; r. 768–814): King of the Franks; forged the Carolingian Empire. He was crowned Roman emperor in 800, thereby founding the Holy Roman Empire. He built the first effective state in western Europe since the collapse of Roman power. In 791–796, he destroyed the Avar khaganate.

Heraclius (b. c. 576; r. 610–641): Byzantine emperor and exarch of Carthage; overthrew the usurper Phocas (r. 602–610). Heraclius rescued the eastern Roman Empire from near collapse and transformed it into the Byzantine state. He defeated Shah Khosrow II in 626–628 and recovered the eastern provinces. He nearly succeeded in reconciling the monophysites and Chalcedonians. Incapacitated by illness, the aging Heraclius failed to prevent the loss of Syria and Egypt to the Arab armies in 636–641.

Justinian I (b. 482; r. 527–565): Known as Justinian the Great; the greatest emperor since Constantine. He promoted the most talented at his court without regard to birth. He restored imperial rule in Italy and Africa, sought religious reconciliation, and sponsored arts and letters. His most enduring achievements are the Hagia Sophia and the Corpus Juris Civilis.

Khosrow II (591–628): Last great Sassanid shah. He gained his throne with the support of the Byzantine emperor Maurice. In 602–628, he waged a war of conquest of the eastern provinces of the Byzantine Empire. In alliance with the Avars, he besieged Constantinople in 626. In 622–628, the
emperor Heraclius, along with Turkish nomadic allies, launched offensives in Armenia, Iran, and Mesopotamia that led to the defeat and overthrow of Khosrow II. Heraclius recovered his lost eastern provinces, so weakening the Sassanid state that it fell to Arab armies in 636–651.

**Krum** (r. c. 803–814): Khan of the Bulgars; defeated the Byzantine emperors Nicephorus I and Michael I. He negotiated the first treaty with Byzantium that delineated the Bulgar state.

**Maurice** (582–602): Byzantine emperor; waged campaigns against the Avars in the Balkans and ended the Persian war (572–590) by supporting Shah Khosrow II to the Sassanid throne. He is credited with writing the *Strategikon*, a manual of tactics against nomadic horse archers.

**Nicephorus I** (802–811): Byzantine emperor; served as treasurer of the empress Irene (797–802). He was an Arabian by birth and seized power as Irene lost popularity. He suffered humiliating defeats at the hands of the Abbasid caliph Harun al-Rashid. He was defeated and slain by Khan Krum of the Bulgars.

### Suggested Reading

Curta and Kovaley, eds., *The Other Europe in the Middle Ages.*

Golden, “The Peoples of the South Russian Steppes.”

Oblensky, *The Byzantine Commonwealth.*

Runciman, *A History of the First Bulgarian Empire.*

Szádeczky-Kardoss, “The Avars.”

Whitby, *The Emperor Maurice and His Historian Theophylact Simocattta on Persian and Balkan Warfare.*

Questions to Consider

1. How did the emperors of Constantinople view the nomadic peoples dwelling on the Pontic-Caspian steppes in the 5th through 9th centuries? What were the imperial interests? How well did emperors between Justinian and Michael III secure these aims?

2. Why did the Avars pose such a threat to Constantinople? What advantages did the Avars possess over Attila and the Huns? How did they change the course of Byzantine civilization?

3. What accounted for the success of the Bulgars between 680 and the 830s? What were the achievements of the Bulgar khans? How did they contribute to the revival of trade and towns in the 9th century?

4. Why did the conversion of Boris to Orthodox Christianity transform the Bulgars from a steppe empire into a lesser Orthodox kingdom?

5. What impact did the Avars and Bulgars have on Byzantine policy and civilization?
This lecture introduces a new group of nomadic people, the Khazars. The khagans of the Khazars ruled as members of the Ashina family. This family claimed descent from the original khagan Bumin who overthrew the Avars in 552 A.D. The Khazars are significant for several reasons, including the fact that the upper classes converted to Judaism sometime at the end of the 8th or beginning of the 9th century. Further, they played an important role in Byzantine foreign policy and in the Byzantine wars against the Arab caliphate. In this lecture, we’ll explore who these people were, why they didn’t convert to Orthodox Christianity, and why the Byzantines failed to win the Khazars over to the Byzantine commonwealth.

Rise of the Khazars

- The Khazars were Gök Turks. Undoubtedly, their ancestors were among those Turks who had concluded an alliance with the emperor Heraclius in 625–626 to make common cause against the Sassanid emperor. As a result, large numbers of Turkish cavalry were released for imperial service.
  - In 627–628, some 10,000 Turkish horsemen crossed over the Caucasus and invaded Iran, ravaging Azerbaijan, penetrating as far south as the modern city of Hamadan, and causing great distress to the Sassanid emperor. Other subjects of the khagan passed into Byzantine service.
  - Starting with Heraclius, the imperial army fielded regular units of Turkish horse archers as part of its strike force.

- This alliance proved beneficial to the western Turks. The Sassanid shah was overthrown and was followed by a succession of weak and short-lived rulers. The Turks gained control of Transoxiana and access to strategic passes in the Caucasus, allowing Turkish armies to enter Armenia and Iran. These territorial aims didn’t trouble
the Byzantine emperor because they basically corresponded with his own.

- In 634, Arab armies crossed the imperial frontiers of Syria. These areas had just passed back under imperial control after that exhausting war with Persia. The Arab armies cut up an imperial force. Initially, the emperor Heraclius, who was ill, simply dismissed this as another raid by Arab nomads. The Romans were far more concerned with Persia and the northern steppes, but as we’ll see later, the early raids escalated into Islamic conquests. The emergence of Arabic power drew the western Turks and the Byzantines closer together.

- In the early 7th century, the western Turks had separated themselves from their eastern kinsmen. After a complicated series of civil wars, the western tribes reconfederated themselves into what’s known as the Confederation of the Ten Arrows. In 670, one of the leading tribes of this confederation, the Khazars, emerged to dominate the steppes from the Aral Sea down to the borders of Persia.
  - The inner tribes of this confederation were those of the Khazars, including the immediate family of the khagan, who was revered as a celestial figure. Indeed, the khagan became such an important religious figure that he designated administrative and military affairs to a subordinate, a bek (modern Turkish: bey).

  - Starting from the 670s and 680s, this Turkish power began to emerge on the steppes between the Caspian Sea and the Volga region and expanded its sway westward over the tribes of the lower Dnieper. Eventually, their power was felt as far as the Hungarian and Wallachian grasslands in eastern Europe.

- The Khazars enjoyed an unusually close relationship with the Byzantine emperors. As the Khazars were reconfiguring themselves into the next great confederacy on the steppes in the 670s, Constantinople was in a battle for its life, dealing with Avars in the Balkans and the Arab caliphs of Damascus. From 626 to 843, the Byzantine Empire was also in a veritable civil war over the use of
icons in religious worship. Under these circumstances, the Khazar khagans represented a godsend of an alliance.

- The Byzantines departed from their Roman legal practices and carried out alliances, including marriage alliances, with the Khazars; this would have been unthinkable in earlier Roman periods. There were also constant diplomatic exchanges.

- Apparently, the Byzantine court was impressed by the Khazar court. It represented a great power on the steppes and a valuable ally against the caliphate.

**Conversion to Judaism**

- From a practical military viewpoint, the Khazars proved to be invaluable allies. They were able to field large armies of cavalry and periodically could cross either the Dariel Pass or the Derbent Pass and invade the caliphate directly, taking pressure off the Byzantine emperor. In addition, the caliphs decided that the conquest of the Khazars was probably as significant as the conquest of the Byzantine Empire, and Arab armies repeatedly crossed the Caucasus in attempts to bring the Khazars to battle and defeat them.

- Here, the Umayyad caliphs ran into the same problems that the early Persian kings and the Sassanid kings encountered, that is, bringing steppe horse archers to battle. Already in the early 8th century, the Arab chroniclers stated that the Turks on horseback could outride and outshoot Arabs. In 737, the future caliph Marwan led an army across the Caucasus, defeated the Khazars, and forced a conversion to Islam.

- That defeat and forced conversion was immediately repudiated, and sometime at the end of the 8th or the beginning of the 9th century, the Khazar court embraced Judaism. For a long time, scholars accepted the date of 860 for this conversion, but the discovery in Scandinavia of coins issued by the Khazars suggests that the date is a generation or two earlier.
• How did the embrace of Judaism come about?
  ○ One of the great achievements of the Khazars was their promotion of trade along the northern extension of the Silk Road. In addition to the products of the Roman world, this trade also involved the products of the forest: amber, furs, and above all, slaves, usually Slavic peoples sold as labor into the Islamic world, as well as Turks captured in raids and sold as soldiers.

  ○ The Khazars exploited all these trade networks. The movement of goods within the early Islamic Empire was usually in the hands of minorities, and several groups emerged in prominence, foremost, the Jews.

  ○ Jewish bankers and trading houses extended from Muslim Spain across North Africa to Egypt and Syria. There were large communities in Cordova and Cairo, and it’s almost certain that Jews were also prominent at the Khazar capital at Atil.

The Cairo Genizah documents, found in a medieval synagogue, give us a sense of the extent and range of Jewish merchandising and banking at the time of the Khazars.
In the late 700s or early 800s, the Khazar khagan probably decided that Judaism was a worthy monotheistic religion. Given that it wasn’t Orthodox Christianity and it wasn’t Islam, it also marked the khaganate as a separate great state. Thus, the court converted to Judaism.

• With the conversion came enormous advantages. The Muslim geographer and historian Ibn Fadlan, who traveled to the Volga in 921–922, commented on the numbers of Jews, Christians, and Muslims trading in the city of Atil. The fact that there were so many people of different nationalities meant that special courts had to be set up to adjudicate questions of contract and commerce. Ibn Fadlan was also impressed by the extent of the slave trade, the powers of the khagan, and the wealth of the khaganate.

Downfall of the Khazars

• The Khazar khagans had constructed the most successful confederacy on the western steppes until the Golden Horde of the Mongols. It was light-years ahead of the Scythians and Sarmatians and would be far more sophisticated than the Pechenegs and Cumans who would follow them. The problem was that the khagans spent so much of their time on trade and commerce and the benefits of material culture that they failed to enforce their will over the subject tribes. This led to challenges within the confederacy.

• Two tribes in particular would come to play an important role in the demise of the Khazars. One was the Magyars, speakers of a Finno-Ugric language who had moved onto the western steppes and adopted a pastoral way of life.
  o They proved to be unruly vassals of the Khazar khagan and ended up migrating into eastern Europe. There, they got involved in the Byzantine–Bulgarian wars and were eventually sent ricocheting into Hungary, where they settled and became the Magyars of the Hungarians we know in 897.

  o En route to their final destination, they did quite a job of disrupting the khagan’s control of his subject tribes.
The other unruly group was the Pechenegs, who came to dominate the southern Russian steppes; that is, the areas around the Don and Dnieper rivers.

- The Pechenegs entered into an alliance with a third group of people who were total interlopers. These were the Rus, Scandinavians from Sweden, who had been exploiting the trade route on the Volga since the 8th century. They were especially active in the slave trade and were operating as merchant princes by permission in the Khazar khaganate.

- In the early 9th century, when the Pechenegs came to dominate the south Russian steppes and were at loggerheads with the Khazar khagans, the Rus switched the axis of their trade from the Volga to the Dnieper. They established cities at the future Russian towns of Novgorod and Kiev. They aligned their trade route on Constantinople and entered into alliance with the Pechenegs. This Pecheneg-Rus alliance undermined a good deal of the trade routes that had previously gone to Atil.

Both the Pechenegs and the Rus came to see the Khazars as foes. And for various reasons, the emperor in Constantinople came to prefer the Pechenegs and Rus as allies over the Khazars.

Sometime in 965 or 967, the Rus and the Pechenegs destroyed the Khazar capital, and the Khazar khaganate fragmented shortly thereafter. After the destruction of the khaganate, the Khazar Jews were probably absorbed into later Turkish confederations.

But the Khazars had created a great steppe empire based on trade. They had proved immensely successful in defining themselves and provided a model for the next successful rulers of the western steppes: the family of Batu, the grandsons of Genghis Khan, the rulers of the Golden Horde.
**Important Terms**

**Cumans**: Western Turkish-speaking nomads and scions of the Kipchak Turks, who migrated from the central Asian steppes into the Pontic-Caspian steppes in the 11th century.

**Finno-Ugric languages**: A family of the Altaic languages, which includes Magyar (Hungarian), Estonian, Finnish, and the Samoyedic languages of Siberia.

**Pechenegs**: Turkish-speaking tribes whose confederation dominated the Pontic-Caspian steppes west of the Don River from circa 860 to 1091.

**Umayyad caliphate**: The first hereditary line of caliphs (661–750), established by Muawiya (661–680) and ruling from Damascus.

**Name to Know**

**Marwan II** (b. 688; r. 744–750): Umayyad caliph; moved the capital from Damascus to Harran. In 737, as governor in Armenia, he waged a campaign north of the Caucasus and compelled the Khazars to accept Islam. In 750, he was defeated by as-Saffah at the Battle of the Zab and, later, captured and executed.

**Suggested Reading**

Brook, *The Jews of Khazaria*.

Curta and Kovaley, eds., *The Other Europe in the Middle Ages*.

Dunlop, *The History of the Jewish Khazars*.

Oblensky, *The Byzantine Commonwealth*.


———, “The Peoples of the South Russian Steppes.”

———, et al., eds., *The World of the Khazars*. 
Questions to Consider

1. How did the Khazars so quickly establish their hegemony over the tribes of the Pontic-Caspian steppes in the 7th century? Why was the power of the Ashina khagan of the Khazars so respected?

2. Why did the Khazars prove to be such valuable allies to the Byzantine emperors? How did the Byzantines view this alliance?

3. What accounted for Khazar success in checking the expansion of the Umayyad caliphate? Why did the Khazar court embrace Judaism in the later 8th century?

4. How did the development of far-flung trade routes strengthen the power of the Khazar khaganate? How did trade transform Khazar society? In what significant ways was Khazar success comparable to that of the contemporary Uighur khagans?

5. Why did the Pechenegs and the Rus princes of Kiev undermine and eventually overthrow the Khazar khaganate?
In this lecture, we will complete our exploration of the relationship between the Byzantine world and the nomadic peoples on the Pontic-Caspian steppes. We will look first at the Magyars, who would be assimilated into western Europe as an essentially Christian kingdom and give up their nomadic ways. We will then turn to the Pechenegs, who warred with the Khazars and initially allied with the Rus. These Scandinavians were not steppe nomads, but they played an important role in the reconfiguration of the steppes in the 9th through the 11th centuries. Finally, we’ll bring in the Cumans, who fell heir to the western steppes after the Pechenegs and engaged in fighting the Russians throughout the 12th and 13th centuries.

The Magyars

- The Magyars were virtually the only significant nomadic peoples of the Middle Ages who were not Turks; they originated in the forest zones to the northeast of the Urals. Their ancestors clearly go back into the Bronze Age, but at some point between the 5th and 8th centuries, they moved out onto the grasslands and adopted a nomadic way of life. They spoke a Finno-Ugrian language, remotely related to Turkish.

- Once they moved onto the steppes, the Magyars acquired many of the same habits as other steppe peoples. By the early medieval period, they had gained all the trappings of steppe cavalry. They were organized into a loose confederacy, and, initially, they apparently recognized the authority of the Khazar khagan. They were probably regarded as outer tribes of the Khazars.

- Around 850, something put the Magyars in motion, and they began to move to the southwest; they ended up on the south Russian steppes in the valleys of the Don and Dnieper rivers. Very quickly, this new area, just to the north of the Black Sea, was regarded as their ancestral home. They regrouped themselves into a loose
The Pechenegs and Magyars, and Cumans confederation of southern tribes and more or less shook off their loyalty to the Khazar khagan.

- The Magyars then started to raid the Balkans, attacking the Bulgars and annoying the Byzantines. In 839, the Byzantine emperor Theophilus sent military engineers and technicians to the khagan of the Khazars to build a fortress on the Don, apparently to inhibit the movement of Magyars eastward into the heartland of the Khazar domains. Islamic sources also confirm that the Magyars and Khazars came to loggerheads.

- In the winter of 895–896, as a result of a diplomatic mistake in a Byzantine-Bulgarian war, the Magyars crossed the Carpathians and settled in their future homeland around Budapest. That is, they took over the Pannonian plains, and starting in 897, they became a nuisance to the western Europeans. Magyars began to raid into Italy and the Holy Roman Empire.

- It isn’t until 955, when the Holy Roman Emperor Otto I defeated the Magyars at a decisive battle at the Lech, that they were forced to accept boundaries and stop raiding.

  - Within a generation, the Magyars came under strong missionary influence and converted to Latin Christianity. Their king Stephen (r. 1000–1038), often known as Saint Stephen, began the transformation of the Magyars into the Hungarians. Henceforth, these people would play a major role in European history. They forgot their steppe ways and became part of Christendom.

    - In fact, the Hungarian kingdom became the bastion of western Europe against future attacks by nomads to the east, the Pechenegs and Cumans, and would take the full brunt of the Mongol attack in the 13th century.

### The Pechenegs and the Rus

- The Pechenegs, known by a variety of names, were Turkish speakers. They were originally part of the coalition of western Gök Turks that was subjected by the Tang emperors, then reasserted its
independence and would clash with the armies of Islam. Sometime in the 9th century, they were pushed west in the typical domino movements by the immediate ancestors of the Seljuk Turks, known as the Oghuz or Ghuzz Turks.

- About 25 years after the Magyars, the Pechenegs crossed just north of Khazar domains and pushed the Magyars west into central Europe. They then descended into the regions between the Don and the Dnieper. Along the way, the acquired a reputation of being the most pitiless and dangerous of nomadic conquerors. The Byzantine emperors had mixed opinions about the Pechenegs; their horse archers were extremely useful, but they were completely impervious to Christianity.

- The Pechenegs warred with the Khazars, but they reached an agreement with another group of people who were not steppe nomads, the Rus. These were Swedes, Danes, Fins, and other people from Scandinavia who had been trading with the Khazars for at least 150 years.
  - Archaeology indicates that in the beginning of the 8th century A.D., Swedes moved across the Baltic and used the river systems of Russia to reach trade routes along the Volga to the Caspian Sea or routes that led to the Dnieper and, from there, to the Black Sea. These were the same routes that had brought the Goths from Scandinavia onto the steppes in the 3rd century A.D.
  - These Scandinavians had superb merchant ships and warships that could negotiate the rivers of Russia. Initially, in the 8th century and early 9th, the Rus arrived at the Volga with the permission of the Khazar Khagan. But they developed a new route along the Dnieper that took them to Constantinople. Their intention was probably to avoid the taxes imposed by the Khazar middlemen and get directly to the silks and gold of the Byzantine city. To exploit this route, they had to come to terms with the Pechenegs.
• The Rus and the Pechenegs reached an understanding that lasted through much of the 10th century to cooperate in the trade connections to Constantinople. Four times, from 860 to 941, the Rus launched fleets to attack Constantinople, and these extorted commercial treaties out of the emperor. So close was the alliance between the Pechenegs and the Rus that sometime after 965 or 967, they teamed up to sack the city of Attil, the capital of the Khazar khagan.

• A significant change took place in the relationship of the two peoples in 988–989. The then-reigning prince of the Rus, Vladimir, converted to Orthodox Christianity. This was a significant success of Byzantine missionaries and marked a major turning point in the relationship between the Rus (now called Russians) and the Pechenegs.
  ○ The Russian princes now ruled as Slavic Byzantine-style kings, that is, Christian monarchs who adopted the laws of Constantinople. As such, they could not sell their Slavic subjects, who were increasingly Christians, as slaves to Turkish nomads.

  ○ Thus, the slave trade suddenly dried up in the 10th and 11th centuries for the Pechenegs, as well as other nomadic peoples. And the Pechenegs felt free to raid those who would not trade with them.

  ○ Starting in the 11th century, there was a constant battle along the steppe zone between the Russians and the Pechenegs, with the
Pechenegs trying to capture Slavs to supply the slave markets of the Islamic world.

- Efforts to convert the Pechenegs proved hopeless. Not only were they nomads and, thus, lacked the urban organization necessary for Christianity, but they also fell on the hashish side of the vodka-hashish line. In other words, those who drank vodka tended to become Christian, while those who used hashish were more likely to convert to Islam. This connection was actually noted as one of the ways that the Rus were convinced to adopt the Orthodox Church.

The Cumans

- The Pechenegs now found themselves at odds with the Russian principalities, the Hungarian kings, and the emperors in Constantinople. In 1087, the fighting force of the Pecheneg confederation crossed the Danube and entered imperial territory. The reasons for their movement are a bit uncertain, but in part, they were being pressed by a new group of Turks who were occupying the former domains of the Khazars, the Cumans. They clashed with the Pechenegs over the right to raid Russia for slaves.

- The migration of the Pechenegs into the Balkans was a nightmare for the then-emperor, Alexius I (r. 1081–1118), who was desperately trying to hold his empire together. He had lost Asia Minor to the Seljuk Turks, and the Balkan provinces were essentially the only areas he retained. Alexius summoned a huge Cuman army into the Balkans to help defeat this invasion.

- In 1091, a combined Cuman-Byzantine army wiped out the Pecheneg migration, reputedly 80,000 Pechenegs, at the Battle of Levounion, which is near the modern Greek-Turkish border. The Byzantines then replaced the Pechenegs with the Cumans. This was the last success in Byzantine diplomacy because after that, the Byzantine Empire was essentially ruined by the Crusaders and sacked in 1204.
The Cumans, Turkish speakers, were keen to exploit the slave and fur trade to the Islamic world. In this, they ran up against the Russian principalities, which now assumed the Byzantine role of dealing with Turkish nomads on the steppes. Through much of the 12th century and early 13th, there was constant fighting between the Russians and the Cumans.

The standoff between the Russians and the Cumans would change dramatically in 1236, when Batu, the grandson of Genghis Khan, swept across the steppes, subjected the Cumans, and plunged into Russia. The full fury of nomadic power would be directed against the kingdom of Hungary and western Europe, and the future of Russia and the western steppes would be decisively altered.

**Important Terms**

**Ghuzz Turks**: Speakers of western Turkish or Oghuz languages who emerged on the central Asian steppes between the 9th and 11th centuries. They included Seljuk Turks, Cumans, and Kipchak Turks.

**Seljuk Turks**: Ghuzz or western Turks who founded the Seljuk sultanate (1055–1194) that revived the power of Abbasid caliphate. Seljuk Turks settled in Asia Minor after the Battle of Manzikert (1071).

**Names to Know**

**Alexius I Comnenus** (b. 1056; r. 1081–1118): Byzantine emperor; seized power in the civil war of 1081 and founded the Comnenian Dynasty (1081–1185). He restored imperial power in western Asia Minor by summoning the First Crusade (1095–1099). He allied with the Cumans to destroy the Pechenegs, who had invaded Thrace, at the Battle of Levounion in 1091.

**Otto I** (b. 912; r. 936–973): Holy Roman Emperor; duke of Saxony and son of Henry the Fowler. Otto was elected king of Germany. In 955, he decisively defeated the Hungarians on the Lech, and his campaigns against the Danes and Slavs secured imperial frontiers. In 962, he was crowned Holy Roman Emperor.
Vladimir (b. c. 958; r. 980–1015): Rus prince of Kiev; he embraced Orthodox Christianity around 989 as part of a marriage alliance with the Byzantine emperor Basil II (976–1025). He founded the royal institutions of the Christian Russian state.

Suggested Reading

Angold, *The Byzantine Empire, 1025–1204.*

Comnena, (Sweter, trans.), *The Alexiad.*

Curta, *Southeastern Europe in the Middle Ages, 500–1250.*

Curta and Kovaley, eds., *The Other Europe in the Middle Ages.*

Dunlop, *The History of the Jewish Khazars.*

Franklin and Sheppard, *The Emergence of the Rus, 750–1200.*


Oblensky, *The Byzantine Commonwealth.*


Vásáry, *Cumans and Tatars.*


Questions to Consider

1. What accounted for the ease and speed of the migrations of the Magyars and the Pechenegs in the 9th century? Why did they pose such a danger to the Khazar confederation?

2. Why did the Byzantine emperors seek alliances with the Magyars and the Pechenegs? How judicious was their policy? What impact did these new nomads have on Byzantine society? How did the Pechenegs exploit their alliance with the Byzantine emperor?

3. How did the Pechenegs profit from the establishment of Kiev by the Scandinavian Rus in 860? In what ways were the Rus and Pechenegs
allies and trade partners? Why did they desert their alliance with Prince Sviatoslav in 972, after his defeat by the Byzantine emperor John I?

4. How important was the emperor Alexius I in advancing the power of the Cumans? How decisive was the Battle of Levounion 1091?

5. How did the emergence of Christian Hungary and Russia threaten the nomadic peoples of the Pontic-Caspian steppes? How does the epic of Prince Igor reflect the clash between Russians and Cumans on the eve of the Mongol invasion?
In this lecture, we will shift back to the middle regions of the steppes and the associated civilizations in what we would today call the Middle East and India. That requires us to refocus our attention on the urban literate civilizations that had such a significant impact on nomadic peoples in the early Middle Ages. The effects of the caliphate and Islam were probably as far ranging and important as the impact of Buddhism and Chinese civilization had been on the nomads of the eastern steppes. Indeed, Islam defined the nomadic peoples of the western steppes far more profoundly than either western or Orthodox Christianity.

The Prophet Muhammad

- **Muhammad** is regarded by Muslims as the last and the greatest of all of God’s prophets. He received his revelations in Mecca, probably when he was around the age of 40. The verses that came to him—suras—were later written down and codified into the Qur’an. This text is believed to be the uncreated word of God.

The Qur’an is considered the uncreated word of God, which means that it can’t be translated; the best one can do is to translate the meaning of the Qur’an.
Muhammad’s strictures were rather simple; the first and most important principle was to submit to the will of Allah. Thus, the religion came to be known as Islam, “submission.” Those who practiced the religion, Muslims, were those who had submitted. From the start, Muslims accepted much of the testimony and prophecies of the Jews and Christians and saw themselves as direct heirs of the religion of Abraham.

Muhammad called for a new community of believers who were bound up in this new faith and recognized the importance of almsgiving and making a pilgrimage at least one time to Mecca. This preaching brought Muhammad directly in conflict with the ruling clans of his native city of Mecca.

- Mecca had been an important caravan city, and its rival city was Medina. These cities had long been linked to the Roman world and had been subject to influence by missionaries and merchants carrying both Judaism and various forms of Christianity. Muhammad’s teachings required the end of idol worship and animal sacrifice, which had characterized Arabian cults since time immemorial. That led to conflict with the leading families, who objected on both business and religious grounds.

- In 622, Muhammad and his followers removed themselves to the rival city of Medina. That year is taken as the year of the flight and became year 1 in the new Islamic world. In Medina, Muhammad accepted Medinan merchants and others into the faith; those who believed became members of an *ummah*, a single community. Questions of clan, tribe, and family no longer mattered so much as the union of one faith.

- By the time of his death in 632, Muhammad had recovered Mecca and united the Arabian tribes under the banner of this new faith. The close followers of Muhammad who succeeded to his traditions then directed a spectacular conquest. In less than three generations, the Muslims ripped away the southern and eastern provinces of the Roman Empire and overthrew the Sassanid state.
**Muslim Conquests**

- A succession of able Arab generals, men who had trained in Byzantine and Sassanid armies, led Bedouin regiments across the frontiers and won stunning victories. For instance, at the Battle of Yarmouk, Khalid ibn al-Walid, known as the Sword of Islam, annihilated the Byzantine army in Syria, and in the next several years, all the Syrian possessions fell.

- Probably in the year 639, at the Battle of al-Qadisiyyah, another force of Arabs, some 20,000 strong, defeated the field army of the then-reigning Sassanid shah, **Yazdegerd III**. The Sassanid Empire collapsed over the next several years. By 651, Arab armies had reached the Amu Darya, the traditional boundary between Iran and Transoxiana.

- In the west, the conquest of Syria opened up Egypt in 641. Egypt was disaffected from imperial rule and welcomed the Arab conquerors. In 642, Arab armies began a relentless march across North Africa. By 698, the city of Carthage had fallen, and the Arabs continued to the Strait of Gibraltar. In 711, Arab forces and their Berber allies (desert nomads of North Africa) overran most of Spain. At the same time, an extraordinary feat of arms was carried out when yet another Arab army crossed the Makran desert and conquered the lower Indus Valley.

- Within less than 100 years, a new imperial power stretched from the Atlantic to the Hindu Kush. The Arabs, themselves desert nomads, had up until this point played a limited role among the civilized states of the Middle East and North Africa. Now, they were conquerors and rulers of a world empire.

**Rise of the Umayyad Caliphs**

- This great world empire put stress on the original community as Muhammad had conceived it. First, there was a question of authority. Three times in the 7th century, in the early stages of the Islamic Empire, a college of six electors met to choose a caliph (“successor”). In 632, the choice was obvious; the office went to
Abu Bakr, the second convert after Muhammad’s wife. When he died, a man named Umar was elected.

- Umar was an accomplished general and presided over the spectacular conquests from 634 to 644. When he died, a man named Uthman, from the prominent Umayyad family, was elected. All three elections frustrated Ali, who was the cousin of Muhammad and saw himself as the natural successor.

- In 656, the Arab army in Egypt mutinied over various grievances, marched to Medina and Mecca, slew the caliph, and offered the throne to Ali, who instantly accepted. Objections were raised across the Islamic world, particularly by Muawiya, the governor of Syria, who was related to the deceased caliph. A civil war ensued. Ali was killed by a group of extremists, and Muawiya was acclaimed caliph in 661. He and his descendants would henceforth rule over Sunni Islam (Orthodox Islam) from Damascus as the Umayyad caliphs. The partisans of Ali, known as the Shi’a, went underground; today, we call them Shi’ites.

**Empire of the Abbasids**

- The Umayyads were responsible for many of the initial conquests, but by the end of the 7th century, they had suffered some serious reverses. They had been defeated by the Byzantines at Constantinople, were thwarted by the Khazars along the Caucasus, and were locked in difficult fighting with Turks over Transoxiana. As a result, shortly after 700, the caliphate began to come under severe fiscal and military pressures.

- The Arab tribal regiments that garrisoned the military towns in this expanding empire became increasingly independent and rapacious. Many of them harbored sympathies for Ali; others, for Shi’a. Southern and northern Arabs were also often engaged in fighting each other. The military governors spent much of their time trying to focus the efforts of these regiments on conquering new territory for Islam, rather than killing each other.
• In 749, the governor in Merv rebelled against the Umayyad caliphs. His mixed army of Arab tribal regiments and Persian converts swept west and defeated the Umayyad forces. By 750, the Umayyad Dynasty had been overthrown and a new dynasty, the **Abbasid caliphate**, was proclaimed.

• In the process of taking power, the Abbasids alienated a number of their allies. Many Shi’a and Alids (followers of Ali) had joined the so-called Abbasid revolution to overthrow the hated Umayyad caliphs. But they now found themselves saddled with an Abbasid caliph who was studiously and carefully Sunni in his religious beliefs. All the animosity that these groups once had against the Umayyads was transferred to the Abbasids.

• The Abbasids proved to be the most successful of the medieval dynasties. Several significant points about this caliphate dictated the future relationships between the emerging Islamic world and the nomadic peoples of the steppes.
  - The second caliph, al-Mansur, moved the capital from Damascus to Baghdad. That move announced that this new line of caliphs had no interest in conquering Constantinople or becoming heir to the Roman Empire. The Abbasid caliphs adopted much of the high culture of Sassanid Persia.
  - Further, they turned their empire from an Arabic empire into a Muslim empire. Something like 34 of the 37 Abbasid caliphs were the sons of non-Arab slaves, most of them Persians. They appreciated the Persian converts who provided infantry, administrators, and thinkers who were responsible for the flowering of Islamic civilization.

**Weaknesses and Rivalries**

• Of course, the Abbasid state had certain weaknesses. It faced opposition from Shi’ites and other extremists. In addition, the unity of the Abbasid state was always questionable. Half the dynasty was made up of the former Roman Empire in North Africa and Spain, along with Arabia. The other part was the eastern or Iranian
half. Over the course of the 8th through 10th centuries, the Abbasid state fragmented.

- The prime group that was the real danger to the Abbasid caliphs was the Alids. They could penetrate the guilds and trade networks across the Abbasid Empire. The Alids pulled off some successes, including one in 909, when an Alid pretender organized the Berber populations into an effective tribal army, swept across North Africa, and occupied Egypt.

- This group established the rival Fatimid caliphate, with its capital at Cairo. The Fatimids occupied Mecca and Medina and took over the cities of the Levant. They were hailed by Shi’ites across the Islamic world. They also entered into an alliance with the resurgent Byzantine state, which was on the move against the Sunni emirs on its eastern frontier.

- Baghdad looked to be in real trouble. It seemed as if a Fatimid army would cross the Fertile Crescent and occupy Baghdad, ending the Abbasid caliphate in favor of a Shi’ite caliphate. This didn’t happen because out of the steppes of central Asia came a new people, the Seljuk Turks. Their leader, Tughril Bey, entered the city of Baghdad in 1055 and restored the power of the Abbasid caliph, along with the power of Islam itself.

### Important Terms

**Abbasid caliphate**: The hereditary dynasty of caliphs (749–1258) established by as-Saffah (r. 750–754) and, from 762 on, resident at Baghdad. Hulagu ended the dynasty with the sack of Baghdad in 1258.

**Fatimid caliphate**: Shi’ite caliphs (909–1171) who claimed descent from Fatimah, daughter of the prophet Muhammad and wife of Caliph Ali. In 969, the Fatimid caliphs ruled from Cairo and protected the holy cities of Medina and Mecca.
Shi’ite: The sectarian school of Islam that desired a descendant of Ali (656–661) as the rightful caliph and, thus, upheld the authority of Ali.


ummad: In Islam, the community of believers as proclaimed by the prophet Muhammad (575–634).

Names to Know

Ali ibn Abi Talib (b. c. 600; r. 656–661): Fourth of the Rashidun caliphs. Cousin of the prophet Muhammad, Ali married the prophet’s only daughter, Fatimah (606–632). Ali was twice passed over for the caliphate. As caliph in 656, he faced opposition from Muawiya in the first Muslim civil war. Ali was slain by sectarian extremists, and in later Shi’ite theology, he was elevated to prophetic status almost on par with Muhammad.

Abu Bakr (b. c. 573; r. 632–634): Caliph and friend and associate of Muhammad who succeeded as the first of the Rashidun caliphs after the prophet’s death. His reign saw the unification of Arabia under the banner of Islam.

al-Mansur (754–775): Second Abbasid caliph; dedicated Baghdad as the new capital in 762 and shifted the locus of Islamic civilization to Iran and Transoxania.

Muawiya (b. 602; r. 661–689): Umayyad caliph; general of the Syrian army and father of the Arabic navy. In 656, he refused to accept Ali, the cousin of Muhammad, as the fourth Rashidun caliph because of Ali’s implication in the murder of Caliph Uthman (644–656). Muawiya triumphed over the forces of Ali and, thus, founded the first hereditary Umayyad caliphate at Damascus.

Muhammad (570–632): The prophet of God (Allah), he was called to cleanse the religion of Abraham and, thus, founded Islam. His revelations
were collected into the Qur’an. Driven from his native Mecca in 622, Muhammad created an ummah (community of believers) at Medina that defeated the Meccans. At his death, Muhammad had united all of Arabia under Islam.

**Umar I** (b. 584; r. 634–644): Second of the Rashidun caliphs; was elected in preference to Ali. He directed the conquests of Byzantine Syria, Egypt, and Libya and the Sassanid Empire of Persia.

**Uthman** (b. 577; r. 644–656): Third of the Rashidun caliphs; was elected in preference to Ali. He headed the powerful Umayyad clan but personally lacked the will to govern effectively from Medina. He was slain by mutinous soldiers of the Egyptian army, who then offered the caliphate to Ali.

**Yazdegerd III** (632–651): Last Sassanid shah and grandson of Khosrow II; lost his empire to the Arab armies. In 636 (or 639), the Arabs occupied his capital Ctesiphon after their victory at the Battle of al-Qadisiyyah. In 642–651, Yazdegerd failed to check the Arab advance into Iran and was murdered near Merv. His son and heir, Peroz, died an exile at the Tang court.

### Suggested Reading

Crone and Hinds. *God’s Caliph*.

Donner, *The Early Islamic Conquests*.

Kennedy, *The Armies of the Caliphate*.

———, *The Prophet and the Age of the Caliphaties*.

Shaban, *The Abbasid Revolution*.

Watt, *Muhammad, Prophet and Statesman*.

### Questions to Consider

1. What accounted for the rapid conquests of the Rashidun and Umayyad caliphs? What was the nature of this early Islamic Empire? How was religious and political authority exercised by the caliph? How was this
Islamic state perceived by the subject peoples and the nomads of the Eurasian steppes?

2. How did Muhammad, as prophet and statesman, establish the precedent for the authority of the caliphs? How would the religious and political authority of the caliphs eventually be adapted by Turkish steppe nomads?

3. What accounts for the prosperity and cultural achievements of the Abbasid caliphate in the 9th and 10th centuries? How would the subject peoples and nomads of the Eurasian steppes view this new Islamic civilization? In what ways did Turkish tribes profit from the Abbasid caliphate?

4. What accounted for the widespread use of Turkish slave soldiers and mercenaries in the Islamic world from the early 9th century? What were the broader implications of this shift in military power in the Islamic world?
The Clash between Turks and the Caliphate
Lecture 20

This lecture looks in more detail at the initial contact between Islamic civilization and the people of the central Eurasian steppes. This requires us to look at the wars waged between the early caliphs, before the Abbasid caliphate, and the Turkish tribes. The lecture will end with a rather peculiar battle in 751, the Battle of Talas, which is seen as a turning point in this relationship. It’s a battle that evokes a great deal of controversy and, in some ways, is remembered for the wrong reasons. Before we get to that battle, however, we need to understand how the Islamic armies came to fight on such a distant frontier, close to the borders of the Tang Empire.

Arabs on the Northeastern Frontier

- The Rashidun and Umayyad caliphs fell heir to the Sassanid Empire’s northeastern frontier. Those regions had largely fallen into the hands of subordinate Turkish tribes who acknowledged the authority of the khans of the western Gök Turks. The cities there were ruled by different merchant princes speaking Sogdian and Tocharian languages. When the Arab armies had defeated the shah’s army, they moved into Iran and reached the Oxus frontier around 651.

- From the start, the Arab armies realized that this region was unlike anything they were familiar with in the Byzantine and Roman worlds. Known to us as Transoxiana, the region beyond the Oxus had an extremely diverse religious and linguistic background. Excavations have revealed opulent houses of great merchant princes, and the decorations indicate that the occupants were familiar with Buddhism, Nestorian Christianity, and Manichaeism. Languages spoken included Sogdian, Aramaic, and Tocharian.

- This region was a formidable one for the Arabs to take on. There was no central and imperial power to defeat but, instead, a constellation of city-states.
Well beyond the knowledge of the Arabs in 651 was the Jaxartes River. This had been the boundary between Transoxiana and nomadic peoples, who had longstanding trade connections.

Within Transoxiana itself were settled smaller groups of nomads, who interacted with the agriculturalists in the cities.

Thus, Transoxiana was, in many ways, something of an urban extension of the central Eurasian steppes. Once the caliphs reached this frontier, they weren’t quite sure what to do with it.

- About 671, a permanent camp was built at Merv, an old caravan city. From there, in the late 7th century and early 8th, Arab forces crossed the Oxus at different points and raided the cities of Transoxiana, such as Bukhara and Samarkand. The riches acquired on these massive raids were brought back to Merv, but there was no thought of conquest—of bringing these regions into the House of Islam.

- The Umayyad caliphs grew suspicious because the governors commanding in Merv had enormous military power. They controlled some of the best Arab regiments in the empire. Further, they recruited large numbers of Persians, who were converted to Islam, served as infantry, and were often given grants of land.

**Conquest in Transoxiana**

- The situation began to change at the opening of the 8th century. The powerful caliph Abd al-Malik (r. 685–705) reorganized the administration of the empire and the frontier provinces, particularly the eastern province in Transoxiana. In 705, a new governor arrived, Qutaybah ibn Muslim, who had been assigned to begin the conquest north of the Oxus.

- Qutaybah served as governor in Merv for some 10 years and launched a methodical set of campaigns intended both to net loot to satisfy the Arab tribal regiments and to begin the conversion of the area. We have reports from the city of Bukhara, for example, that
the Buddhist temple there was leveled and replaced by a mosque. Further, the locals were rounded up to attend services.

- These attempts by Qutaybah to force Islam on the great caravan cities provoked a reaction. The cities resisted more seriously against the Arabs and called in their allies, the Turkish nomads. The man who responded to the call was a colorful figure known as Suluk. He was a brilliant campaigner, and in the clashes between the Arab and Turkish armies, especially in the 720s, it became clear that the Turks could outride and outshoot the Arams on the steppes of central Asia.

- Between 718 and 722, many of the cities in Transoxiana that had submitted to Abbasid rule declared their independence or went over to the Turks. The caliphs’ frontier essentially fell back to the Oxus. But in 722, Suluk was killed, and the resistance to the Arabs fell apart. Succeeding governors began to come to terms with the cities of Transoxiana. By 750, they had more or less delivered the region to the control of the caliphs in Damascus.

- This piecemeal conquest of Transoxiana posed something of a religious crisis in the early Islamic community.
  - The initial conquests of the Arabs had been of areas occupied primarily by Christians and Jews, people of the book. Although they were not treated as equals and had to abide by certain restrictions, they were allowed to maintain their religious institutions.

  - With the conquest of Persia, the Arabs incorporated a region, particularly Iran, that was Zoroastrian. Although this religion wasn’t referenced in the Qur’an, the Zoroastrians were essentially lumped together with Christians and Jews as protected people.

  - Crossing the Oxus, however, brought into the power of the caliph all sorts of people who practiced religions with which the Arabs had absolutely no familiarity: Buddhism,
Manichaeism, various pagan cults, Iranian cults, and so on. In time, the Islamic government would have to come to terms with these groups. By 750, Transoxiana was under the control of the caliph, but it was hardly an Islamic land.

The Battle of Talas

- The Arab armies were now on the western fringe of the power of the Tang emperors of China. In July or August of 751, a major battle took place between these two armies. On the Arab side was an experienced governor named Ziyad ibn Salih. The Tang general was Gao Xianzhi, who had ruled the western regions of the Tarim Basin. Both of these governors commanded important provincial armies, but both also depended heavily on Turkish allies, primarily, the Karluk Turks.

- The Battle of Talas was not actually planned. It resulted from the exiles of client rulers of both great powers. Those rulers appealed to Ziyad and Gao Xianzhi for help in regaining their thrones. Of course, both commanders were also aware of the strategic importance of Transoxiana and of the trade routes over the Pamirs. Undoubtedly, as they assembled their armies, these were considerations for backing the exiles’ claims. The idea was to put in power local rulers who would favor either the Tang emperor or the Abbasid caliph.

- In 751, the armies moved into position and encountered each other at the Talas River. We have both Chinese and Arabic accounts of the battle. Perhaps some 30,000 to 35,000 men were marshaled on both sides. The key players in the battle would be the Karluk cavalry.

- The Chinese had at least 10,000 imperial forces, including excellent crossbowmen. But they had also recruited large numbers of Turkish cavalry, perhaps 20,000. Ziyad fielded perhaps 10,000 to 15,000 tribal Arabic regiments and Persian infantry. At least half, if not the majority, of his army was made up of Turkish allies, mostly Karluks who were fighting on both sides.
The two armies came into contact somewhere on the Talas River. What decided the battle was the desertion of the Karluks on the Chinese side to the Muslim side. We don’t know the reason for this defection.

- For the first five days of the encounter, Ziyad was reluctant to commit his Arab and Persian forces to an assault across the river directed at Chinese infantry supported with crossbows. The Arabs may not have had much contact with the Chinese, but they quickly understood the power of the Chinese infantry in a fortified position.

- Once the Chinese lost their supporting flanks of cavalry, then Ziyad could launch an attack against the infantry in the center, and his Turkish allies would eventually encircle and reduce the Chinese. This is apparently what happened.
The Arabic cavalry ran into tough professional Chinese infantry. The Chinese general Gao Xianzhi rallied his forces and held the center. His subordinate officers fought an excellent holding action, and 2,000 of the Chinese managed to break out of the encirclement and escape, including most of the senior officers who wrote memoirs after the battle.

Many of the Chinese soldiers fought on until they surrendered on terms. The Arab sources speak of taking many captives.

- Neither the Chinese emperor nor the Abbasid caliph pushed the battle. The Chinese emperor had problems with rebellions at home, and the caliph was dismayed by the success of both his governor and the Turkish allies. Thus, both empires accepted the battle as a draw. The Talas River would represent the boundary between them.

- The Chinese emperor withdrew his forces, and Chinese influence in the western regions lapsed; it would not return until the Ming emperors. Meanwhile, the Islamic empire did not gain any real estate. In fact, the Karluk Turks ended up being the beneficiaries. They now dominated the central steppes. Soon, these Turks would construct new confederations, embrace Islam, and invade the Muslim world.

**Important Term**

Rashidun caliphs: The first four elected caliphs from among the immediate associates of Muhammad: Abu Bakr (632–634), Umar (634–644), Uthman (644–656), and Ali (656–661).

**Names to Know**

Abd al-Malik (b. 646; r. 685–705): Umayyad caliph who imposed Arabic as the language of administration and forged the first Muslim administrative institutions. He appointed able governors who conquered Carthage in 698 and raided into Transoxania.
Gao Xianzhi (d. 756): Tang commander of the Four Garrisons (Tarim Basin) and an experienced general of Korean ancestry. He commanded the Tang army that was defeated by the Arabs and Karluks at the Battle of Talas in 751.

Qutaybah ibn Muslim (b. 699; r. 705–715): Umayyad governor of Khurasan; waged a destructive war against the cities of Transoxania, looting Manichaean, Zoroastrian, and Buddhist sanctuaries. He took Bukhara in 709 and Samarkand in 712. His ruthless efforts to impose Islam galvanized the Sogdian populations to invite Suluk, yabgu of the western Turks, to intervene. Qutaybah was executed on grounds of treason on the orders of Caliph Sulayman.

Suluk (717–738): Yabgu of the Turgesh, a leading tribe of the western Turkish khaganate. He waged a brilliant war of attrition against the Umayyad governor in Transoxania.

Ziyad ibn Salih (748–751): Arabic governor of Khurasan who commanded the Arabic-Turkish Karluk army that defeated the Tang army at the Battle of Talas in 751.

Suggested Reading

Graff, Medieval Chinese Warfare, 300–900.
Kennedy, The Great Arab Conquests.
———, The Prophet and the Caliphatess.

Questions to Consider

1. Why drove the Rashidun and Umayyad caliphs to conquer eastern Iran and Transoxiana? How foreign and daunting were the peoples and cultures of these lands? Why did the Arabic conquest take more than a century?

2. How effective were the frontier armies of the Umayyad caliphs? What problems of discipline and motivation inhibited Arab success? How did
polices of the Arab governors alienate Sogdian and Bactrian cities and Turkish tribes alike? How did they perceive the Arabs?

3. Why did the Turks under Suluk rally so successfully? How did the succession of defeats suffered by the Arabs change their views and stereotypes of the steppe nomads?

4. Why did the Umayyad and Tang armies clash at the Battle of Talas in 751? In what ways was this battle decisive? How did the Turkish combatants fare in this battle? What lessons did the Turks draw from this Arabic victory?

5. Why did the Abbasid caliphs halt Islamic expansion? What were the consequences for this change in Muslim policy for the Turkish nomadic tribes?
In the last lecture, we ended with the Battle of Talas, in which Islamic and Chinese armies fought themselves to a strategic draw, even though the Muslims had clearly won the battle. The result of that battle was essentially to halt Islamic political and military expansion for the next 300 years. The achievements of Islam at this time can instead be found in the creation of a cultural synthesis, a whole new civilization across the former Near East, the Persian Empire, and parts of the former Roman world. It was this Islamic synthesis that proved to be so important for the peoples of the Eurasian steppes.

**Emergence of a New Civilization**

- As mentioned earlier, the Abbasid caliphs had shifted the locus of their power to Baghdad, which became the intellectual and economic center of the Islamic world. This great city became the model for the lesser provincial cities of the Islamic world in terms of letters, architecture, aesthetics, and visual arts.

- The success of the Abbasid civilization rested not only in the caliphs but also in the early viziers, or chief ministers. These were men who often came from the Barmakid family, known to be great patrons of scholarship and familiar with Buddhism.

- Most of the people creating this Islamic civilization in Baghdad were not Arabic but came from a variety of backgrounds. In addition, various types of writers in Aramaic, Persian, and Greek were encouraged. These included Christians, Jews, and Zoroastrians, who began the process of translating early literary traditions into Arabic. Great strides were made in medicine and mathematics.

- In the process of synthesizing earlier intellectual and literary traditions into a wider world, the Arabic language itself was enriched and transformed, both in its poetry and its ability to express
intellectual and mathematical ideas. Numerous loan words were taken from both Greek and Persian, and the language was refined to be more than just the revealed word of God through the prophet. By 800, Arabic was now a literary language in its own right.

- An important political change accelerated this process. In 813, al-Mamun became the new caliph, and he looked to Persia for his cultural background. He also took over the role once performed by viziers of sponsoring poets and intellectuals. This became a major activity of the Abbasid caliphs throughout the 9th and into the 10th centuries.
  - Al-Mamun increasingly modeled his court on the old Sassanid court, incorporating harems and eunuchs, Persian ministers, and a high degree of opulence and ceremony.
  - Further, the empire became studiously Muslim. Administrative posts were staffed by men loyal to the caliph, many of whom were Persian. Arab military regiments were increasingly replaced with Turkish mercenaries and slave soldiers. The latter were excellent warriors who had been pulled from their families and were devoted to the caliph.

**Contributions of the Samanids**

- In addition to changes in aesthetics and letters, there were also important changes in architecture. The Samanid emirs, for example, on the eastern frontier, took it upon themselves to sponsor arts and architecture, and they set the model for other emirs. From the 9th to the early 11th centuries, the wealthy Samanid emirs poured their money into monuments, essentially creating the high Persian culture of Islam.
  - Such monuments included mosques; medreses, that is, religious schools with minarets; and türbes, roughly translated as “memorial mausoleums.” In some ways, these were the most important monuments for the Islamisation of the landscape.
  - The türbe of Ahmad, which survives in Bukhara, is a gem of tile construction and the early use of the dome. It set the tone
In addition to the türbes, we cannot underestimate the importance of medreses. These were theological schools where Sharia, the law of Islam, was studied. All medreses usually had attached kitchens, hospices, and various types of institutions to carry out charitable work. They were founded in cities and supported by merchants and other pious Muslims. In some ways, they filled the social and economic roles of Buddhist and Christian monasteries that had long been established in the cities of the Silk Road.

This development on the part of the Samanid emirs was a gradual process, taking place over perhaps 200 or 300 years.
The Samanid emirs were also behind the promotion of Persian as a literary language. In Baghdad, all the disputation over the Qur’an, as well as the medical and mathematical texts, were being written in Arabic. But the Samanid emirs, themselves descended from Iranian converts, wanted to use the literary language of Persian.

- Significant Persian literary works were produced in the 9th and 10th centuries. Perhaps the best one known is the *Shah-nameh*, written by Ferdowsi, which became the national epic of Persia.

- This epic not only preserves earlier national tales before the Arabic conquest, but it also shows that Persian was recast into a literary language. It was now written in the Arabic script and had been enriched by loan words. It was not the dialect spoken in the various cities of Transoxiana.

When the Turks entered Transoxiana, they were, at best, practicing folk Islam, but they saw the Persian Muslim culture of Transoxiana and eastern Iran as a model for themselves. They would essentially follow the path of the Samanid emirs and devise their own distinct architecture. They would adapt their language to the Arabic script and record their ancient traditions, creating an ethnic identity that was both Muslim and Turkish.

**Spread of Islam on the Steppes**

- How did Islam reach the people of the steppes? Part of the answer is that the nomads inevitably would have had contact and trade with the caravan cities and would have seen their marvelous architecture. But the interchange was far more significant and long term than just being impressed by the new face of caravan cities.

- Merchants in the Abbasid Empire, especially starting in the 8th century, began to convert to Islam in fairly large numbers for a number of reasons. First, by 700, Arabic was supplanting other languages as a commercial language. Second, members of the *ummah* were seen as representatives of a powerful ruler; this was especially true for merchants engaged in trade outside the limits
of the Abbasid caliphate. Therefore, they carried with them the implicit protection of Muslim law.

- In the course of the 8th century, many people converted to Islam and began to learn Arabic. Of course, they traded among the nomadic peoples of the Eurasian steppes and made contact with the Turks. In addition, merchant caravans traveled with religious figures and teachers, including Sufi mystics.
  - Sufi mystics were not members of the theological schools that were studying the Qur’an or perfecting Sharia. They were popular mystics and inspired figures. They impressed the Turkish nomads with their contact with the other world.
  - Sufis were nominally part of Sunni Islam, but they didn’t operate within the Sunni institutional apparatus, which made them ideal traveling companions for merchants on the Silk Road.
  - These mystics stressed prayer, dance, trances, and songs, leading them to achieve an ecstatic state. To the Turks, they looked like shamans—inspired teachers with some sort of insight into the other world.

- In time, the Sufi mystics would convince many Turks to convert to Islam, although these conversions were often less than complete. When later strict theologians of the religious schools traveled among the Turks, they discovered that their converts were still carrying out animal sacrifice, consulting shamans, and invoking ancient gods and goddesses. This is typical of how nomads assimilated and adapted religions to their own existing structures.
  - One such adaptation can still be seen today in the invocation of the mother goddess, Umay, by women in childbirth in the Turkish world. Umay came to be identified with Mary, the mother of Jesus, who is the prophet Isa to the Muslims.
  - The persistence of these traditional habits and beliefs can be seen in the tsarist government’s and, later, the Soviet government’s attempts to identify the Muslim population on
the steppes. The tribes’ varied practices prevented any kind of census based on religion, and officials ultimately had to catalogue these people based on tribal identities rather than religious identities.

- Still, these conversions to Islam were important because they made the tribes on the Eurasian steppes part of the wider *ummah*. The Turks were seen as ruthless and, in many instances, cruel, but they were accepted as Sunni Muslims and now had the opportunity to enter a literate, urban civilization.
  - Earlier empires, such as the Han, the Byzantine, and the Roman, saw only two ways to deal with nomads: either assimilate them or expel them.
  - But the in case of the Muslim world, the Turks—although they were outlanders—were now Sunni Muslims. As such, they would turn themselves into the military elite of the Islamic world, conduct a new era of Islamic expansion, and create their own version of Turkish Islamic civilization.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Important Terms</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Samanid</strong>: The family of Iranian emirs (819–1005) who ruled from Bukhara, eastern Iran, and Transoxania as the representatives of the Abbasid caliphate. They defined the visual arts and letters of eastern Islam.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Shah-nameh</strong>: “Book of Kings”; the Middle Persian national epic composed by Abu al-Qasem Mansur (c. 940–1020).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Sharia</strong>: Muslim religious law based on the Koran.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Sufi</strong>: Muslim mystic who follows the Sunni tradition.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>türbe</strong>: Memorial tomb to a Muslim ruler or mentor.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
al-Mamun (b. 786; 813–833): Abbasid caliph; son of Harun al-Rashid. In 813, he defeated his half-brother al-Amin and gained the throne. But he surrendered control over Khurasan and the northeastern frontier to Tahir ibn al-Husayn.

Ferdowsi (Abu al-Qasem Mansur) (940–1020): Persian poet; wrote the epic Shah-nameh (“Books of Kings”) in 977–1010. This national epic celebrated Persian historical traditions before the advent of Islam and set the standard of expression in literary Middle Persian.

Suggested Reading

Bulliet, Cotton, Climate and Camels in Early Islamic Iran.

Elverskog, Buddhism and Islam on the Silk Road.

Foltz, Religions of the Silk Road.

Golden, Central Asia in World History.

Hansen, The Silk Road: A New History.

Questions to Consider

1. Why did the Umayyad armies fail to win over large numbers of converts in Transoxiana and among the Turkish tribes of the Eurasian steppes? What were early Muslim attitudes toward the diverse faiths they encountered in these regions? How did the Arab Muslims initially view the Turkish nomads?

2. How did the recruitment of Turks into Abbasid armies change attitudes toward Islam among the nomadic peoples? Why did the Persian culture of the Abbasid caliphate impress the nomadic peoples? What was the role of the Samanid emirs in transmitting both Islam and the Persian civilization of Abbasid Baghdad to the Turkish tribes?

3. What were the appeals of Islam to the merchants in the cities of the Silk Road or among the Turkish tribes? Why was it so easy to identify Sufi...
mystics with Turkish shamans? How did the Turks combine Islam with their folk beliefs?

4. How did writers play such an important role in defining the Turkish identity within the wider Islamic world? Why could the Turks maintain their language and identity and still be members of a wider Islamic civilization?

5. Why did merchants and the expansion of the caravan trade prove decisive in the conversion of Turkish tribes to Islam from the 10th century? Why did Buddhism steadily give way to Islam at the same time?
The Rise of the Seljuk Turks
Lecture 22

In this lecture, we will follow up on some of the implications of the previous two lectures. As you recall, we discussed the clash between the armies of the caliphate and the western Turks that ended in the Battle of Talas. Then, we talked about the dissemination of Islam onto the western steppes through trade connections. Those issues lead directly to the subject of this lecture, which is a series of Turkish migrations that resulted in the formation of new powers on the steppes. We will discuss three states in particular: the Karakhanids, the Ghaznavids, and the Seljuk Turks, who represented the greatest of these new Turkish political organizations.

The Aftermath of Talas

- The Battle of Talas marked, in some ways, the beginning of a new wave of migrations across the central Eurasian steppes. We might think that the Karluks, the Turkish allies who deserted from the Chinese to the Muslims, would go on to dominate the central steppes, but that did not happen. The Karluks represented a loose confederation; they fell to fighting among themselves and got swept up in the slave trade.
  - In addition, the Karluks were vassals of the Uighur khagan, who exercised a nominal hegemony over the central steppes of Eurasia. But the Uighur khagans were defeated in an uprising of their subject peoples in 840. The khaganate broke up, and many of the Uighurs migrated to the caravan cities of the Tarim Basin. Their homeland, the Orkhon valley, was never reoccupied by Turks.
  - In the wake of the Uighurs, the Karluks never imposed any kind of authority over the central Eurasian steppes. As a result, there were more migrations of Turks from east to west into the central and western steppes.
The Abbasid caliphate and the Samanid emirs ruling in Bukhara were not displeased by the new wave of migrations on the steppes, because they played directly into one of their greatest needs: the slave trade.

- From the very start of the Abbasid caliphate, the caliphs distrusted their Arab tribal regiments—and with good cause. The Arabs were rapacious and unruly, difficult to discipline, and many were infected with Shi’a, Alid, or Umayyad sympathies.

- For this reason, the Abbasid caliphs began to replace their Arab soldiers with professionals, including Persians, Armenians, Kurds, and above all, Turks. Large numbers of Turks were hired as mercenaries or recruited as allies to fight in the armies of the great caliphs. In addition, the caliphs began to recruit a Turkish bodyguard, the *haras*.

- The bodyguard was composed of slave soldiers. These were generally young men, around the ages of 14 or 15, who had been taken in tribal wars and sold as slaves. They were educated in religious schools, converted to Islam, and drilled to be elite soldiers.

- The Islamic world came to depend on the manpower of the Eurasian steppes, and the disorder on the steppes—the failure of the Karluks to construct a new confederacy and the collapse of the Uighur khaganate—was to the advantage of the Abbasid caliphs and the Samanid emirs.

- In time, however, merchants operating on the Eurasian steppes began to introduce Islam. Turkish tribes began to understand the religion and gain more organization. We have reports of massive tribal conversions in the 10th century. Several important political orders grew out of these new conditions.

**The Karakhanid Turks**

- The *Karakhanid* Turks were ruled by the Kara khans, or “black khans.” The confederation was divided into a western and an
eastern half. The eastern half would have been east of Kashgar on the steppes around the Altai Mountains, and the western tribes were north of the Jaxartes and came to control Kashgar.

- The Karakhanids began to convert to Islam starting in the mid-10th century and styled themselves as both Turkish rulers and patrons of Muslim civilization. Indeed, Kashgar emerged in the 10th and the 11th centuries as one of the first centers of a distinct Turkish Islamic civilization. The khagans there patronized poets and scholars, and it was in Kashgar and the associated towns involved in the Silk Road trade where Turkish was adapted to the Arabic script.

- A number of figures came to define this Turkish civilization, including the writer Mahmud al-Kashgari, whose career spanned most of the 11th century.
Mahmud recorded many of the Turkish heroic and epic traditions in something called a *diwan* ("compendium"). This work is the first comprehensive discussion of the Turkish language, and it cites many early oral poems and other traditions. Mahmud also appended maps to his work, showing the positions of the various Turkish tribes on the Eurasian steppes.

Mahmud was a pivotal figure in turning Turkish into a literary language. Henceforth, the Turks as a whole would embrace Islam, but they would do so on their own terms. Turkish would become one of the three great languages of the Islamic world, along with Arabic and Persian.

When the Turks entered the wider Islamic world, they would not be assimilated in the way many other nomadic peoples had been. The Turks acquired a cultural-religious identity, one that was Islamic but also distinctly Turkish.

As mentioned earlier, starting in the mid-10th century, the rulers of the Karakhanids began to convert, bringing with them whole tribes. These conversions gained pace throughout the 10th and 11th centuries and were different from the individual conversions won by merchants and Sufi mystics or the conversions of slaves brought into the Islamic world. The Karakhanids emerged as one of the great political powers out of this interaction between the steppes and the Islamic world.

**The Ghaznavid Sultans**

Another great political order emerged as a product of the slave system; these were the rulers who are known as the Ghaznavid sultans. They were essentially a succession of slave soldiers, or *Mamluks*, who had started out in the employ of the Samanid emirs of Bukhara.

The founder of this dynasty, Alp Tigin, had been exiled to the remote town of Ghazna, which is in Afghanistan today. He took
over the town and turned it into a successful frontier post. His power was eventually transmitted to his son-in-law, Sebüktigin.

- Sebüktigin took over the Ghaznavid emirate probably in the year 977 and, in some ways, pointed the Turks and Islam in the direction of India. He repeatedly invaded the Punjab, plundering Hindu temples and Buddhist monasteries. He also depended heavily on slave troops that had been recruited from the steppes, and above all he used Persian administrators. Sebüktigin may have been Turkish in origin, but culturally, he was a product of high Persian-Iranian culture.

- Later Ghaznavid sultans, especially Sebüktigin’s son Mahmud, carried out some extraordinary raids into India. In 1024, Mahmud descended through the Khyber Pass into Gujarat and sacked the great temple of Shiva at the city of Somnath.

- As the Ghazavids emerged as the power of eastern Islam, they ran up against the Karakhanids, with both states squeezing out the Samanid emirs. Eastern Islam was partitioned between the two powers, with the Oxus River again accepted as the boundary. The city of Balkh fell into the hands of Mahmud. The Karakhanids were content with the cities of Transoxiana.

- It seemed as if Mahmud and his successors would go on to unite eastern Islam, but that didn’t happen because a third group suddenly intervened and knocked out both contenders—the Seljuk Turks.

The Seljuk Turks
- The ancestors of the Seljuk Turks, the Oghuz or Ghuzz Turks, had settled in the Jaxartes valley, the lands around the Aral Sea. They entered the Islamic world in the 10th century. The founder of this tribe, Seljuk, moved into the region known as Khurasan, an important border area that is in eastern Iran and parts of Afghanistan and Turkmenistan today. The Seljuks were military colonists and seem to have been involved in camel breeding.
The grandsons of Seljuk, particularly Tughril Bey and his brother Chagri Bey, took power over these tribes and exploited the clash between the Karakhanids and the Ghaznavid sultans. In the 1030s, the Seljuks swept through many of the cities of eastern Iran. Tughril Bey was careful to ensure that his soldiers represented themselves as agents of the caliph in Baghdad. In 1037, he had himself proclaimed sultan (“guardian”) at Nishapur.

On May 23, 1040, in the vicinity of Merv, Tughril Bey won a major victory over the Ghaznavid army. It was a classic victory of Turkish cavalry over an army that had come to depend heavily on Indian forces. The Ghaznavid sultan had brought up infantry and even war elephants from India. He did not have access to the same number of cavalrymen, and the battle proved decisive. The Ghaznavids were forced to retreat into India, and the Karakhanids were then pushed back to the Jaxartes.

All of Transoxiana fell into the hands of Tughril Bey, and the Turkish armies began to march relentlessly across northern Iran. They arrived at all the great caravan cities not as nomadic barbarians or conquerors but as Sunni Muslims and agents of the caliph. In 1055, Tughril Bey entered Baghdad itself, and his position as sultan was confirmed by the caliph. He married a daughter of the caliph, and henceforth, the Abbasid caliphate would be directed by a Turkish sultan.

The victory of Tughril Bey was spectacular and unexpected. In capturing Baghdad, the Seljuk sultan and his successors found that they now had a problem of meeting foes on numerous frontiers. The Karakhanids were still in the northeast, and the Ghaznavids in India could always mount a comeback, but above all, the Seljuks now assumed the commitment of dealing with the Shi’a caliphs of Cairo and their Christian allies, the Byzantine emperors of Constantinople.
Important Terms

**Ghaznavid**: A dynasty of Turkish slave emirs (963–1186), who ruled from Ghazna (Afghanistan) over Transoxania and Iran and raided northern India.

**Karakhanid**: A Turkish confederation on the central Asian steppes that ruled Transoxania from Kashgar and Samarkand (840–1212). They converted to Islam in 934.

**Mamluk**: From the Arabic for “servant”: (1) Turkish slave soldier in the Islamic world; (2) dynasty of Turkish slave soldiers that ruled Egypt (1250–1517); (3) dynasty of Turkish slave soldiers that ruled the Delhi sultanate (1206–1290).

Names to Know

**Alp Tigin** (961–975): Turkish Mamluk; ruled Ghazna (today Afghanistan) as a vassal of the Samanid emir Mansur I (961–976). He promoted Sunni Islam and raided the Punjab, sacking Hindu temples and Buddhist monasteries. He was succeeded by Ishaq (975–977), and then his son-in-law Sebüktigin (977–997).

**Mahmud al-Kashgari** (1005–1102): Turkish poet and scholar under the Karakhanids; wrote the first compendium on the Turkish language, *Diwan lughat at-Turk*, and adapted the Arabic-Persian script for writing Turkish. His work contains a wealth of information about early Turkish history and religious traditions. He also drew the first world map showing the location of Turkish tribes.

**Mahmud of Ghazni** (b. 971; r. 997–1030): Ghaznavid sultan; the son and successor of Sebüktigin. He waged 17 campaigns in northern India, whereby he gained the loot and slaves to sustain his professional army. He clashed with the Karakhanids over Transoxania, and in 1015–1071, he secured Khwarezm. In 1027–1028, he extended his sway over the caravan cities of northern Iran.
Sebüktigin (b. 942; r. 977–997): Ghaznavid emir and sultan; known as the Lion of Ghazni. He was the Turkish commander and son-in-law of Alp Tigin. In 977, he was declared emir by his Turkish soldiers. He forged the Ghaznavid emirate into a Muslim state and conquered the Kabul valley. In 994–999, he secured the Samanid lands south of the Oxus River, while the Karakhanids occupied Transoxania.

Tughril Bey (b. 999; r. 1037–1063): Seljuk sultan; restored the power of the Sunni Abbasid caliphate at Baghdad. In 1025, Tughril Beg and his brother Chaghri had settled their Ghuzz Turks in Khurasan as vassals of Sultan Mahmud of Ghazna. In 1030–1037, Tughril Beg conquered Transoxania and took the title sultan. In 1040, he defeated the Ghaznavid sultan Masud (1031–1041) and conquered the former Ghaznavid domains in northern Iran. In 1055, he entered Baghdad and was received as great sultan by Caliph al-Kasim (1031–1075).

**Suggested Reading**

Bulliet, *Cotton, Climate, and Camels in Early Islamic Iran*.


Cahen, “The Turkish Invasion: The Selchukids.”

Elverskog, *Buddhism and Islam on the Silk Road*.

Jackson, *The Delhi Sultanate*.

Golden, “The Karakhanids and Early Islam.”


**Questions to Consider**

1. What accounted for the migrations of Turkish tribes westward in the 9th and 10th centuries? What was the impact of these migrations? Why did a powerful khaganate fail to emerge that could have united the steppes?
2. How did Abbasid caliphs and Samanid emirs exploit the disunity among the Turkish tribes? What was the long-term impact of the slave trade on the nomadic peoples?

3. What was the nature of the Karakhanid confederation? Why did these Turkish tribes convert to Islam in the 10th century? How did conversion change the relationship between nomads and sedentary peoples?

4. What accounted for the success of the Ghaznavid sultans? To what degree was the state simply the personal achievement of Sebüktigin and Mahmud? Why did the Ghaznavids fail to defeat the Seljuk Turks?

5. How much did Seljuk success depend on Tughril Bey? What advantages did the Seljuk Turks enjoy? Why were they so readily accepted as defenders of Sunni Islam? Why did the occupation of Baghdad pose a crisis of policy for Tughril Bey and his successors?
Turks in Anatolia and India
Lecture 23

As we’ve seen in previous lectures, for nearly 300 years during the Abbasid caliphate, the political and military expansion of the Islamic world had halted. During that same period, Abbasid caliphs and various emirs ruling in the name of the caliph came to depend on Turkish military power. Once the Seljuk Turks emerged as a major factor in eastern Islam, they were responsible for conquering two new regions: Anatolia, often referred to as Asia Minor, and northern India, particularly the region around Delhi known as the Doab. This lecture will compare these conquests.

The Problem of Cairo

- As mentioned in the last lecture, in 1055, Tughril Bey, leader of the Seljuk Turks, entered the city of Baghdad. From that point forward, Tughril Bey and his successors were confronted with running a vast empire, far larger than any Turkish ruler had yet administered.
  - They could now tap into the wealth of a good portion of the Silk Road, but they also faced a series of commitments that strained Seljuk resources.
  - The Karakhanids were still present to the east and might contest Transoxiana. The Ghaznavids and their vassal allies could come out of India and the borderlands of Afghanistan. And above all, the western frontier posed challenges.

- The Fatimid caliphs had resided in Cairo since 973. They represented a counter-caliph to the Sunni caliph in Baghdad, in whose name Tughril Bey and the Seljuk Turks fought. Knocking out these sectarian rivals, who posed a challenge to the authority of the Abbasid caliphate and the Seljuk sultan, became a priority.

- Further, in 1055, after the Seljuk withdrawal from Baghdad, rebels in the city called in a Fatimid army, and Baghdad was occupied for...
40 days. Tughril Bey appeared and chased out the Fatimid army, but he was henceforth committed to a war against Cairo.

- The Fatimid caliphs had come to an agreement with the Orthodox emperors of Constantinople. At the time, the Byzantine state was deeply divided between two factions: a civil elite in the capital that wanted to slash military expenditures and a military elite based in Anatolia that put priority on containing the frontiers. The civilian group came to dominate politics in Constantinople, a fact that had dire consequences for the military budget and the efficiency of the Byzantine army.

- Up until the arrival of the Seljuk Turks, an agreement existed between the Byzantines, who controlled northern Syria, and the Fatimids, who controlled southern Syria and the rest of the Levant, to protect Christian pilgrimage routes to Jerusalem. This agreement had two important consequences for Tughril Bey and his Seljuk Turks.
  - First, Tughril Bey turned his Turkish regiments on the Byzantine Empire to keep the Byzantine emperors distracted. At the same time, he concentrated the bulk of his forces to take Syria and Jerusalem, then hold Mecca and Medina, and lastly disrupt the pilgrimage routes, Pope Urban II preached the First Crusade in 1095.
  - Second, the emirs of Tughril Bey began to attack Asia Minor and found no resistance. In Byzantine Anatolia, they found cities to sack but also grasslands that were similar to their homeland in central Asia. Further, this region was not occupied by Muslims but by Christians. The soldiers could fight as ghazi warriors in the name of jihad. This was an ideal place for Turkish expansion.

The Battle of Manzikert
- Starting in 1055, Turkish tribal armies began to raid across Anatolia, and the Byzantine state reacted ineptly. In 1068, a new emperor came to the throne, Romanus IV Diogenes, whose job was to
reckon with the Seljuk Turks. Romanus inherited a treasury that had been bankrupt by 50 years of incompetence and an army that was in a poor state. He tried to bring the raiders to bear, but it was difficult because the Turks had learned the various routes across Asia Minor.

- The fighting climaxed in August of 1071 when Romanus marched a large field army west and encountered the new sultan, Alp-Arslan, the nephew of Tughril Bey, at the town of Manzikert. The town was on grasslands that were ideal for the Turkish cavalry.

- Romanus is often criticized for ineptitude, but he actually did a credible job. He drew up his army immediately to the west of the modern town, which still has heavy fortifications built from the Byzantine age. He put his infantry in the center, arranged the usual flanking forces with archers, and held his cavalry in reserve.
  - Romanus fought the sort of battle that would have been recommended by both Byzantine authors and Tang generals, but he also commanded an army that had no sense of unity. He held his own over the course of the day. At the end of the day, he called his forces together and told them to fall back to camp because they could not bring the Turks to battle.

  - The infantry wheeled around and opened up gaps that Alp-Arslan was able to exploit. The army was thrown into confusion. Rumors flew that the emperor had been killed. The cavalry, particularly the forces in the rear that were supposed to prevent such an occurrence, defected.

  - Actually, Romanus had fallen into the hands of the sultan. He was later released and received the standard Byzantine imperial retirement package: He was blinded and left in a monastery.

**The Crusades**

- In the wake of the victory at Manzikert, independent bands of Turks moved into Asia Minor and carved out their own principalities. Within a decade, most of Asia Minor had fallen into the hands of
Turkish adventurers, technically professing to be the emirs of the Turkish sultan in Baghdad but actually independent operators.

- The Byzantine emperors had no choice but to take Asia Minor back. In 1081, a successful general, Alexius I Comnenus, battled his way to the throne and decided to call in western Europeans as mercenaries to beat back the Turks and retake Asia Minor. That appeal was interpreted by Pope Urban II as a call to liberate Jerusalem, and thus, the First Crusade was launched. Between 1097 and 1099, more than 50,000 western Europeans streamed across Asia Minor toward Jerusalem.

- The result was a seesaw struggle across Asia Minor among Byzantines, Crusaders, and Seljuk Turks. Initially, the Crusaders won stunning victories over the Turks. Western and coastal regions of Asia Minor fell back under Byzantine control. But the Byzantine emperors could never drive the Turks off the plateau. The Turkish tribes settled in significant numbers, came to terms with the Christian agriculturists, and began to create a Turkish heartland in this peninsula.

- The fighting also played into the hands of the Seljuk Turks. It broke down Byzantine institutions, cities, and road systems, resulting in conditions that favored the nomadic way of war. Large parts of Asia Minor passed out of agricultural use into grasslands, and steadily, the balance shifted in favor of the Turks. Two events confirm this shift.
  - In 1176, the emperor Manuel I was decisively beaten at the Battle of Myriocephalon. That battle marked the end of Byzantine efforts to expel the Seljuk Turks from Asia Minor.
  - In April of 1204, members of the Fourth Crusade stormed into the city of Constantinople and sacked it. Byzantine power was finished. The political and, ultimately, the cultural destinies of Asia Minor shifted decisively to the Seljuk Turks settled in Anatolia, who would turn that region into a new Turkish-speaking, Muslim land.
Conquests into India

- At the same time that the Seljuk Turks were winning victories in the west, there were also significant battles taking place on the eastern frontier. India at this time was divided into a number of competing kingdoms, vying for control of the Aryavarta, the Aryan homeland. This region essentially encompassed the Indus Valley, the Doab, and the Ganges. When a Hindu king gained ascendancy over his opponents, he didn’t build great bureaucratic structures but attempted to control this region.

- As a result of different dynasties vying for control, there was no organized resistance when the Ghaznavid sultans began to raid into India, even before the Seljuk Turks were on the scene. In addition, the Ghaznavid sultans increasingly realized that they couldn’t take back their domains in Iran or contend for the cities of Transoxiana; thus, they began to take over the regions of India. In this regard, the conquest was very different from that in Asia Minor.

- In 1192, at the Battle of Tarain, just north of Delhi, the nomadic cavalry of the Ghaznavid sultan Muhammad Ghuri crushed the most effective state in northern India, that of Prithviraj III. In the next year, his forces took Delhi. Those victories, combined with earlier ones by the sultan Mahmud, collectively had the impact of Manzikert in Asia Minor, opening northern India to Muslim conquest and settlement.

- However, in the 11th and 12th centuries and even into the 13th, the Turkish conquest of northern India was much more a military
occupation than a settlement. This is quite different from the situation in Asia Minor, where perhaps 500,000 nomads settled in the wake of Manzikert and, in time, would create a new Turkish identity.

○ In contrast, with his victory in 1192, Muhammad Ghuri gained control of Delhi and faced a population 10 times that of Asia Minor. Further, he was dealing with 2 million square miles on the subcontinent, as opposed to 300,000 square miles in Asia Minor. Above all, in India, the Turkish Muslim conquerors ran into the power of caste, varna, and the traditions of Indian civilization in a terrain and a climate that did not permit the settlement of nomads. In fact, it wasn’t even conducive to horses.

○ From the start, then, the sultans ruling in Delhi faced a very different situation than their contemporaries did in Konya in Asia Minor. As a result, two distinct Turkish Muslim civilizations came out of these two conquests: a Turkish civilization in Anatolia and a ruling elite in Delhi.

### Important Terms

**Aryavarta**: The “Aryan homeland,” which comprises the lands of the upper Indus and Ganges rivers that are home to the sacred cities of Hinduism.

**Doab**: The fertile lands between the Punjab and the upper Ganges and Yamuna rivers; Delhi and Agra are in the Doab.

**jihad**: In Islam, “holy war.”

### Names to Know

**Alp-Arslan** (b. 1029; r. 1063–1072): Seljuk sultan and nephew of Tughril Beg. Defeated and captured the Byzantine emperor Romanus IV at the Battle of Manzikert. Alp-Arslan opened Asia Minor to settlement by Turkish tribes.

**Muhammad Ghuri** (b. 1150, r. 1202–1206): Ghurid emir; extended the Ghurids into northern India. He conquered the Punjab and Doab in the name of his older brother Ghiyas al-Din (1163–1203). His decisive victory over
the Rajput King Prithviraja III (1149–1192) in 1192 gained him control of Delhi. As emir, he entrusted the administration of the Indian conquests to his Turkish general Qutb al-Din Aybak.

**Romanus IV Diogenes** (b. c. 1030; r. 1068–1072): Byzantine emperor; candidate of the officers of the eastern army. He married the empress Eudocia, widow of Constantine X Ducas (1059–1067). Romanus was decisively defeated and captured by the Seljuk sultan Alp-Arslan at the Battle of Manzikert in 1071. In 1072, Romanus was released by Alp-Arslan, but Michael VII ordered him deposed and blinded. Romanus died in exile.

## Suggested Reading

Cahen (Jones-Williams, trans.), *Pre-Ottoman Turkey*.

———. “The Turkish Invasion: The Selchukids.”

Elverskog, *Buddhism and Islam on the Silk Road*.

Jackson, *The Delhi Sultanate*.


Magdalino, *The Empire of Manuel I Komnenos, 1143–1180*.

Rice, *The Seljuk Turks*.

Vymnos, *The Decline of Medieval Hellenism in Asia Minor and the Process of Islamization from the Eleventh through the Fifteenth Century*.

## Questions to Consider

1. What reasons compelled Turks to invade both Anatolia and India? How did these two conquests differ? In what ways were they similar?

2. Why did the Battle of Manzikert in 1071 prove so decisive in its results? Why did the Turks settle so successfully in Asia Minor? Why did the Comnenian emperors and the Crusaders fail to expel the Turks from Asia Minor? How did the desultory fighting between 1097 and 1176 ultimately benefit the Seljuk Turks?
3. What was the political, religious, and cultural order in northern India in the 11\textsuperscript{th} century? Why did the leading Indian kingdoms fail to unite against the Turkish invaders?

4. How were the careers of Mahmud of Ghazvi and Muhammad Ghuri decisive for the future of Muslim India? How did the Indian populations react to the widespread destruction of Hindu temples and Buddhist monasteries?
This lecture looks at how the Seljuk Turks of Asia Minor made use of their victories in the 11th and 12th centuries to construct a new Turkish civilization in Asia Minor. Up until 1204, it was unclear what would happen in the struggle between Byzantines and Turks for possession of Anatolia. When the Turks succeeded, Konya emerged as the center of this new Muslim Turkish civilization. In this lecture, we’ll look at the attempts of the sultans in Konya to forge a wider unity once it was clear that there would be no Byzantine reconquest of Asia Minor.

**Errors of the Byzantines**

- In the struggle for control of Anatolia with the Turks, the Byzantines made two fatal miscalculations. The first was calling in the western Europeans, who would turn their arms against the Byzantines rather than fighting the Muslim foe. A second, deeper miscalculation was born of previous Byzantine experience with nomadic peoples.
  - Both the Bulgars and the Magyars had been successfully converted to Orthodox Christianity, and the emperors in Constantinople believed that the sultans of Konya and the Danishmend emirs of Niksar (in northeastern Turkey) could eventually be brought under the Christian umbrella, as well.
  - What they didn’t understand was that when the Turks entered Asia Minor, they had already turned themselves into a distinct Muslim ethnicity that had married the Turkish language, traditions, and values to a kind of folk Islam.
  - In 1204, after Constantinople was sacked by the Fourth Crusade, no Byzantine emperor was ever in a position to conduct a serious effort to convert the Seljuk Turks.

- Konya emerged as the center of Asia Minor and, therefore, the center of a Muslim Turkish civilization.
The Rise and Fall of Konya

- Starting in the early 13th century, a succession of talented sultans in Konya managed to expand control over the peninsula. Most of Asia Minor was eventually put together as a single sultanate recognizing the authority of Konya. The fact that the sultans were able to reign in the various nomadic tribes and join rival cities into a single state was a considerable achievement.

- The pivotal ruler in this was Kay-Khusraw II. He came to the throne after a series of civil wars fought with his half-brothers over the succession.
  - Kay-Khusraw managed to eliminate the collateral lines, but one of his half-brothers had appealed to both nomadic tribes and Mongols. Kay-Khusraw refused to submit to the great khagan, Ögödei, the son of Genghis Khan.
  - In 1243, the Mongol governor in Tabriz, Bayju, decided to intervene in Asia Minor. His army smashed the forces of Kay-Khusraw, who managed to escape. He went on to rule as a Mongol vassal for another three or four years.

- This defeat at the hands of the Mongols essentially ended the political power of Konya. By the early 14th century, the various Muslim states in Asia Minor again fragmented into a constellation of lesser states and political powers. That situation would remain in Asia Minor down to the reign of Mehmed II, the Ottoman sultan who would reunite the region as part of the Ottoman Empire.

Cultural Achievements in Konya

- In political terms, the sultans of Konya did not do particularly well in establishing a wider political unity. After 1309, Konya was, in many ways, finished as a political center, although it would survive as a religious and cultural center.

- In the 12th century, the sultans of Konya had scored a major success in transforming Asia Minor culturally and religiously. The courts at Konya and lesser cities, such as Sivas, Amasya, and Niksar, all
favored the high Persian culture of eastern Islam. Persian was the literary language used at court, and Persian poets and scholars were appreciated.

- The Turkish-dominated cities of Asia Minor became linked to the caravan trade even more intimately, and greater numbers of Muslims from the wider Islamic world settled in these cities. The administrative and cultural talent that came into Asia Minor was used to construct Turkish civilization.

- In addition, the Mongol conquests of the 13th century drove increasing numbers of Turkish tribes and Muslims out of central Asia and Iran westward into the Seljuk domains. That brought many more Turkish settlers, who reinforced the Turkish component on the peninsula, but it also brought mystics, scholars, poets, craftsmen, and, above all, architects.

- In the early 13th century, several significant developments allowed the sultans of Konya to undertake a massive reworking of the urban landscape of previously Christian Byzantine cities in Asia Minor.
  - One example can be found in eastern Turkey, in the city of Divriği. In 1229, a wonderful mosque-hospital complex was built there, and it remains virtually untouched. The plain exterior is nicely contrasted with the doors and portals that feature elaborate carving. The interior is inviting, with a good deal of prayer space opened by columns. Early mimbars (wooden pulpits) survive that show marvelous carving from nomadic traditions.

  - Medreses were also built across eastern Turkey, and several can be seen today.

  - Steadily over the 13th century, the skylines of cities in Turkey were transformed into Muslim skylines, with medreses, minarets, and mosques. These were the first significant buildings in Asia Minor in more than 150 years. The money for
this construction came from the successful consolidation of the power of the sultans of Konya and the Silk Road.

- Another monument that came to characterize Seljuk Asia Minor was the caravansary, essentially a rest stop along the Silk Road. Caravans could stop there for up to three days to rest while their goods were securely stored. Some caravansaries included chapels for Islamic worship. The caravansaries were supported by endowments and were under the protection of the sultan, which meant that the caravans that used these facilities could be taxed.

- In the countryside, yet another architectural feature that points to the transformation of Asia Minor into a new Seljuk homeland are the memorial tombs, or türbes.
  - At least 3,500 of these have been counted as having been constructed in the 13th and early 14th centuries. Many of them
were memorials to hocas ("holy men") or Sufi mystics. Three have survived in Divriği in a wonderful state of preservation.

- The türbes served to attract Christian agriculturalists to Islam. They replaced, in effect, the traditions of the saints in the Christian tradition and played an important role in the gradual conversion of Asia Minor to Turkey.

The Power of Sufi Mystics

- One final ingredient in the Islamization of Asia Minor was the power of Sufi mystics. As mentioned in an earlier lecture, these Muslim holy men were, in many ways, unconventional in their religious beliefs. They were not always well-versed in Sharia or the Qur’an per se. Instead, their communication with God was often more personal and direct. This aspect of the Sufis coincided with the Turkish reverence for hocas.

- At the same time, in the fighting that had raged over Asia Minor in the course of the 11th and 12th centuries, Christian institutions had been severely disrupted. Monasteries were particularly targeted and repeatedly sacked. And even if the churches themselves were respected, many of the bishops decamped to Constantinople.

- Many of the Greek churches fell under the control of priests who were generally ignorant of scripture, and increasingly, the Christian community became disoriented; certainly by the 13th century, Christian spiritual life was quite impoverished. Thus, the Christian population was ideally suited for proselytizing by Sufi mystics.

- Foremost among these mystics was Jalal al-Din Rumi, known to us as the poet Rumi. He came from a fine, literate family, and his father was a hoca and teacher. In 1228, his family moved to Konya at the invitation of the sultan. Rumi succeeded to the school of his father, then in 1244, underwent a conversion, in which he became an aesthetic. He and his followers, popularly known as dervishes, made a decisive difference in the conversion of Christians.
Rumi was convinced that the oneness of God was all-important and that God could be reached through poetry and dancing, especially mystical dancing. These beliefs led to the so-called whirling dervishes, who use their bodies as the vehicle for communication with the divine.

Rumi and his followers were seen as great teachers and holy men who could perform miracles. We have large numbers of stories written by his followers in the generations after him that report mystical conversions carried out among Christian populations.

To the Christian populations, such mystics presented a powerful image. The Christians had not had bishops and monks for generations. Now, these Sufi mystics came into their villages and offered a vision of the divine that had long been lacking.

- Steadily, as a result of this contact, the countryside was won over. By 1350, the population had decisively tipped toward Islam and was completely Turkish speaking. The political failure of Konya was a moot point because by 1350, the Seljuk sultans had set in motion a transformation of the peninsula into a new Islamic land.

**Important Term**

**caravansary**: Walled quarters, stables, and storage rooms constructed and maintained by the Turkish Muslim rulers for the benefit of caravans. The upkeep of the caravansary was paid by the profits of a foundation.

**Names to Know**

**Jalal al-Din Rumi** (1206–1273): Persian mystic and poet; known as Rumi. He was born in Balkh, the son of the Baha al-Din Walad, a celebrated jurist and theologian. His family relocated to Konya in 1228, where Rumi succeeded his father as head of the madrasah in 1232. In 1244, he adopted an ascetic life and founded the Mevlevi mystical order of Sufism. The members
of this order, the dervishes, converted the Christians of Anatolia in the 13th and 14th centuries.

**Kay-Khusraw II** (1237–1246): Seljuk sultan of Konya (Rûm). He failed to maintain control over the Turkish tribes and, thus, faced repeated rebellions. He refused to render homage to the Mongol khan Ögödei (1228–1241). Bayju, the Mongol commander in Iran, invaded Asia Minor and decisively defeated Kay-Khusraw at the Battle of Köse Dag on June 26, 1243. Thereafter, the sultans of Konya, as Mongol vassals, lost control over the emirs and Turkish tribes of Asia Minor.

**Ögödei** (b. 1186; r. 1229–1241): Mongol khan; the third son of Genghis Khan and Börte. Ögödei, popular and affable, was elected by the *kurultai* as successor to Genghis Khan. He ruled directly over the Mongolian homeland, but he was recognized as Great Khan by his brothers Chagatai and Tolui and his nephew Batu. He transformed Karakorum into a capital city and authorized Batu’s conquest of the west. His death precipitated the first succession crisis of the Mongol Empire.

### Suggested Reading

Cahen (Jones-Williams, trans.), *Pre-Ottoman Turkey*.

———, “The Turkish Invasion: The Selchukids.”

Lange, *The Seljuqs: Politics, Society, and Culture*.

Peacock and Yildez, eds., *The Seljuks of Anatolia*.

Rice, *The Seljuk Turks*.

Vyrnos, *The Decline of Medieval Hellenism in Asia Minor and the Process of Islamization from the Eleventh through the Fifteenth Century*.

### Questions to Consider

1. Why did the 13th century prove so decisive for the genesis of an Islamic Asia Minor? Why did the Seljuk Turks ultimately reject assimilation into the Byzantine cultural commonwealth?
2. How did border warfare shift the military balance in favor of the Seljuk Turks by the early 12th century? How did the migration of Turkish tribes in the 13th century contribute to the spread of the Turkish language and nomadic material life among the Christian sedentary populations?

3. How effectively did the sultans of Konya impose their authority over the emirs and ghazi lords of Anatolia? Why did the sultans Kay-Khusraw I and his heirs make Konya the arbiter of Muslim Anatolia? Why did the sultanate fragment?

4. What enduring Muslim political, administrative, and cultural institutions were forged by the sultans of Konya? What was their debt to the Samanid emirs of Transoxiana? How much did they owe to their traditions brought from the Eurasian steppes?

5. How did the sultans of Konya promote trade in the 13th century? What was the cultural and economic impact of making Anatolia an integral part of the wider Silk Road? How did the network of caravansary promote prosperity and Islam?

6. What factors led to the conversion of Christians to Islam? What was the role of the Jalal al-din Rumi? How did the promotion of Muslim arts and monumental buildings by the sultans contribute to the process?
In this lecture, we’ll look at the results of the conquests of northern India by Turkish nomadic warriors in the early 13th century. This lecture runs parallel to what we just discussed on the Turkification and the Islamitization of Asia Minor. Why did the sultans ruling at Delhi fail to forge a wider imperial unity? They ran into some of the same problems as the sultans of Konya. On the other hand, what were their successes, and what were the limitations in creating a Muslim civilization in India? At the end of the lecture, we’ll examine the question of whether the Muslim conquest of northern India was more of a military occupation than a real settlement.

**Aybak’s Rule in Northern India**

- In 1192, Muhammad Ghuri had gained control of northern India, but he was distracted by events in central Asia. He entrusted the running of his conquests to subordinate generals—Mamluk slave soldiers. In particular, a general named **Qutb ud-Din Aybak** was essentially left on his own to direct various campaigns.

- Those campaigns saw the consolidation of a kingdom in and around Delhi with a much looser confederacy across the Indo-Gangic plain. From the start, power rested in the hands of nomadic steppe warriors and slave soldiers. In 1206, when Muhammad Ghori died, Aybak essentially became an independent ruler. He assumed the title sultan, ruled from Delhi for the next four years, and transmitted power through his family.

- From the start, Aybak realized that he couldn’t depend solely on tribal regiments and slave soldiers. He began to give out essentially endowments or fiefs (**iqta**) to leaders (**muqtis**), who would then use this land to support military units that would be the basis of power for the sultan. Some of these commanders were quite independent. The **Khalji** family, for instance, essentially carved out its own independent operation. This would be a problem repeatedly in
dealing with *muqtis*. Nonetheless, Aybak set the basis for political control of Delhi and the Doab.

**Challenges for Iltutmish**

- Aybak was succeeded by his son-in-law **Iltutmish**, who ruled from 1210 to 1236. He, too, originated as a military commander, but he owed his position on the throne to the fact that he had married Aybak’s daughter and was absolutely trusted.

- Iltutmish proved to be a very able ruler. He extended the use of endowments. He campaigned prodigiously and extended the influence of the Delhi sultanate across the Indo-Gangic plain. But from the start, he was concerned about a succession because the state was potentially unstable; his conquests were quite tentative.

- Already in Iltutmish’s reign, it was clear that a ruler in India would have to co-opt members of the Kshatriya caste, that is, the warriors and princes, if any kind of meaningful political order was to be constructed. The ruler would have to come to terms with that Hindu ruling class even though he might raid and dispossess them in some areas. On the other hand, the only way for this to work would be to start building a wider network of alliances.

- Furthermore, the ruler in India would have to satisfy the *muqtis*, who formed essentially an inner council of the sultanate, usually known as the Forty. They could pass judgment on a number of issues, including the succession to the various fiefs. They were rewarded with an *iqta* that involved a governorship or the profits of some kind of concession or monopoly. This was the way to maintain a large standing army.

- In addition, Iltutmish was concerned about his family. He had several sons whom he didn’t trust and groomed his daughter to succeed him. This was **Radiyya Begum**, who came to the throne in 1236, when her father died.
Radiyya and the Deterioration of the Dynasty

- Radiyya was clearly an able ruler, but she violated numerous social conventions. She wore the trousers of the steppes, was a great equestrian, and knew how to fight. She ruled successfully down to 1240 but was then overthrown by a coalition of *muqtis*.

- For the *muqtis*, not only was Radiyya a woman, but she also represented a centralizing tendency of the court. She intended to rule through her agents and to rein in the *muqtis* so they wouldn’t become so independent. She and her husband were captured in a major battle outside of Delhi on October 12, 1240, and eventually she was executed. The dynasty deteriorated after that point.

- Radiyya was followed by a succession of weak rulers until the family was overthrown by the Khaljis in Bengal. Radiyya’s reign proved a turning point for at least two reasons.
  - The efforts of the dynasty to centralize and rein in the independent commanders had failed.
  - In each of the two succeeding dynasties, the Khalji Dynasty and the Tughluq Dynasty in the late 13th and early 14th centuries, the founders attempted to forge a wider unity by conquering regions to the south of Delhi, notably, the northern districts of the Deccan and farther south. Those efforts ultimately failed, as well.

The Khalji and Tughluq Families

- The Khalji family came to power in 1296. The second sultan of this dynasty, Muhammad ala-ad Din, took it upon himself to direct major campaigns into southern India. This was the first time that Muslim forces really crossed the boundary line that runs along the Narmada River and essentially cuts northern India from southern India. Muhammad ala-ad Din was well served by Malik Kafir, or Kafur, a general who was actually a Hindu convert.

- This general commanded successive invasions into central and southern India, resulting in the destruction of major temple
complexes. The armies penetrated deep into southern India and raged farther east, again, targeting temples known for their wealth, yet these conquests failed to net ala-ad Din territorial acquisitions because they were vast raids. The Muslim armies rounded up captives and plunder, then retreated.

- This dynasty ran into the same problem of trying to reconcile central control with the *muqtis*, and when the raids began to come to an end in 1320, it was overthrown by a new family, the Tughluqs. Muhammad Tughluq, the most prominent of this family, likewise conducted similar types of operations against various Hindu kingdoms. Ultimately, these efforts to bring the Hindu kingdoms to heel failed.

- Muslim attacks of Hindu kingdoms led to the consolidation of southern India around the city of Hampi. There, two brothers, who were reputed to have initially submitted to the sultan of Delhi, established a Hindu kingdom known as Vijayanagara (“Victory City”). In the mid-14th century, this kingdom acted as a check on further Muslim advances into central and southern India.

**Building Programs in Delhi**

- By the middle of the 14th century, there was a political standoff between the Muslim kingdoms consolidated in central and southern India and the sultans of Delhi. From a political standpoint, the sultans were somewhat successful. They retained their thrones and resisted the Mongols, but they never quite had the prestige in the Islamic world for their military and political achievements as the Mamluks of Egypt.

- The sultans of Delhi, just like their counterparts at Konya, carried out...
an active building program to promote both Islam and their own position in the Islamic world. The Qutb complex south of Delhi is an example that can still be seen today. In the early 13th century, these buildings came to symbolize the power of the sultans of Delhi.

- The complex is named after Qutb ud-Din Aybak, the first of the so-called slave sultans who took power in 1206. It was completed by Aybak’s son-in-law and successor, Iltutmish. The complex features the Qutb Minar, the largest minaret in the Islamic world at the time, and a major mosque. It was expanded by Iltutmish and, later, the Khalji and Tughluq sultans.

- The mosque as we know it today is called Quwat ul, meaning “Might of Islam.” It is an impressive building constructed of brick and spolia—material seized from older buildings. The mosque has a great open courtyard, an avlu, where the faithful gather to pray; in the middle is the fountain, necessary for ablutions. Gates, memorial tombs, and subsidiary buildings were added over the course of the next 200 years. In size and audacity, the mosque at the Qutb complex dwarfs anything built by the Seljuk sultans of Konya.

Results of the Conquest

- The building programs of the sultans transformed Delhi into a great city, the center of Muslim power in northern India. The military operations from this city were far ranging and daring, yet Islam always remained a minority religion. The question of what the occupation of the sultans brought to India remains a matter of great debate, with Muslims stressing the power of the Turkish horse archers and cavalry and Hindu nationalists deploiring the destruction of their shrines.

- From about 1192 to 1707, we have about 500 good texts documenting the Muslim targeting of specific temples for destruction. Sometimes, they were driven to loot them to pay the army; other times, they clearly targeted these temples to break resistance. This is not nearly the thousands of temples and thousands of Brahmins killed suggested by other sources.
The impact of these first 250 to 300 years of Muslim rule in India on Buddhism and Hinduism has also been studied. Buddhism had begun to retreat into Tibet and was essentially finished off by the Muslim invasions. In terms of the Hindu populations, however, Islam ran up against a powerful hierarchy and caste system.

- Hindu worship centers on great temples that were ill-suited for conversion into mosques, requiring the Muslims to construct new mosques.

- Further, the great cults of India were linked with the worship of the villages of India, associated with the so-called practices of tantra; that is, the notion that there’s a higher allegorical, spiritual meaning behind all the simple rites practiced in the villages across India. These rites were almost family and village worship and were not dependent on the support of the Brahmins and the temples.

- Thus, Islam encountered an institutional religion that had far greater resources and strength behind it than the Turks did in Asia Minor.

As a result, by 1350, where Asia Minor was being converted into an Islamic land, the sultans of Delhi were ruling over a set of Muslim cities in a largely Hindu countryside. They faced powerful Hindu kingdoms to the south and to the east. In some ways, the Indians came to view the newcomers, the Turkish invaders, not so much as invaders and conquerors but as a subset of caste, and Islam, in many ways, became much more an Indian religion rather than the Indians becoming Muslims.

**Important Terms**

*iqta*: A military tenure granted to Muslim soldiers by the sultans of Delhi.

*Khalji sultanate*: The second Persian-speaking dynasty of Turkish sultans in northern India (1290–1320).
**muqti**: A military governor of the Delhi sultanate who held a military tenure in lieu of a salary.

**Qutb Minar**: Built by Sultan Aybak of Delhi in 1198, it is the largest minaret in India.

**Quwat ul Islam**: Meaning “Might of Islam,” the mosque outside of Delhi built from plundered architectural elements of Hindu and Jain temples. It was ordered by Sultan Aybak in 1193.

**spolia**: Architectural elements or sculpture of older buildings recycled into new buildings.

**Tughluq sultans**: Members of the third dynasty of Turkish Muslim rulers in India (1320–1414).

---

**Names to Know**

**Iltutmish** (r. 1210–1236): Sultan of Delhi; succeeded his father-in-law, Aybak, and reestablished the capital at Delhi. He organized a system of land grants to his emirs and soldiers, but he also co-opted loyal Hindu princes into the military hierarchy.

**Qutb ud-Din Aybak** (1206–1210): Sultan of Delhi; was the leading general of Muhammad Ghuri (1202–1206), who entrusted Aybak with the conquest of the Ganges. In 1206, he made himself sultan of the Turkish slave soldiers and, thus, founded the slave sultanate of Delhi.

**Radiyya Begum** (b. 1205; r. 1236–1240): Daughter of Iltutmish; was the first Muslim woman to rule in her own right as sultana of Delhi. She failed to win over the Turkish military elite, who were scandalized by her manners and liaisons. Her murder in 1240 marked the end of effective rule by the slave sultans of Delhi.
Elverskog, *Buddhism and Islam on the Silk Road*.

Jackson, *The Delhi Sultanate*.


Thapar, *A History of India*, volume I.

Zakaria, *Razia, Queen of India*.

**Questions to Consider**

1. What were the achievements of Qutb ud-Din Aybak and Iltutmish, the founders of the sultanate of Delhi? How did they transform Delhi into a Muslim capital? What was the impact of their building programs in northern India?

2. What accounted for the later political instability of the sultanate? Why was the reign of Radiyya Begum a turning point? What were institutional and military limitations of the sultanate? What was the impact of the Mongol attacks after 1220?

3. Why did the Khalji and Tughluq sultans of Delhi fail to forge a more effective imperial state? What was the Hindu response to the repeated attacks by the sultans of Delhi in the 14th and 15th centuries?

4. What were the appeals of Islam to the diverse peoples of India in the 13th and 14th centuries? Why did the majority of Hindus and Jains remain loyal to their ancestral worship? What role did the Turkish conquest play in the demise of Buddhism in India?

5. What were the interactions between Turkish and Persian Muslim conquerors and the populations of India? How were Islam and Islamic civilization transformed in India?
Manchurian Warlords and Song Emperors
Lecture 26

In this lecture, we will move away from the Islamic world and return to the eastern steppes and China. In China, in the year 907, the Tang Empire collapsed. The Great Wall was no longer an effective barrier—political, moral, or cultural. As a result, nomadic peoples moved into northern China. In this lecture, we’ll discuss three of those groups: Khitans, Jurchens, and Xi Xia. By studying their interaction with the restored Chinese Song Dynasty in the 10th and 11th centuries, we will come to understand why the Mongols emerged and had such a dramatic impact on the 13th century.

The Khitans

- The Khitans were not technically steppe peoples; they were originally from the Manchurian forest, and they learned nomadism through contact with the ancestors of the Mongols and Turks. They came to dominate parts of northern China in the early 10th century and eventually ruled as Chinese-style emperors.

- The Khitan state was established in the early 10th century by Abaoji. In 907, he overthrew his master, carved out a state in northern China, and began to rule in the manner of a Chinese emperor. Abaoji, whose throne name was Taizu, initiated the conquest of strategic Chinese provinces, later known as the 16 prefectures.

- While the Khitans had authority over other nomadic tribes, they

To their nomadic allies and vassals, the Khitans projected the image of great warriors; for their Chinese subjects, they modeled a traditional imperial administration.
also ruled many Chinese subjects—estimates run from 10 to 15 million just in the 16 prefectures alone. That meant they had to control a loose confederation of nomadic peoples and devise a government by Chinese officials to manage this area. From the start, this empire had a dual administration.

- Furthermore, Abaoji wanted to pass power within his family, father to son, as a Chinese emperor would: the system of primogeniture. Nomadic peoples, on the other hand, practiced lateral succession.

**A Dual Administration**

- From the start, the royal family in the Khitan Empire was torn between the desire to become Chinese emperors or retain strong ties with the steppes. Increasingly, over the 10th and 11th centuries, they opted for the Chinese model.

- The emperor Shengzong, whose Khitan name was **Yelü Longxu** (r. 982–1031), completed the process of turning the Khitan Empire of the steppes into a Chinese bureaucratic state. However, the Khitan emperors, who adopted the Chinese dynastic name Liao, still tried to project the image of being nomadic conquerors to the tribes.

- They cemented ties with various tribes, which involved overtures of hospitality, marriages, celebration of events, and traditional rites. On the other hand, they also ruled as Chinese emperors; that is, they cultivated Chinese bureaucrats.

**Treaty with the Song Dynasty**

- The Khitan Empire came into conflict with the Song emperors of southern China, and in 1005, they signed a treaty with the Song emperor Zhenzong that arranged a partition between the Khitan state and the restored empire of China to the south.

- For the Khitans, this was a major triumph. It established the Khitan state as heir to the northern Chinese traditions of the Tang. The Song emperors, however, were furious. They did everything in their power to undermine the Khitan state.
This treaty also recognized the independence of the Xi Xia—Tangut-speaking people who embraced Buddhism and who would maintain the Silk Road. The Xi Xia also proved to have an essential skill: They had adapted Chinese characters to write their own version of a script. They would, in time, provide many of the translators, ministers, and merchant princes who would advise the Mongol court in the 13\textsuperscript{th} century.

**Aguda**

- The Song emperors believed that they were the heirs to the Han Dynasty. It was unacceptable to have any part of China under the control of barbarians. To destroy the Khitans, they brought in another barbarian: **Wanyan Min**.

- Wanyan Min, or Aguda, who was the khagan of the people dwelling on the northern reaches of the Amur River, had a personal quarrel with the Khitan emperor. He was more than willing to accept subsidies and technical advisors, especially Chinese military advisors, to wage war against the Khitans.

- This alliance was called the Alliance of the Sea because the only way to exchange envoys was to go by water to get around the territories controlled by the Khitan emperors. **Jurchen** warlords rallied around Aguda, who launched a major campaign into the Khitan territories and drove the Khitan emperor farther south, right into the hands of the Song armies.

- Aguda conquered much of the Khitan kingdom. The Song, however, were far less effective in reclaiming their territories from the Khitans.

**The Jin Dynasty**

- **Wanyan Sheng**, the new ruler of the Jurchens and the brother of Aguda, took a high-sounding Tang throne name, Taizong. He continued to press south. As a result, the Song court found that its new ally-turned-rival captured the northern Tang capital city of
Kaifeng in 1127. The Jurchens also captured the court, including the retired emperor Huizong.

- The Song Dynasty then relocated further south. A younger son, Gaozong, took power and established a capital at the modern city of Hangzhou.

- The entire lower and middle Huang He valley was now in the hands of the Jurchen emperors, who styled themselves as the Jin—the Chinese term for “gold.” The Golden emperors now ruled a large section of northern China, perhaps 30 to 40 million Chinese subjects, and controlled a nomadic confederacy stretching to the Altai Mountains.

- Over time, the Jin emperors would become too distant from their nomadic allies and vassals. This allowed for the emergence of the Mongols.

**Song Rule**

- Why was the Song court incapable of driving out the Khitans and then the Jurchen invaders? The Song could not extend their control back over the western districts that had brought in revenue from the Silk Road.

- The Song controlled southern China from 960 to 1279, when their dynasty was destroyed by the Mongols. The Song ruled about two-thirds of the Chinese population. The dynasty was founded by an accomplished general, Zhao Kuangyin, who seized power and united a number of smaller kingdoms in the mid-10th century.

- The new dynasty projected itself as a Confucian dynasty. Confucian texts were widely read by the upper classes. This had been assisted by the invention of block printing. Many of the cultured and administrative elite had relocated south to escape attacks from the northern barbarian states.
A Successful Bureaucratic State

- The Song emperors instituted a new way of recruiting officials: a standard examination to recruit scholars rather than recommendations or dependence on the military elite.

- The future bureaucrat went through a series of exams. A total of 300,000 might take the exam, but only 300 would get the jinshi—the highest degree that allowed admittance into the top ministerial classes. The examination system ensured continuity in the members of the upper classes. They had a shared culture of the classics.

- These classics were important because they were read for their moral precepts and to gain an understanding of the duties of the government. This inculcated in the court and the administration a sense of professionalism that transcended the individual emperor.

- As a result, the Song Empire was perhaps one of the most successful bureaucratic states ever created. It maintained a cultural coherence and continuity that persisted from the 10th century to today.

Economic Development

- In addition, as part of their role as Confucian emperors, the Song emperors sponsored enormous economic development. The Song Empire exploited the invention of the blast furnace for iron technology and encouraged massive production of ceramics. Silk-linen production became a state-regulated industry, and these products were exported far outside the Song Empire. Chinese merchants traveled to Indonesia, the Chola kingdom in India, and to Fatimid Cairo.

- Thus began the rage for Chinese porcelains. Iron technology proved a boon to agriculture. Rice production expanded because of the availability of iron tools. The Song also expanded the use of money and were the first to use a kind of paper money.

- The Song Empire was extremely successful except in one area. The Song had to accept the fact that they had lost their northern zones
and that their military was largely defensive and could no longer take on the job of expelling the barbarians. As a result, the Song court invariably resorted to diplomacy.

**Kara-Khitans**

- In the fighting that led to the overthrow of the Khitan Empire, one figure, **Yelü Dashi**, stands out. Yelü Dashi was a Khitan prince who refused to accept the loss of Khitan power. He took 10,000 warriors and went west.

- Yelü Dashi evaded the armies of the Jin emperors, who now ruled northern China. He attacked the Karakhanid Turkish tribes centered on the Jaxartes and the steppes just north of the Tarim Basin.

- This invasion was a shock to the Islamic world. This group of Khitans, who called themselves the **Kara-Khitans**, overwhelmed the Turkish confederation. In 1141, they inflicted a decisive defeat on the Seljuk Turk Ahmad Sanjar at a battle called Qatwan. The Kara-Khitans crossed the Jaxartes, overran Transoxania, and took over the great caravan cities. Their victory toppled the Seljuk sultanate in Baghdad.

**Repercussions in the Islamic World**

- The caliph of Baghdad was delighted because the Arab caliphs were fed up with the Turkish sultans. The victory in 1141 had major repercussions in the Islamic world. Many Muslims were shocked that a pagan army had overthrown an Islamic army.

- With the Seljuk Turks off the map, politically, the Abbasid caliphs were able to reassert themselves as a regional power. But for many Muslim authors and intellectuals, and certainly for the religious community, this was not supposed to happen.

- What they did not realize is that the Kara-Khitan invasion was nothing more than a dress rehearsal for the Mongol conquest.
**Important Terms**

**jinshi**: The highest level of mandarin officials in the Song examination system (960–1279).

**Jurchens**: Tungusic-speaking peoples of Manchuria who overthrew their overlords and ruled northern China under the Chinese dynastic name Jin, or “Golden” (1115–1234). The Jurchen emperors exercised a loose hegemony over the Mongol tribes.

**Kara-Khitans**: Sinicized Khitans (1123–1218) who migrated to the central Asian steppes and, thus, escaped the rule of the Jurchens. In 1141, the Kara-Khitans defeated the Karakhanids near Samarkand—a victory that gave rise to the legend of Prester John. Also called the western Liao.

**Khitans**: Mongol-speaking conquerors who ruled northern China under the Chinese dynastic name of Liao (907–1125). They were overthrown by their vassals, the Jurchens.

**Song Dynasty**: The Song Dynasty (960–1279) reunited most of China as the successors of the Tang emperors, promoted Confucian traditions, and perfected the bureaucratic state. The Khitans and, later, the Jurchens denied the Song the recovery of northern China.

**Xi Xia**: Sinicized Tanguts who had settled in Gansu and western China in the 10th century as nominal vassals of the Song emperors. With Jingzong (1038–1048), Xi Xia monarchs ruled as Chinese-style emperors who favored Buddhism (1038–1227).

**Names to Know**

**Abaoji** (b. 872; r. 907–926): Emperor of Liao Dynasty; assumed the Chinese throne name Taizu. He was of the Yila tribe within the confederation of Khitans. In 904, he seized supreme power over the Khitans. In 907, he assumed the name and role of a Chinese emperor, conquering the 16 prefectures in northeastern China and the eastern Eurasian steppe. He established his Sinicized court at Shangjing.
**Wanyan Min** (b. 1068; 1115–1123): Jurchen emperor of the Jin Dynasty; assumed the Chinese throne name Taizu. He united the Jurchens and overthrew the Khitan Empire. In 1121, he concluded with Song emperor Huizong (1100–1125) the so-called Alliance of the Sea that called for the partition of the Khitan Empire.

**Wanyan Sheng** (b. 1075; r. 1123–1135): Jurchen emperor of the Jin Dynasty; assumed the Chinese throne name Taizong. He succeeded his brother Wanyan Min and completed the conquest of the Khitan state. In 1127, he captured Kaifeng and the Song court, including the retired emperor Huizong. The new Song emperor Gaozong (1127–1162) agreed to cede northern China to Wanyan Sheng.

**Yelü Dashi** (b. 1087; r. 1124–1143): Kara-Khitan khan; a descendant of Abaoji who refused to accept Jurchen rule. In 1130–1131, he led a migration of Khitans into the Tarim Basin; in 1137, he overthrew the Karakhanid khaganate and founded a new Kara-Khitan Empire in central Asia. On September 9, 1141, Yelü Dashi decisively defeated the Seljuk sultan Ahmet Sanjar (1118–1153) at the Battle of Qatwan—the event that gave rise to the legend of Prester John. The victory delivered Transoxania to the Kara-Khitans.

**Yelü Longxu** (b. 972; r. 982–1031): Khitan emperor of the Liao Dynasty; assumed the Chinese throne name Shengzong. He presided over the transformation of the Khitan Empire into a Chinese bureaucratic state. In 1005, he concluded the Treaty of Chanyuan with the Song emperor Zhenzong (997–1022), who recognized the Khitan Empire and agreed to pay an annual subsidy.

---

**Suggested Reading**

Barefield, *The Perilous Frontier*.

Elverskog, *Buddhism and Islam on the Silk Road*.

Franke, “The Forest Peoples of Manchuria.”

Kuhn, *The Age of Confucian Rule*. 
Questions to Consider

1. Why did the Khitans and Jurchens establish such successful Sinified empires? How were these states models for later Mongol organization? What accounted for the failure of the Khitan emperors of the Liao Dynasty?

2. What role did the Xi Xia emperors play by controlling the Gansu Corridor? What lessons in administration did they provide for the later Mongol khans?

3. Why did the heirs of the Song emperors Taizu and Taizong fail to reunify China? How did the Song creation of a Neo-Confucian bureaucratic state and culture hinder the defense of this very state against the northern barbarians?

4. Why did the Jurchen emperors of the Jin Dynasty fail to maintain order on the Eurasian steppes? What dangers were posed to China by the incessant tribal warfare of the 12th century?

5. What was the impact of the Kara-Khitan invasion into the eastern Islamic world? How did their migration and conquest anticipate the Mongol invasions?
In this lecture, we’ll explore who the Mongols were at the time Temujin—Genghis Khan—was born, around 1162. The Mongol Empire was largely the creation of Genghis Khan and his successors. It was Genghis Khan who united the various Mongol tribes into a new confederation and launched a remarkable career of world conquest. He occupies a special position in the gallery of great commanders.

The Tatars

- The Tatars were subjects of the Khitan emperors and, later, the Jin emperors. When Temujin was born in 1162, the Mongols shared the eastern steppes with a group of neighboring tribes, some speaking Mongol, others speaking Turkish.

- At the time of Temujin’s birth, the most important tribe was the Tatars. They were better known by a corruption of that name, Tartars, which Christian authors used to describe them when the Mongols invaded Russia in 1236 and overran eastern Europe.

- The Tatars spoke a version of Turkish and dwelled in the steppes to the west of the Mongols. They were in close contact with the Jin emperors and Chinese officials. They were connected by trade routes and most likely could field the largest nomadic cavalry on the steppes.

- The Tatars represented a major power. They had 70,000 warriors in a population of 150,000 to 200,000 people, since almost every male from birth to the age of 60 could ride. Furthermore, the Tatars were extremely aggressive and fought for control of the Kerulen River valley, a valley sacred to both the Mongols and Tatars.

- The Tatars had long been in association with China. They had received silks and various gifts from the Chinese empires, first the
Song and, later, the Jin. The Tatars represented one of the most civilized tribes on the eastern steppes.

**Merkits, Oirats, Naimans, and Keraits**

- To the northeast of the Mongols was another important tribe, the Merkits. They were regarded as some of the best warriors on the steppes. They were not as numerous as the Tatars, but they were notorious for stealing wives and horses. In fact, they stole the wife-to-be of Genghis Khan early in his career.

- The Merkits, too, were nomads and kept their flocks around the great glacial body of water Lake Baikal. The Merkits followed shamans. They had not been exposed as much to Chinese civilization although, later on, many became Nestorian Christians.

- The Oirats dwelled on the western steppes, and farther west were the Naimans. The Naimans were perhaps the second most important tribe in Mongolia in 1162. The Naimans and the Tatars would both oppose the unification of the tribes by Genghis Khan.

- Because of their location, which put them north of the Tarim Basin, the Naimans had been visited by many Uighur merchants, and they were familiar with Buddhism. They may have had an early written script. They also were extremely aggressive and drove the Keraits east to become the immediate neighbors of the Mongols.

- The Keraits had originally dwelled in the Altai Mountains, regions that were once home to the Turks. The Naimans pushed the Keraits up against the Mongols. The Keraits were mainly Nestorian Christians, and there was much intermarriage between them and the Mongol tribes.

**An Unstable Political Situation**

- All these tribes were loosely affiliated. They spoke Mongol languages or Turkish languages with a heavy Mongol component. They all had been in contact with the Chinese world to some degree.
- Politically, the situation was very unstable. Both Jin emperors and Song emperors wanted to incite wars among the tribes and keep them all weak. This allowed the Jin emperors to posture as masters of the steppes.

- But actually what the Jin emperors did—in significant contrast to the Khitan emperors—was to create the conditions that would allow for someone like Genghis Khan to emerge. He would come forward to unite the tribes engaged in incessant tribal warfare provoked by subsidies and alliances of the Jin emperors.

**The Secret History of the Mongols**

- Scholars have a number of sources about the life of Genghis Khan. *The Secret History of the Mongols*, written shortly after his death in 1227, was a significant work that presented much valuable information about the early life of the great conqueror. It was a long narrative account written from a nomadic perspective.

- Another important work was from the Muslim polymath Rashid al-Din. He wrote at the court of Hulagu, a grandson of Genghis Khan, and his work was based in large part on the *Secret History*. He also interviewed eyewitnesses about later Mongol history.

- Another key source was Juvayni, a native of Khurasan, or eastern Iran. Juvayni wrote a universal history and was an eyewitness to the sack of Baghdad in 1258.

**The Yassa**

- A significant work put together in Genghis Khan’s own time was the codification of Mongol customs, known as the *Yassa*. This crucial work would have major ramifications for the Islamic world on questions of religious, as opposed to political, authority.

- The Yassa comprised rulings that Genghis Khan dictated later in life that came to synthesize political customs and traditions of the Mongols. These rulings reveal the very pragmatic and meticulous mind of Genghis Khan and give us insight into the Great Khan who
would command expeditions that required remarkable strategic and logistical preparation.

**Genghis Khan: Personal Life**

- During his difficult formative years, Genghis Khan came to trust people based on their talent and their loyalty to him. His commanders and officers were great generals—the so-called Four Dogs of War. None of them gained his position based on his ethnicity or religion. What mattered was loyalty to the khan and clan.

- Genghis Khan was clearly personally brave, receiving wounds during sieges. He led by example, inspiring the tribes to follow him on wild, bold, and daring—even foolhardy—expeditions.

- In personal habits, he was quite modest. He shared the hardships of his men, and he enriched them with gifts: brides from foreign conquests, bolts of silk, silver, horses. Genghis Khan saw such patronage as simply a way to power. He never made the mistake of confusing the trappings of power with the reality of power.

- He lived in a simple tent. Although there were reports of his keeping huge harems, those conquered brides were just political tools. The only woman who really mattered to him was his first and only wife, Börte, a clever girl and the mother of his four sons. Overall, he was a conqueror, a ruler, whom the great tribes could admire and follow.

**Genghis Khan: Political Life**

- To his rivals, Genghis Khan was a terror. They saw him as the fearsome embodiment of the barbarian of the steppes. He terrorized his rivals with deliberate and calculated atrocities.

- These atrocities had a strategic goal: to confuse the enemy and frighten cities into immediate submission. Even by the standards of the rules of war during the 13th century, Genghis Khan, his sons, and grandsons waged war on a scale hitherto unseen. He terrorized the Chinese, the Muslim, and the Christian worlds.
Genghis Khan also created a vision of world conquest by the time of his death. He was able to transmit this vision to his sons and grandsons, who proved very worthy successors.

**Early Life of Genghis Khan**

- When Temujin was born in 1162, in the Mongol heartland, his father, Yesugei, was a minor leader of a clan, probably a vassal of the Jin emperor. He arranged for a marriage for Temujin with a girl named Börte, who represented an important political alliance in the clan.

- Temujin’s father was subsequently poisoned by the Tatars. When his father died, his clan forced the family into the forest. In those dire circumstances, Temujin learned resourcefulness—and he never forgave the Tatars.

- He gained a reputation as a great leader and began to raid the flocks and horses of Tatars and other tribes. By around 1180, when he was about 18, he had gathered around him a number of young Mongols who admired and followed him.

- That brought Temujin to the attention of the leader of the Keraits, **Wang Khan**, who took Temujin in as his subordinate and commander. Temujin also cemented relations with another important Mongol prince, **Jamukha**, and together they began to raid and attack opposing tribes in the late 1190s.

- A Merkit tribe kidnapped Börte. In fact, Temujin and Börte’s first son, **Jochi**, is thought to have been the son of a Merkit prince, fathered when Börte was in captivity. Genghis Khan, however, accepted this boy as his firstborn.

**Decisive Early Battles**

- Temujin won great acclaim by bringing back his wife and by challenging the Merkits. In the ensuing tribal wars between Temujin and the other tribes on the Eurasian steppes, Jamukha became increasingly jealous, and the two friends fell out.
That rift climaxed in a battle fought on the eastern steppes in 1230, in which the Tatars and their allies were decisively defeated. Temujin massacred the Tatars.

Thereafter, Temujin and his patron, Wang Khan, fell out, and Wang Khan allied with Jamukha. There was a second great battle in which Temujin was defeated. However, he managed to rally in late 1203 and defeat and capture Jamukha, whom he executed.

**The Great Khan**

- By 1203–1204, these victories had cemented Temujin’s domination on the steppes. To the Jin and Song emperors, this was just the usual tribal warfare. What they did not realize was that the victories of Temujin put in power a man who was without a doubt a military genius.

- In 1206, among the sacred mountains of central Mongolia, Temujin summoned a great assembly, known as the *kurultai*. The *kurultai* —an assembly of tribal leaders—was held near the sacred mountains of central Mongolia; there, Temujin was proclaimed “Universal Lord”: Genghis Khan.
was a significant religious event that gathered all the leading men of the tribes and clans.

- The representatives of all the tribes now proclaimed Temujin as Genghis Khan, or “Universal Lord.” This marked a major milestone; Genghis Khan now had not only the power of the tribes of the Eurasian steppes but also the vision and the means to organize these tribes into an effective imperial army and undertake world conquest.

**Important Terms**

- **kurultai**: The national council of Mongols summoned to elect the khan or to declare war or conclude a peace.

- **Yassa**: Customary Mongol law codified by Genghis Khan; it exalted the authority of the khan over all other legal and religious authorities.

**Names to Know**

- **Börte** (1161–1230): Principal wife of Genghis Khan. She was affianced to marry him to link their clans, but around 1180, she was abducted by the Merkits; eight months later, she was rescued by Genghis Khan and married. It was widely believed that her first son, Jochi, was the son of Börte’s captor, Chilger Bökh. She bore Genghis Khan three sons: Chagatai, Ögödei, and Tolui. Both Genghis Khan and Ögödei valued her for her shrewd judgment.

- **Jamukha** (c. 1165–1206): Mongol prince; the sworn brother and then rival of Temujin, Genghis Khan. In 1197–1202, he fought against Temujin and Wang Khan and, in 1203, in alliance with Wang Khan, defeated Temujin at the Battle of Baljuna. Temujin, however, later rallied and defeated Jamukha.

- **Jochi** (1181–1227): Mongol prince; the first son of Genghis Khan and Börte, but he was suspected to be the son of the Merkit warrior Chilger Bökh, who had held Börte captive for eight months. Genghis Khan accepted Jochi as his son. Jochi, while personally brave, was perceived as lacking the qualities of a khan. He also had quarreled with his brother Chagatai during the
Khwarezmian campaign in 1220. Hence, Genghis Khan decided to assign to Jochi the western *ulus*. Because Jochi predeceased his father, Jochi’s domain (the future Golden Horde) was assigned to his son Batu.

**Juvayni** (1226–1283): Persian historian and native of Khurasan, served both Khwarezmian shah Jalal al-Din (1220–1231) and the Mongol khans Ögödei (1229–1241) and Hulagu (1256–1625). He wrote his *History of the World Conqueror* based on contemporary sources. He witnessed the sack of Baghdad, and he twice visited the court at Karakorum.

**Rashid al-Din** (1247–1318): Persian polymath and scholar; was a Jewish convert to Islam and native of Hamadan. At the ilkhanate court, he wrote an encyclopedic history of the Islamic world, *Jami’ al-tawarikh*, in which he made extensive use of Chinese sources and the *Secret History of the Mongols*. He also translated Buddhist texts and Chinese works on statecraft into Persian.

**Wang Khan** (d. 1203; r. c. 1175–1203): Khan of the Keraits. His personal name was Toghrul; in 1197, he received the Chinese title Wang (“King”) from the Jin (Jurchen) emperor Zhangzong (1189–1208). The sworn brother of Yesugei, the father of Temujin, he received Temujin into his service in 1180. He supported Temujin against Jamukha, but in 1203, he switched his loyalty to Jamukha. Temujin captured the Kerait encampment, and Wang Khan fled and was slain by the Naimans.

**Suggested Reading**

Golden, “Inner Asia c. 1200.”

Jackson, “The Mongol Age in Eastern Inner Asia.”

Mote, *Imperial China, 900–1800*.

Ratchnevsky, *Genghis Khan: His Life and Legacy*.

Rossabi, *The Mongols and Global History*.

Saunders, *The History of the Mongol Conquests*.

Weatherford, *Genghis Khan and the Making of the Modern World*.
Questions to Consider

1. How did the Mongols transform themselves into nomads? In what ways did they live a typical nomadic way of life? In what ways were they exceptional?

2. What are the sources on Genghis Khan? What are their limitations and virtues? What are the images about Genghis Khan that emerged from these accounts?

3. What were the political, social, and economic conditions in Mongolia at the time of the birth of Temujin? How did these conditions allow for the unification of the nomadic tribes? How important were the policies of the Jurchen emperors of the Jin Dynasty in this process?

4. How did his early life of survival and adventure hone the skills of Temujin as a great leader? At what point did Temujin emerge as the khan who could unite the tribes? What advantages did he and the Mongols possess in 1206 so that they could wage campaigns of world conquest?
In this lecture, we will turn to the events in Genghis Khan’s career after the *kurultai* of 1206, when Temujin was declared Genghis Khan, universal lord of the nomads. At this time, he was about 44 years old. He had attained a primacy on the Eurasian steppes not seen since the Xiongnu, when Modu Chanyu had united the tribes, and then again when Bumin, the first of the Gök Turk khagans, created his vast empire.

The Shaman Tradition

- Throughout his life, Genghis Khan took great care to consult the shamans. He was attended in 1206 by a very important shaman, **Kokchu**, who actually predicted the universal domain of Genghis Khan.

- Kokchu, as many shamans, was believed to enter trances in which he would mount a world tree and have visions of the future. These notions were ancient and characteristic of the steppe nomads. Even when they had embraced religion, such as Buddhism, Christianity, or Islam, many Mongol and Turkic peoples always had an underlying trust in shamans.

- Genghis Khan was a pragmatist in religious matters—again, characteristic of the steppe peoples. He treated all holy men—Nestorian Christians, Islamic imams, Sufi mystics, and Daoist monks—as if they were shamans.

- Whoever had access to or contact with the divine powers should be paid attention to and should be respected, he believed. That was one of the peculiarities about the Mongol conquest. Although there was wholesale looting of religious shrines, at the same time, there was deep respect paid to holy men as legitimate representations of divine power.
Reorganization of the Army

- In 1206, Genghis Khan was in a position to carry out a reorganization of his army. By this time, he had under his control most of the tribes of the eastern steppes.

- Genghis Khan organized his army by divisions of 10. This was an old system that went back at least to the Xiongnu. Units were built on multiples of 10, 100, 1,000; and the key unit was the 10,000 unit known as the *tumen*.

- The tumen was a military formation that some would compare to Napoleon’s corps or to a Roman legion. It was a military force capable of operating as an independent unit, as a small army. The Turkish Mongolian word for army is *ordu*, from which we get the word *horde*.
• Importantly, the Mongol hordes referred to separate tumens in which the men were recruited based on their loyalty, their ability, and their courage—not on clan and tribal affiliations. This was a significant distinction.

• Genghis Khan replaced the loyalty based on ethnic ties with a new loyalty: All these men were now *anda*, or sworn brothers to the Great Khan. The officers knew that promotion meant distinction on the battlefield and loyalty to the khagan.

• By 1227, literary sources tell us that there were 129 tumen—more than a million who acknowledged Genghis Khan as their lord.

**Keys to Military Success**

• In 1219, Genghis Khan waged his most ambitious war of conquest against the shah of Khurasan, *Ala al-Din Muammad*, or Muhammad Shah. This was a battle for control of Iran and Transoxania. The action entailed moving a large army from the tent city of Mongolia, *Karakorum*, to the banks of the Jaxartes—about 3,500 miles across the steppes.

• Genghis Khan organized this march meticulously. Three columns swept across the steppes, which were cleared of all tribes and animals, leaving plenty of fodder. The army moved out in early spring. Every warrior had 5 to 10 extra horses as remounts. The army appeared much larger than it was. The Mongol main force, a tumen, could cover 40 miles in a day or more; it was a spectacular cavalry.

• More than any other world conqueror, Genghis Khan had access to enormous amounts of information. All this was used for planning, logistics, strategy, and movement of forces. For example, the best mapmakers in 1227 were found in Karakorum.

**Control of the Tarim Basin**

• In the course of fighting the Xi Xia in the Tibetan highlands, Genghis Khan learned to appreciate the importance of siege warfare. In fact,
there were a couple of embarrassing setbacks; the Xi Xia diverted a river that almost flooded out Genghis Khan’s camp.

- After that, he saw the need for engineers and began to recruit northern Chinese engineers into a corps of 1,000 that would accompany the army wherever it went.

- The war with the Xi Xia concluded with a treaty. The Xi Xia agreed to pay tribute, and they became a crucial component in providing translators and administrators for the emerging Mongol Empire. That gave Genghis Khan control of the caravan routes into the Tarim Basin.

**Control of Northern China**

- Genghis Khan’s next objective was the Jin Empire. He wanted to control the regions of Manchuria and the northern Chinese provinces, which were extremely valuable not only for their millet production but also for the industrial manufacture of armaments.

- The result was another war. From 1212 to 1215, the Mongols carried out a methodical conquest of the northern domains of the Jin emperor. What was really important was the siege of the future city of Beijing.

- The capture of the Jin capital essentially sealed Genghis Khan’s control of northern China. The Jin were no longer a serious threat, and the Song emperors had neither the means nor the inclination to contest the conquest of northern China and the western areas. Genghis Khan now controlled the key borderlands of China.

**At the Threshold of the Islamic World**

- Genghis Khan also controlled the trade routes through which silk would move and bring in profits. He did, however, have to clean up the western steppes. Various Mongol dissidents had fled into the Kara-Khitan Empire and had carried out raids against the Mongol domains.
Pacifying the area and bringing it under control required a Mongol force under Jebe. This effort was aided by the fact that the Mongols who had taken over the Kara-Khitan Empire proved very unpopular rulers. They had become enthusiastic Buddhists and had persecuted the Muslim populations, particularly in the Tarim Basin.

That victory, in 1218, brought the Mongol Empire to the central steppes. Genghis Khan now stood at the threshold of Transoxania, in the Islamic world.

Muhammad Shah
- At that time, Transoxania and Iran were ruled by Muhammad Shah. An ill-advised incident broke out that involved a Mongol caravan. Muhammad Shah’s agents arrested several merchants as spies. Genghis Khan then wrote to Muhammad Shah.

Muhammad Shah essentially treated Genghis Khan as a subordinate, as some sort of local barbarian ruler, and dismissed the incident altogether. However, he was perfectly aware that Genghis Khan was gaining control of the steppes.

Muhammad Shah depended on Mamluks, largely recruited from different Turkish tribes, but the Mongol khagan was set to interrupt the flow of recruits. A conflict was probably inevitable, and this incident gave Genghis Khan an excuse to mobilize the Mongol army.

Invasion of the Islamic World
- In 1219, Genghis Khan set out on his most important campaign, which was a turning point: the invasion of the Islamic world. It was the largest display of nomadic power ever seen on the steppes—to be repeated a few times thereafter.

Even though Muhammad Shah had a large army, he lacked the same kind of cavalry, and he made the mistake of dispersing his forces. The Mongol forces converged on the city of Otrar and savagely sacked it. The population was massacred.
The army of Muhammad Shah was just not up to the task. His field forces were swept away, and in 1219–1220, the campaigns quickly become a war of sieges. Genghis Khan then made a beeline to Bukhara, also taken in a ruthless sack.

Samarkand, which was held by a Turkish garrison, was captured, as well. The civilian population was largely massacred; craftsmen and others that were selected for serving the Mongol khagan were sent back to Mongolia.

From 1219 to 1220, the caravan cities of Iran, Transoxiana, and into Afghanistan fell into the hands of the Mongol armies. Muhammad Shah fled west and eventually died in exile on an island in the Caspian Sea.

**Genghis Khan’s Successor: Ögödei**

- Genghis Khan detached two tumen, 20,000 men, to pursue the remnants of the army of Khurasan. They carried out campaigns into Russia and eventually circled back and brought information of the lands of the west.

- The son of Muhammad Shah fled to India and tried to raise forces, but Genghis Khan’s army decisively defeated his army on the Indus.

- By 1221, the lands of eastern Islam had been ransacked and leveled by the Mongol army. It was a stunningly quick and incredibly savage conquest. The result was that the Mongols had burst into the Islamic world as an absolute terror, and the Islamic world was shocked.

- In the meantime, Genghis Khan was able to make his way back to Mongolia. In the course of the campaign, he had decided that the succession would fall to his third son, Ögödei, who had distinguished himself in the campaigns.

- When Genghis Khan died in 1227, he ruled a far greater empire than any other steppe conqueror. He had created a vast imperial
army and, above all, left a clear vision of world conquest that was now transmitted to his sons and successors.

**Important Terms**

_nda_: Sworn brothers in Turkish and Mongolian society.

**Karakorum**: Located on the Orkhon River, the political capital of the Mongol Empire in 1225–1260.

_ordu_: Turko-Mongolian army or military encampment.

_tumen_: Mongol military unit of 10,000 soldiers.

**Names to Know**

**Ala al-Din Muhammad** (r. 1200–1220): Shah of Khwarezm; conquered Iran from the Seljuk Turks in 1205. By 1217, he had secured Transoxania, assumed the title shah, and extended his unwanted protection over the Abbasid caliph al-Nasir. In 1218, he provoked a war with Genghis Khan, who overran the Khwarezmian Empire in 1219–1220. Muhammad Shah died a fugitive on an island in the Caspian Sea near Abaskun.

_Jebe_ (d. 1225): Mongol general; born as Zurgadai but received his nickname Jebe (“Arrow”) when he boldly confessed that he had accidentally wounded Genghis Khan in battle in 1201. He was a trusted field commander and, thus, he shared with Subutai command of the western expedition in 1221–1223.

_Kokchu_ (d. 1206): Shaman and advisor to Genghis Khan; credited with great influence over the khan. He was executed on grounds of treachery based on information supplied by Börte, principal wife of Genghis Khan.

**Suggested Reading**

Brian, “The Mongols of Central Asia from Chinggis Khan’s Invasion to the Rise of Temür.”
Golden, “Inner Asia c. 1200.”
Ratchnevsky, *Genghis Khan: His Life and Legacy.*
Rossabi, *The Mongols and Global History.*
Saunders, *The History of the Mongol Conquests.*

**Questions to Consider**

1. What was the symbolic and practical significance of the election of Temujin as Genghis Khan by the *kurultai* in 1206? How did the peoples of the eastern Eurasian steppes perceive this act? What were the perceptions of the emperors of the Xi Xia, Jin Empire, and Song China?

2. In what ways did Genghis Khan innovate in the nomadic way of war since the 6th century A.D.? What were the crucial elements that accounted for the success of Mongol armies in the 13th century? How much did Mongol success owe to the genius of Genghis Khan?

3. Why was Genghis Khan determined from 1210 to conquer the Jin emperors of Jurchen? How were his aims in northern China comparable to those of previous conquerors of the steppes? What accounted for his success in winning over Turkish and Khitan tribes?

4. How did the war against Muhammad Shah in 1219–1221 transform the Mongol Empire? What were the aims of Genghis Khan and his heirs upon their return to Karakorum in 1225?

5. What was the situation of the Mongol Empire on the death of Genghis Khan in 1227? In what ways was this new empire of the steppes exceptional from previous such empires? Was the rapid expansion of the empire after 1227 inevitable given the army, imperial organization, and vision Genghis Khan gave to his heirs?
In this lecture, we explore Mongol expansion to the western steppes, the Russian forest zone, and even into Hungary and Poland. These areas came under Mongol attack in 1220, 1223, and again in the great campaign of Batu, lasting from 1236 to 1242. Batu was the son of Genghis Khan’s oldest son, Jochi. When Genghis Khan was planning his succession, he knew that Jochi did not have the ability to hold together the vast Mongol confederation. The third son, Ögödei, would succeed as Great Kahn. Because Jochi predeceased his father by several months, his domains went to his son Batu, who proved to be one of the great successes of the Mongol Empire.

Ögödei as the Great Khan
- When Genghis Khan died, most likely in August 1227, there was again an assembly of all the princes, the kurultai. There was a delay of about 18 months before Ögödei was elected the new Great Khan. The proclamation of Ögödei, however, was unanimous.

- In 1229, Ögödei became the Great Khan. He faced some daunting challenges, one of which was administrative. Already the Mongol Empire extended farther than any previous steppe empires. Genghis Khan had carried out a military conquest of the Islamic world, but he still intended to rule that empire from his capital in Mongolia.

- The Great Khan would rule not only all the steppe lands but also great urban centers. That meant hiring administrators to run the northern Chinese provinces that had been
conquered from the Jin, the 16 prefectures, the regions of the Tarim Basin, and the caravan cities in Transoxania and Iran.

- With Ögödei, we see the first efforts to switch from a tribute-based empire to a tax-based empire. This experiment was first carried out in the northern Chinese regions. Ögödei also had ambitions to the west; he wanted to bring the western Eurasian steppes under his control and rule over all the tribes.

**Partitioning of the Empire**

- In his final missives, Genghis Khan had loosely divided up his empire. It was understood that Ögödei would rule the whole of the empire as Great Khan; that Chagatai, the second son, would rule the central steppes, the regions that had been conquered from the Kara-Khitans; and that Tolui would handle the homeland.

- **Batu**, the son of Jochi, was given the commission to go west and conquer all the lands to the far western ocean. It was very much in the interest of both Ögödei and Batu to conduct a western campaign. Batu was highly ambitious; if he wasn’t sent west, he might have challenged Ögödei back at home.

- As soon as the Jin Empire was conquered in 1234, plans were made to carry out the conquest of the western steppes. This would be another ambitious imperial campaign. Ögödei not only gave the commission to Batu, but he also assigned his most experienced commanders to the mission. Among them was **Subutai**, who had distinguished himself in an earlier campaign to pursue Muhammad Shah.

**Veteran General Subutai**

- In the earlier campaign, Jebe and Subutai had not only pursued Muhammad Shah, but they had also discovered the grasslands of Azerbaijan in northwestern Iran, which were ideal grazing lands for Mongol cavalry horses. They attacked the Christian kingdoms of Georgia and the Caucasus and won stunning victories, mortally wounding King George IV of Georgia.
• In a daring winter campaign in 1222–1223, they crossed from Azerbaijan over the Caucasus Mountains, and in the spring, they descended on the south Russian steppes. They swept aside all resistance and sent the Cuman army running. The Cuman khan Köten fled to the Russian prince of Novgorod to raise a coalition of Russian princes and Cumans to oppose the Mongol invasion.

• This army met the Mongol army on the banks of the Kalka River on May 31, 1223. In a classic use of tactics, the Mongol army encircled and smashed the coalition of Cuman and Russian princes. More than 10,000 Russians fell. Russian chroniclers were staggered at the defeat.

• That victory on the banks of the Kalka River completely changed the image of the Mongols in the minds of western Europeans. Initially, reports of battles from central Asia had led Christian Europe to think that the Mongols were somehow associated with the legendary kings Prester John and David.

• The victory on the Kalka River revealed that these people were not the followers of Prester John; they were the Tartars, from Tartarus, or hell, in classical mythology. And they retreated just as mysteriously as they came.

Launch of the Western Campaign

• Subutai was a veteran general who knew the Russian steppes. He and his experienced soldiers were assigned to Batu as part of the invasion force in 1236 that would move west.

• Ögödei made sure that every major figure in the imperial family accompanied this expedition, including two future khans: Möngke, the son of Tolui, and Ögödei’s own son Güyük.

• It was an all-star cast of the Mongol imperial family in an all-star army. Some scholars argue that as many as 75,000 Turks and Mongols rode west in 1236 on an expedition of both exploration and conquest.
Yuri II and the Russian Defeat

- The campaign opened with a sweep of the western steppes. These were largely occupied by Kipchak Turks, or Cumans, who readily submitted. By 1236, all the tribes to the Ural Mountains had submitted to Genghis Khan. Many of the Kipchaks were recruited into the imperial army and eventually became the mainstay of the western khaganate of Batu, which was later known as the Golden Horde.

- Late in 1236, Batu, who had excellent information about the political divisions among the Russian princes, conducted a winter campaign. The army crossed the Volga in force. Subutai led a column north to ravage the lands of the Bulgar khagans; the main force entered onto the south Russian steppes.

- The leading prince at the time was Yuri II, who ruled the city of Vladimir-Suzdal, the forerunner of Moscow. In November 1237, the Mongol offenses opened up against the Russian cities. Yuri unsuccessfully tried to raise a coalition of other Russian princes.

- In 1238, Batu’s army ran through the Russian army, put Vladimir-Suzdal under siege, and slaughtered the city. Yuri fought a second battle, but he was wiped out in early March of 1238.

- Then, from 1238 to 1239, the Mongol army systematically destroyed virtually every major Russian city. There was little opposition. The princes all defended their own towns, but there was no concerted effort to meet the Mongols in open battle.

The Sack of Kiev

- Batu then retired to the south Russian steppes. At this new encampment, he began to collect information about what was farther west. He had now brought all the steppes under his control and thoroughly sacked the Russian cities. At this point, Batu had under his command more than 150,000 men. He decided to move next into central Europe.
The first goal, however, was to carry out a pacification of the last Russian city: Kiev. Kiev was the only city that had not fallen into Mongol hands, and it was on the main route leading into Galicia, or southern Poland. The city of Kiev was put under siege and sacked, and the population was massacred.

Kiev had been regarded as the most beautiful city in Russia. The princely families of Kiev had intermarried with many of the European nobility and royal families. Most of central Europe was linked in some way to the city. The sack was seen as a shock and a warning about what might come next.

Campaign in Poland

- With Kiev captured, Batu gained reinforcements from the east. He refitted his army and, in 1241, launched an invasion into Europe itself. Two great attacks were envisioned.

- The first one, given to Subutai, was an attack into southern Poland, or Silesia, and ultimately into Germany and central Europe. The mission was to prevent the Teutonic knights from joining up with Bela IV in Hungary. The second objective was to defeat King Bela.

- In February 1241, Subutai crossed the frozen Vistula and entered Poland. The Mongol army completely outmaneuvered its opponents, and Krakow was abandoned and torched.

Battle with Bela IV of Hungary

- Subutai crossed over the mountains of Galicia and descended into Hungary from the north. Meanwhile, Batu had set in motion the main Mongol army in four major columns. It crossed into Hungary, King Bela IV was taken by surprise, and the Mongol forces swept across the Pannonian grasslands in Hungary.

- In April 1241, the Hungarian army of Bela and the Mongol army under Batu took up positions alongside the Sajo River. Batu’s forces surprised the Hungarian camp, and a ferocious battle ensued.
The Hungarian knights distinguished themselves. Bela IV and his forces eventually broke out and fled to Buda and points west. The Mongols slaughtered many of the Hungarian infantry in heavy fighting.

**Beyond the Steppes**

- Mongol losses at the Sajo River were significant; furthermore, Batu encountered something that he had not seen before as the Mongol army moved west across the Hungarian plains: fortified masonry castles.

- Batu had outrun not only his geographic knowledge but his logistical limits. For Batu to move forward into central Europe, he would need a different kind of army, with large numbers of infantry and engineers who had the expertise to take masonry castles.

- In effect, central Europe posed the same problem that Song China had posed. The Mongols had outrun the steppe zones. Batu was at a loss for what to do next. However, that problem was solved for him.

- In 1242, after ravaging Hungary for most of 1241, Batu pulled his army back to the lower Volga because he heard news that his uncle Ögödei had died. That meant a new election.

- Batu was keen to be in on the election of the next khan. For the first time—but not for the last—the political dynamics and succession issues at the Mongol court would drive world events.

**Important Term**

**Kipchak Turks**: Ghuzz or western Turkish-speaking nomads who dominated the central Asian steppes in the 11th through 13th centuries. They submitted to Mongol Khan Batu in 1238–1241 and constituted the majority of tribes of the Golden Horde.
Batu (b. 1207; r. 1227–1255): Mongol khan; the son of Jochi (the eldest son of Genghis Khan). In 1227, he succeeded to the western ulus (the future Golden Horde). He conquered the Cumans in 1235–1236. In 1237–1240, he subdued the Russian principalities. He won a brilliant victory over King Bela IV of Hungary at the Battle of the Mohi on April 11, 1241. The news of the Mongol victory panicked Western Christendom, but in 1242, Batu withdrew to the grasslands of the Volga when he received news of the death of Khan Ögödei. Thereafter, Batu ruled in splendid isolation, professing loyalty to Güyük and Möngke.

Bela IV (b. 1206; r. 1235–1270): King of Hungary; a conscientious ruler who extended royal justice and restored his kingdom after the Mongol invasion. He was, however, decisively defeated by Khan Batu at the Battle of the Mohi on April 11, 1241.

Güyük (b. 1206; r. 1246–1248): Mongol khan; the son of Ögödei and Töregene. The strong-willed Töregene assumed a regency in 1241–1246, until she could arrange for the acclamation of Güyük as Great Khan by the kurultai. Güyük, a suspicious ruler and an alcoholic, discredited the house of Ögödei in the eyes of many Mongols. He died while en route to settle scores with his cousin Batu.

Möngke (b. 1209; r. 1251–1259): Mongol khan and eldest son of Tolui and Sorghaghtani Beki. He proved an intelligent ruler, who commissioned his brother Hulagu to conquer the Islamic world in 1256. In 1257–1259, he along with his brother Kublai Khan, invaded Song China. He died of dysentery while besieging the fortress Diaoyu on the Yangtze River. His death precipitated a civil war.

Prester John: “Priest John”; a legendary Christian king in inner Asia who would deliver Jerusalem from the Muslims. He was probably inspired by garbled reports about Yelü Dashi (1124–1143), khan of the Kara-Khitans, who had defeated Seljuk sultan Ahmad Sanjar (1118–1153) at the Battle of Qatwan on September 9, 1141. Genghis Khan was later hailed by western European Christians as Prester John or his descendant, David.
**Subutai** (1175–1248): Mongol general and early companion of Temujin (the future Genghis Khan); commanded 20 campaigns. He was an expert in strategy and siege warfare. In 1221–1223, he and Jebe conducted a brilliant western campaign that climaxed at the Battle of the Kalka River on May 31, 1223. He distinguished himself in the western campaigns of Batu in 1237–1241 and in the campaign against Song China in 1246–1247.

**Yuri II** (b. 1189; r. 1212–1238): Prince of Vladimir-Suzdal; campaigned against the Volga Bulgars and Russian rival princes. In 1238, Batu captured Vladimir. Yuri II escaped, but his capital was sacked and the population slaughtered. On March 8, 1238, he and his army were annihilated by the Mongols at the Battle of Sit River.

**Suggested Reading**

Istvan, *Cumans and Tatars.*

———, “The Jochid Realm.”

Jackson, *The Mongols and the West, 1221–1410.*

Rossabi, *The Mongols and Global History.*

Saunders, *The History of the Mongol Conquests.*

**Questions to Consider**

1. What were the strategic objectives of the expedition of Subutai and Jebe in 1220–1223? What did this expedition reveal about Mongol military organization and logistics? What was the impact of the Battle of the Kalka River in 1223?

2. Why did Ögödei and Batu agree to the conquest of the far west? How did this expedition figure in overall Mongol aims of world domination?

3. How did Batu exploit the political weaknesses of his foes, the terrain and weather, and tactical discipline of his army to achieve such spectacular victories over Cumans, Russians, Poles, and Hungarians in
1237–1241? How did the Mongols acquire such accurate information of their opponents?

4. What was the role of terror inflicted by Batu in demoralizing foes? How did western Europeans receive the news of the sacks of Vladimir-Suzdal and Kiev?

5. Why did the Mongols win the battles of Leignitz and Mohi in 1241? Did these victories open central Europe to Mongol conquest? Why did the succession crisis forever end Mongol western expansion?
In this lecture, we will examine the Mongol invasions into the Islamic world. In the previous lecture, we saw how dynastic politics back at Karakorum, the Mongol capital, had halted Batu’s invasion of central Europe. We will see the same dynamic here. The planned invasion of the Islamic world by Hulagu was also cut short by dynastic politics that would plunge the Mongol Empire into its first civil war.

The State of the Islamic World

- When Genghis Khan returned home to his capital at Karakorum, he left behind a largely devastated Islamic world. Impressed by Islamic teachers, Genghis Khan was not necessarily hostile to Islam as a religion, so long as it knew its place as one of many faiths within the Mongol Empire.

- Genghis Khan left little in the way of an administration in the Islamic world. There was no real effort to revive the cities or to put agricultural land back under production. There had been widespread devastation in some of the cities.

- What’s more, there were counter-authorities in the Islamic world that were perceived as dangers to Mongol rule. That included the Abbasid caliphs in Baghdad, who were a strong regional power; the Assassins, the infamous Ishmaelite sect at their fortress Alamut; and above all, the Mamluk, or the slave sultans of Egypt.

The Election of Güyük

- In 1241–1242, the Mongol Empire was in a crisis brought about by the death of Ögödei. Because the nomadic peoples practiced lateral succession, the choice of the next Great Khan was by no means assured.
In 1242, there were several candidates, including Güyük, the son of Ögödei, who had a reasonable claim to the throne, and Batu, the son of the oldest son of Genghis Khan. Other possible candidates were the sons of Tolui, the youngest son.

Tolui died in 1232, but he and his wife had four sons, all capable of obtaining the khaganate: Möngke, Hulagu, Kublai (later Kublai Khan), and Arigh Böke. It was not until 1246 that the electors decided to go with Ögödei’s son Güyük, who was elected the Great Khan.

Rivalry and Political Instability

That change in leadership also brought about a change in policy, because the new khan was hostile to Batu. Güyük did not want to renew the western campaigns because doing so would bring distinction to Batu.

Batu, therefore, aligned himself with the widow of Tolui: Sorghaghtani Beki. Sorghaghtani Beki was probably the favorite daughter-in-law of Genghis Khan; she favored her sons Hulagu and Kublai, the future Kublai Khan.

Batu threatened civil war at one point, and these machinations underscored the instability of the nomadic tradition of lateral succession. There was intense rivalry in the third generation after Genghis Khan because all the cousins had equal claim to be the Great Khan. If they did not get the position of Great Khan, they expected to get an ulus—a huge area with nomadic tribes and military power.

This political instability would eventually break out into civil war and, in time, would lead to the unraveling of the empire of Kublai Khan.

The Election of Möngke

A second important election came on July 1, 1251, after the death of Güyük; the Mongols elected Möngke as the new khan. That meant
that the power of the Great Khan now passed from the Ögödei family to the Tolui family.

- That was an important change because Möngke was a very different ruler than Ögödei and Güyük. He had none of the pretensions of being a Chinese-style monarch. He was a Mongol ruler, much more in the manner of Genghis Khan.

- He was modest in his appearance and manners. He was committed to new expansion to sustain the monarchy. The flow of treasure, silk, and captives was crucial to keeping loyal followers.

- Möngke carried out important changes in the military, purging the officer corps of those loyal to the house of Ögödei and replacing them with his own men. By the second or third year of his reign, he was ready to expand his empire.

Assumption of Power in a New Generation

- Batu, the cousin out on the western steppes, was essentially confirmed in his position as ruler of the Mongols and Turks of the far west. That ulus eventually evolved into the Golden Horde. The khans ruling in the western steppes in time evolved into independent rulers; they also eventually adopted Islam.

- The family of Chagatai was rewarded with control of the central steppes. The Chagataid khans had claim over Transoxania and the cities of the Tarim Basin.

- The most important commissions were given to the two younger brothers of the new khan. Kublai Khan was commissioned with the
eastern steppes and given the charge to conquer China. Hulagu was ordered to return to the Islamic world and take out any opposition to Mongol control of the eastern lands of Islam.

Elimination of the Assassins

- Möngke had good reasons for his move in the Islamic world. For one thing, the Abbasid caliph in Baghdad represented a counter-authority. Further, the Mamluk sultans of Egypt, or the slave soldier sultans, were on the rise and had an excellent army.

- Above all, there was a secretive group—an extreme Shi’ite cabal based in Alamut that had cells across the Islamic world—known as the Assassins.

- Hulagu was given the greater part of the field army. It was now transferred from the western steppes to the central steppes to invade the Islamic world. This campaign would perhaps be the most impressive since those of Genghis Khan. Hulagu had an enormous army; estimates run from 80,000 to 200,000.

- The army left Karakorum in 1253, moved across the Eurasian steppes, and reached Samarkand in 1255. It was a display of Mongol power never seen before. The army swept into Iran, crossing the Oxus near the city of Merv, and moved across northern Iran. By 1257, most of the fortresses of the Assassins had fallen.

- The last grand master at Alamut was just a young boy; he surrendered the fortress and allowed the Mongols to occupy it. Because the Assassins were seen as a political danger, the Mongols burned all their libraries—an inestimable loss for future generations of scholars. The Assassins were finished.

Destruction of Baghdad

- Hulagu then moved against his next opponent: the caliph of Baghdad. For this operation, he needed reinforcements from the eastern Christians, including Antioch and the Armenian kingdom of
Cilicia. These two Christian states sent forces and fought with the Mongols down to 1260.

- After the usual exchange of envoys, the caliphs simply dismissed the Mongols. That was a mistake: War was declared, and Hulagu planned an extremely ambitious campaign.

- In January 1258, Mongol columns moved out of the grasslands of Azerbaijan and converged on Baghdad. They ravaged the lands and slaughtered upward of 800,000 people. Hulagu’s expert Chinese engineers moved their artillery up to the walls of Baghdad and pounded them to dust.

- The sack of Baghdad was seen by many in the Islamic world—and even beyond—as the height of Mongol atrocities. The caliph watched his own family humiliated and executed. The citizens were marched out on the plains of Iraq and beheaded.

Across the Al-Jazirah

- The destruction of Baghdad gave Hulagu control of the religious, political, and commercial center of eastern Islam. It also destroyed the authority of Sunni Islam because only the caliph could give legitimacy to the various rulers of the Islamic world. The sack of the city was a religious and political disaster as much as a demographic and economic one.

- In 1259, after retiring to Azerbaijan during the winter and refitting his army, Hulagu launched a new campaign and swept across the region that we call the Al-Jazirah: the grasslands between the upper Euphrates and Tigris.

- At this time, the area was populated with Turkish and Arab speakers who practiced nomadism. It was also an area dotted with caravan cities ruled by Ayyubid emirs, members of the family of the great conqueror Saladin.
The Mongol army made short work of the area. They sacked a number of famous cities, and Damascus simply surrendered—not about to take on the Mongol army.

Hulagu’s general Kitbuqa actually sent lead elements as far south as Gaza. The Mongol army had reached the Mediterranean shores. At that point, it looked as if there was no stopping the Mongols—except that Hulagu had run to the end of his logistical capability. He would need a fleet.

While Hulagu was planning his next move, he received news that Möngke had died and that his younger brother Arigh Böke had been elected the new khan. That meant that Hulagu had to suspend operations, retire to Azerbaijan, and await instructions.

He left a small force to secure his western frontier. This force comprised largely Turkish elements, as well as Christian allies—Armenians and knights from the principality of Antioch. It was entrusted to the senior commander Kitbuqa.

### Decline of Mongol Power in the West

Meanwhile, in Cairo, the sultan was busy putting together forces to intervene and defeat the Mongol force that was stationed in the Beqaa valley, in today’s Lebanon.

**Qutuz**, the Mamluk sultan, put together an army and crossed the Sinai. At Ain Jalut, the Mamluk army set up positions, and the Mongol army moved out of the Beqaa valley, taking the bait. On September 3, the two armies agreed to fight. The real architect of victory was not the sultan, but his leading emir, **Baybars**.

The Mongol army went down fighting. Although many of the soldiers were Turks and allies, not full imperial Mongol forces, the Mongols had been defeated in an open battle for the first time. Sultan Qutuz got the credit and was immediately assassinated by Baybars.
- Baybars became the new sultan, and the Mamluk army briefly reoccupied Baghdad. They found a supposed member of the old Abbasid family, brought him back to Cairo, and claimed that the caliphate had been restored. Cairo henceforth emerged as the new power of the Islamic world.

- This battle marked the end of Mongol power in the Islamic world. Kublai Khan, who eventually succeeded as Great Khan of the Mongol Empire, went on to accomplish the unthinkable: a nomadic conquest of the ancient Middle Kingdom.

### Important Terms

**Chagatais**: Descendants of Khan Chagatai (1226–1242), second son of Genghis Khan; they were rulers of the central Asian steppes and Transoxania.

**ulus**: The Turko-Mongolian nation, designating related tribes.

### Names to Know

**Arigh Böke** (b. 1219; r. 1259–1264): Mongol khan; the fourth and youngest son of Tolui. He was entrusted with the Mongolian homeland by Great Khan Möngke. In 1259, upon the death of Möngke, Arigh Böke was declared Great Khan, but the Mongol army in China acclaimed Kublai Khan. Arigh Böke was defeated in the ensuing civil war in 1260–1254 and forced to abdicate.

**Baybars** (1260–1277): Mamluk sultan of Egypt; architect of the victory over the Mongols at Ain Jalut in 1260. Soon afterwards, he seized power in Cairo and reoccupied the Levant. He also claimed to have removed the Abbasid heir from the ruined city of Baghdad to Cairo; thus, he was hailed as the champion of Islam against the Mongols and Crusaders.

**Kitbuqa** (d. 1260): Mongol general; the leading field commander of Hulagu in 1256–1259. He was defeated and slain by the Mamluk army at the Battle of Ain Jalut on September 3, 1260.
Qutuz, al-Muaaffar Sayf al-Din (1259–1260): Mamluk sultan. He refused to submit to Hulagu and planned the campaign of Ain Jalut. He was overthrown and murdered by his leading general, Baybars.

Sorghaghtani Beki (1204–1252): Kereyid princess and wife of Tolui, son of Genghis Khan, and the niece of Wang Khan. She was the mother of Möngke, Kublai Khan, Hulagu, and Arigh Böke. A Nestorian Christian, she favored her co-religionists at court. In 1248–1251, after the death of Khan Güyük (1246–1248), she secured the support of Batu and the majority in the kurultai to elect her son Möngke as Great Khan.

Suggested Reading

Cahen, “The Mongols and the Near East.”

Hildinger, Warriors of the Steppe.

Mote, Imperial China, 900–1800.

Saunders, A History of Medieval Islam.

———, The History of the Mongol Conquests.

Questions to Consider

1. How successful was Ögödei in imposing peace and order on the Muslim lands of Iran and Transoxiana that had been devastated by Genghis Khan in 1219–1221? How did the generals with a permanent Mongol army in Azerbaijan keep order?

2. How important were dynastic politics at the Mongol court and the succession crises in dictating Mongol expansion?

3. What were the threats posed to Mongol rule by the Assassins, the Abbasid caliphate, and the Mamluk sultans of Egypt? How important were the caravan cities of Iran and Transoxiana as sources of Mongol revenue?

4. How skillfully did Hulagu conduct his campaigns in 1258–1260? If a succession crisis had not arisen due to the sudden death of Möngke,
could Hulagu have conquered Egypt, or had the Mongol army reached its logistical limits?

5. What were the long-term consequences for the Islamic world of the invasion of Hulagu? How did it decisively shift the axis of Islamic civilization?
In this lecture, we’ll explore the last of the Mongol campaigns: Kublai Khan’s conquest of Song China. This was perhaps the greatest of the Mongol military achievements. Song China posed immense logistical, political, and military problems for a force based on horse archers. To conquer China, Kublai Khan had to devise a new kind of army. Although previous Mongol campaigns had been characterized by terror and violence, Kublai Khan succeeded in winning over the Chinese population. By 1271, he ruled as a Chinese-style emperor, taking the name Yuan for his dynasty. As the Roman historian Livy stated, “It is not only important to know how to win victories, it is also important to know how to use them.”

**Background to the Song Invasion**

- Why did Kublai Khan and Möngke depart from the policy of the earlier khagans and decide to take on the Song Empire in China?

- At his death in 1227, Genghis Khan had achieved most of what he wanted territorially. He had unified the central and eastern steppes. He controlled the rich cities of the Tarim Basin, the Gansu Corridor, and most of northern China.

- The Song court had had close dealings with Genghis Khan and his various successors; in fact, they had been criticized by their people for not taking stronger measures against the Mongols. From the Song viewpoint, however, the Mongols did not offer much of a threat.

- On the other hand, the Mongols were not in much of a position to invade south into the Yangtze valley and take on the Song fortifications. Furthermore, the emperors of the Song Dynasty were served by able generals and capable bureaucrats who were loyal to the throne.
These bureaucrats may not have been skilled in warcraft, but they understood statecraft. They had read the Chinese classics on strategy and on wider diplomatic policy, and they had a good sense of the political situation on the steppes.

Commission to Conquer China

From the Mongol viewpoint, conquering the Song Empire was a daunting task that required a dynamic and energetic khagan. When Möngke was confirmed as khan in 1251, he appointed his brother Kublai as master of the eastern armies and commissioned him to go south.

The youngest brother, Arigh Böke, was given nominal control of the heartland; he stayed in Karakorum. That position allowed him to amass important political support.

Kublai Khan was ideally suited for the commission to conquer China. He had not had much training in the western domains and knew very little about the Islamic world. However, he knew a great deal about the Mongolian homeland and, above all, the Mongolian domains in northern China.

In some ways, Kublai Khan, more than any of his brothers, appreciated the importance of China. He was brave, excelled in hunting and horsemanship, and possessed all the qualities of a Great Khan. Möngke knew that Kublai Khan had the intelligence to develop the logistics and strategy to undertake the conquest of China.
Operations in Tibet and Yunnan

- The war began with operations to secure the western approaches to the Song Empire, which would eventually become the southern frontiers of the Mongol Empire. In 1258, Kublai Khan led an expedition of more than 650 miles across the rugged terrain of Tibet and into the current province of Yunnan in southwestern China.

- This campaign was significant, largely because it was a war of sieges and logistics. Kublai Khan perfected the logistical system to provide the fodder, water, and food to support a cavalry army in a landscape inhospitable to the type of nomadic warfare that was the hallmark of Mongol armies.

- Kublai also recruited many more Chinese infantry to garrison cities, which would relieve the Mongol forces to carry out field operations, maneuvers, stealth operations, and battles of encirclement.

- The Tibetans had paid homage to Möngke—an important connection, because he allowed Tibetan tantric Buddhism to flourish. Buddhism eventually became the preferred religion of Kublai Khan and his successors, the Yuan emperors.

Böke as Great Khan

- Once the western areas had been secured, in 1259, Möngke and Kublai moved south to the Yangtze River. The Song army was huge—perhaps 600,000 men—but it was weak in cavalry. The region north of the Yangtze was thick with Song fortifications; the river was patrolled by flotillas.

- Kublai knew that the Mongols would have to gain those fortresses along the Yangtze. That would mean gaining control of the waterways and the canal systems. In the initial expedition by Möngke and Kublai, the Mongol army got bogged down in a war of sieges along the Yangtze.

- On August 11, 1259, Khan Möngke died of cholera. Initially, Kublai continued fighting, but then he got word that his younger brother,
Arigh Böke, had summoned a rump session of the *kurultai* and had himself proclaimed khan.

**Civil War in the Mongol Empire**

- Both Hulagu and Kublai refused to recognize the election. Eventually, Kublai held his own *kurultai*, in inner Mongolia, the first time the Mongols had ever met in assembly outside the homeland. They proclaimed Kublai the Great Khan.

- In early 1260, we see two Great Khans and, for the first time, a civil war. Hulagu from the start supported Kublai. The result was that the majority of the military force was in the hands of Kublai Khan. In 1261, his field army knocked out the forces of Arigh Böke, who retreated west into the central steppes.

- Kublai Khan won the civil war easily. He cut off food shipments to Mongolia. The population of Karakorum had swollen to somewhere between 30,000 and 50,000 permanent residents. It had to be supplied by foodstuffs brought in from the Chinese provinces, and Kublai Khan controlled those routes.

- A particularly severe winter drove the point home: Whoever controlled China controlled the Mongol Empire.

**Rule of the Mongol Empire**

- Kublai Khan had gained the empire—but at a price. In order to achieve the position of Great Khan, he had to agree that he would conquer China and incorporate it into a great eastern khaganate.

- There were four other *ulus*. The western reaches, or the Golden Horde, were ruled by the descendants of Batu. The Chagataid rulers controlled the central steppes. In Iran and Transoxania, Kublai Khan recognized the son of Hulagu, who became the next ilkhan.

- Kublai Khan, in effect, partitioned the Mongol Empire not only along cultural lines but also along the geographic lines of the steppes.
War against the Song

- In 1268, Kublai Khan reopened the war against the Song court. He amassed a great army, including the core of the operations: the esteemed cavalry forces of Mongolia. He also chose the most capable generals. His finest general was Bayan, who was entrusted with the final mopping-up operations after 1273. Kublai Khan also recruited large numbers of Chinese infantry. Above all, he expanded the engineering corps.

- His nephew, the ilkhan of Persia, had sent Muslim engineers and technicians to build superior engines of war, especially artillery. Certain Song generals defected to Kublai Khan at the start of the campaign, especially in 1268–1269. They not only brought valuable information but also explained the fortification systems along the Yangtze.

- Importantly, these Song defectors understood incendiaries, which were ignited by gunpowder. These included primitive grenades or iron bombs that exploded and fire lances that could ignite the Chinese fortified cities, which were largely wooden palisades on top of rammed-earth platforms.

- Kublai Khan had the best of expertise and, above all, large numbers of ships that were used to isolate the crucial fortresses along the lower Yangtze. Those fortresses were the scene of major sieges. The fortress of Fengcheng was brutally sacked, and that led to the surrender of other fortresses. At that point, the Song court knew that the war was over.

A Chinese-style Emperor

- In addition to the war of sieges and the successes along the Yangtze, Kublai Khan departed from the usual policy of Mongol conquerors. On the whole, the conquest of Song China was not accompanied by the traditional massacres and atrocities. From the start, Kublai Khan intended to win over the Chinese people as subjects; already by 1271, he presented himself as a Chinese-style emperor.
• He intended to win the war politically, as well as militarily. By December 1272, when the main fortresses had been battered down, it was clear that the war was over. Kublai Khan retired to his capital in the north, Dadu, or Xanadu, which was later Beijing. There was a major ceremonial surrender in 1276; Gong abdicated.

• Kublai Khan had conquered Song China and, with it, all the administrative apparatus to run it. The Confucian scholars, or Mandarin gentry class, realized it was time to come to terms with Kublai Khan. To a certain degree at least, Kublai Khan respected Chinese civilization.

Logistical Overreach
• Kublai Khan also fell heir to some of the territorial ambitions of the Chinese. This led him to make two ill-advised naval invasions of Japan. Both of these campaigns were failures.

• Large numbers of Chinese were drafted into both invasions, while the number of Mongols involved was low. The smaller expedition, in 1274, was an invasion of the island of Kyushu. Because of storms, much of the fleet was destroyed and nearly half the men never returned. A larger expedition with two great flotillas was sent in 1281. That, too, failed; the army was caught on the beaches by a typhoon.

• The failure of both expeditions in Japan represented, again, the limit of Mongol logistics and military power. Kublai Khan had overreached. Despite the embarrassment of the Japanese expeditions, however, they certainly did not endanger the throne or Mongol control of China.

Important Terms

rammed earth: A construction technique using earth, gravel, lime, and clay. The Qin and Han emperors employed this method to build the Great Wall. The construction is simple but labor intensive.
**tantric**: The higher moral and mystical interpretation of traditional village rites in either Hinduism or Buddhism.

**Yuan Dynasty**: The Chinese dynasty adopted by Kublai Khan (1260–1294) and his successors who ruled China and Mongolia (1279–1368).

---

### Name to Know

**Bayan** (1236–1295): Mongol general; the leading field commander of Kublai Khan in the conquest of Song China. He received the final surrender of the dowager empress Xie Daoqing and the boy emperor Gong (1275–1276) at the Song capital of Linan (Hangzhou).

---

### Suggested Reading

Barefield, *The Perilous Frontier*.

Mote, *Imperial China, 900–1800*.

Polo (Wright, ed. and trans.), *The Travels of Marco Polo, the Venetian*.

Rossabi, *Kublai Khan, His Life and Times*.

Saunders, *The History of the Mongol Conquests*.

---

### Questions to Consider

1. How did Genghis Khan view the Song Empire? What was the policy and ultimate aim of Ögödei in his campaigns against the Jin and into Tibet? What limitations did Ögödei face if he were to undertake a conquest of China?

2. What were the strengths and weaknesses of the Song Empire in the 13th century? How effective were the courts of emperors Lizog and Duzong in confronting Kublai Khan?

3. In what ways did Kublai Khan display strategic and logistical genius in his conquest of China? How important was his generalship in achieving victory? What other factors accounted for Mongol victory in 1279?
4. Why was Kublai Khan compelled to invade Japan in 1274 and 1281? What accounted for Mongol failure to conquer Japan? How did these amphibious landings mark the limit of Mongol military power?

5. How does the conquest of Song China by Kublai Khan compare to the campaigns of Batu (1236–1242) and Hulagu (1257–1260)? What lessons did Kublai Khan learn from these earlier campaigns and apply to his conquest of China?
In this lecture, we will examine the consequences of the great Mongol conquests. On the one hand, an enormous number of people died as a result of the Mongol campaigns. It has been estimated that at least 500,000 Russians died as a result of Batu’s campaigns over the course of five years; a similar number was slaughtered in the northern Chinese areas. The destruction wrought against the Islamic world was colossal. On the other hand, scholars have argued that once the conquests were over, the Mongols imposed peace and stability—certainly on the Eurasian steppes. Let’s look at what constituted this *Pax Monogolica*, or “Mongol peace.”

**Population Movements**

- Following their conquests, the Mongol khagans quickly set up courts and built capitals that attracted not only trade but numerous specialists. At all the Mongol courts, interpreters, translators, and administrators were in high demand.

- Muslims, Christians, Buddhists, and others participated in Mongol society. In addition, Mongol courts were sustained by captives. In many cases, craftsmen were spared and sent to the Mongol capital or to devastated lands in northern China. For example, Muslims brought in the cultivation of fruit trees, particularly lemon and other citrus.

- There was a significant movement of population across Eurasia because of the policies of the khans. Chinese were sent west and posted on the Iranian frontier. Alani, who were Christians of the Caucasus, were sent to China. This movement of populations led to cultural exchange.

- Of course, some of these population movements were forced. Numerous Turks and Muslims fled out of central Asia and Transoxania into Delhi and Konya to reinforce the Muslim
civilizations there. The ancestors of the Ottoman sultans traced their
descent from tribes that fled west from the Mongol conquerors.

Spread of Religion

- The movement of these peoples also allowed for the spread of
  religions. Initially, all faiths were tolerated in the Mongol Empire.
  Genghis Khan ruled on this in his Yassa, although each of the four ulus
  had a different response.

  - For instance, the Golden Horde embraced Islam. In contrast, the
    ilkhans of Persia maintained a cosmopolitan court. There are cases
    of Muslim ilkhans supporting Buddhist monasteries. Even in Iran,
    a number of stupas and Buddhist monasteries were built. The
    Chagataid khagans of central Asia were tolerant of most religions.

  - Kublai Khan himself embraced Buddhism. He was also respectful
    of Daoism and the Neo-Confucian traditions. He knew he needed
    the services of the Chinese administrative class, but he always
    interacted with Muslims, with Uighurs, and with adventurers from
    the west—including Marco Polo.

  - Kublai Khan preferred the Sakya form of Buddhism, a prominent
    school in Tibet. He sponsored monasteries. He used the Tibetan
    monks to create a new, distinctly Mongolian script that was non-
    Chinese—no doubt to the dismay of the Confucian scholar class.

Travel and Trade

- The Mongols also promoted travel and trade, particularly along the
  Silk Road and the complementary sea and ocean routes. Missions
  were sent by western Europeans to the Great Khan’s court.

  - The earliest one recorded is from 1246. Giovanni Da Pian Del
    Carpini, a Franciscan friar, was sent by Pope Innocent IV to
    witness the enthronement of Güyük. He traveled for about 110 days,
    some 3,000 miles. Some years later, another Franciscan, William
    of Rubrouck, was sent as the envoy of the Crusader king Louis IX.
• The prosperity on the Silk Road increased once the Mongol peace was imposed. The upsurge in trade was also evident in the development of sea routes that moved goods around the Indian Ocean to the South China Sea. An example was the dissemination of Chinese porcelains across the Islamic world.

• **Marco Polo** returned home after 23 years in Cathay at the court of Kublai Khan by taking the sea route. The trip was quite an adventure. The travelers were shipwrecked and took two years to get back to Venice. They eventually landed in Iraq and took caravans to Trebizond; from there, they found passage on ships back to Venice. Both sea routes and the Silk Road prospered under the Mongol khans.

**Technology Transfer**

• There were four major areas of cultural exchange and technology transfer during this time. First was in the area of astronomy and mathematics. Genghis Khan and most of the other khans, especially Kublai Khan, were keenly interested in these subjects.
  ○ Mathematics, which had been perfected in Baghdad in the 10th century when Muslim scholars invented algebra, was brought to China to improve the calculations of astrology. Astrology was connected to both the Daoist and the shamanistic traditions.
  ○ This exchange brought Muslim science to the attention of the Chinese, and in turn, Chinese calculations were sent back. Rashid al-Din, the scholar in residence at the ilkhan court, played an important role in that exchange.

• Another area of exchange was in geography, cartography, history, and mapmaking. There was, again, an exchange between the two great Mongol courts in Iran and China. Rashid al-Din was at the forefront of this. He demonstrated a range of interest in geography, mathematics, and even anthropology. This meant that both the Chinese and Muslim worlds had extremely accurate information for mapmaking.
A famous Ming admiral, Ma Huan, set out in 1413 on a voyage of discovery and exploration in the South China Sea. He reached India and even all the way to Baghdad. Although he was a subject of the Ming emperor of China, he also spoke Arabic and was a Muslim.

He clearly had maps that were far superior to those of the great navigators of the period of European discovery, starting with Christopher Columbus.

- Information related to medicine, food, and plants was also exchanged. Grapes and fruit trees were brought by the Muslim world to China. In turn, various luxury items that were well known in Chinese cuisine, such as tea, black pepper, and cinnamon, became available in the Islamic world—and both worlds improved their diet and cuisine substantially. Major translations of works on cultivation, aromatics and spices, and medicines were completed. The Mongol conquest brought together two of the greatest medical traditions at the time: the Chinese and the Islamic.

- Finally, block printing and paper were devised by the Chinese and were perfected in the Song period; subsequently, block printing became available in the Islamic world. The ilkhans of Tabriz used block printing to issue paper money, an imitation of the Song paper money and letters of credit. This experiment was abandoned after 1353, but it was a highly significant and interesting trial of the use of fiduciary currency.

**Gunpowder**

- A technology exchange of particular significance was gunpowder. Gunpowder went back as early as the Han period in China. The Mongols encountered it in the incendiaries used against them in the great sieges on the Yangtze River, and black gunpowder was also spread across the Eurasian steppes.

- However, it is curious that this was probably the only significant transfer of technology received by the Europeans. The western
Europeans were fascinated with it. Already in 1346, King Edward III of England had cannons.

- The Europeans managed to enclose the gunpowder into tubes and create artillery. The Mongols, Chinese, and the Muslim world never hit on this innovation. One speculation is that the European smiths were familiar with bronze and brass casting methods.

- Thus, by the middle of the 14th century, the Europeans were casting guns and beginning to create artillery that could knock down walls. What’s more, the Europeans then created handheld firearms and mounted artillery on oceangoing vessels.

- From the end of the 15th century on, western Europe, with those military advantages, essentially conquered the world. One could argue that the expansion of European imperialism came thanks to the gunpowder received from the Mongols—under the Mongol peace.

**Marco Polo**

- There were many travelers to the Mongol courts, but Marco Polo occupies a special position. He wrote a work titled *Livres des merveilles du monde*—usually known as *The Travels of Marco Polo*—that chronicled 23 years of service at the court of Kublai Khan.

- Some doubt Marco Polo existed or even went to China. He may have run a salt monopoly; at any rate, he was a minor official. He had joined his father and uncle, who had made an earlier trip to the...
Mongol court to represent the commercial interests of the Republic of St. Mark, or Venice.

- When he returned to Italy in 1298, he was captured in a naval battle and languished in a Genoese prison. There, he dictated his account. Whatever the actual details of Marco Polo’s career, they pale in comparison to the significance of what he wrote.

- We are not sure how much of this account was altered, edited, or embroidered, but it was an instant commercial success. It was translated into many languages. Although there were many questionable aspects of his account, it nonetheless replaced all the previous fanciful notions of the Far East, of India, and even of the Islamic world with a wealth of information.

- Before Marco Polo, Christian Europe had very little information outside of its immediate area. Much of it consisted of wild tales from classical antiquity, legends, and stories of Prester John. These were now replaced with actual descriptions of a real kingdom, Cathay, and a real capital, Xanadu.

- These fantastical places were goals for the Europeans to seek out. In fact, it was Marco Polo’s work, according to Christopher Columbus, that inspired him to make his great first voyage of discovery. Besides gunpowder, perhaps the second greatest gift from the Mongol peace to the Europeans was this vision of Cathay. Europeans set out in search of this vision and carried out one of the greatest expansions of all time—the great imperial expansion across the oceans of the globe.

**Important Terms**

**Cathay**: Medieval European name for China; it was derived from a misunderstanding of Khitan, Mongolian-speaking nomadic rulers of northern China who ruled as the Liao Dynasty (907–1125).
**Ming Dynasty**: Founded by Emperor Hongwu (1368–1398), who expelled the Mongols, the Ming Dynasty (1368–1644) was the last native dynasty of imperial China.

### Names to Know

**Carpini, Giovanni Da Pian Del** (1182–1252): Franciscan friar; the envoy of Pope Innocent IV (1243–1254) to the Mongol court in 1246–1247. His party traversed the steppes from Kiev to Karakorum in 106 days. Carpini witnessed the *kurultai* that elected Güyük (1246–1248), and he records important details about the court a generation after the death of Genghis Khan.

**Ma Huan** (1380–1460): Admiral of Ming China; a Muslim and Arabic speaker. At the command of the Ming emperor Yongle (1402–1424), he set sail with 57 ships in a great expedition to the western lands in 1413. He visited Champa, Java, Sumatra, Malaya, the southern Indian port of Cochin, Hormuz, and ultimately Mecca.

**Polo, Marco** (1254–1324): Venetian adventurer; took service with Kublai Khan as the administrator of the salt monopoly at Yangzhou and as an emissary to the Burmese court. In 1251–1257, Marco Polo, along with his father Niccolò, and uncle Maffeo (who had previously visited the ilkhanate court), journeyed to Dadu. In 1292–1294, the three returned to Venice. In 1298, Marco was captured by the Genoese at the Battle of Curzola. While in prison in 1298–1299, he dictated his adventures of 23 years (1271–1294) to fellow prisoner Rustichello da Pisa, who composed the *Livres des merveilles du monde*. Marco’s book was an instant success and fired the European imagination and desire to reach Cathay.

Suggested Reading

Allsen, *Culture and Conquest in Mongol Eurasia.*

———, “Mongols as Vectors of Cultural Change.”

Jackson, *The Mongols and the West.*

Polo (Wright, ed. and trans.), *The Travels of Marco Polo, the Venetian.*

Rossabi, *The Mongols and Global History.*

Saunders, *The History of the Mongol Conquests.*

Questions to Consider

1. How destructive were the great Mongol conquests on cities, trade, and civilization in the first half of the 13th century? Did the Mongol invasions have a catastrophic impact on Russia, the Islamic world, and China?

2. In what ways did the Mongols contribute to the transmission of technology and the arts of civilization across Eurasia? In what ways did the Mongols promote trade and prosperity in the later 13th century?

3. What accounted for the popularity of Islam among the Mongols? Why did the ilkhans, the Chagataid khans of central Asia, and the khans of the Golden Horde embrace Islam? How did the Mongol peace and the accompanying trade lead to the Islamization of the cities of the Tarim Basin?

4. What was the appeal of Buddhism for the Yuan emperors of China and the Mongols of the homeland? Why did Buddhism prevail over the other religions on the eastern Eurasian steppes?

5. What was the impact on Europeans of the reports of missionaries and envoys sent to the Mongol court? Why were the Mongols so unimpressed by Christianity as presented by the missionaries from western Europe? What was the impact of the journeys of Marco Polo on exciting the imagination of Europeans that led to the Age of Discovery?
In this lecture, we will study the passing of the Mongol peace and the
Mongol Empire. The process was not so much decline and fall as
conversion and assimilation. The four ulus underwent changes and
fell away from the Mongol imperial legacy. Those four ulus included the
domains of Kublai Khan, which comprised the Mongolian homeland in
Tibet and China; the central steppes in the Tarim Basin, controlled by the
Chagataid khagans; Transoxania, controlled by the ilkhans of Persia under
the family of Hulagu; and the Golden Horde, controlled by the descendants
of Batu, ruling the western steppes, with hegemony over the Russian
Orthodox principalities in the forest zones.

Reign of Kublai Khan

- In China, Kublai Khan inherited a policy from his uncle Ögödei. An
  important minister who had served the Jin emperor warned Ögödei,
  “You may conquer China from horseback, but you cannot rule it
  from horseback.” From the start, Kublai Khan made an effort to
  win over the Confucian scholar classes.

- He spared most of the Chinese populations. He did not reenact
  the massacres that characterized the brutal conquest of the Islamic
  world, Russia, and Hungary. On the other hand, Kublai Khan did
  not use the Song examination system; he retained the right to select
  his ministers personally based on their loyalty and usefulness to the
  khan. Buddhism was the religion of choice.

- Kublai Khan feared that if he put himself too much in the hands
  of the bureaucrats, ultimately, his rule would be undermined.
  Assimilation was always a danger. If the Mongols became too
  accustomed to Chinese ways and luxuries, they would lose their
  military edge.
• The numbers told the story. The Song Empire and the former Jin Empire together were estimated to be 120 million strong, most of them in south China. The number of Mongols and Turkish tribes Kublai Khan commanded did not reach 1 million. This led to a basic tension.

Waning Control in the *Ulus*

- As Yuan emperor, Kublai Khan built his own capital, Dadu, which is today the modern city of Beijing. It was reported in Marco Polo’s account as the fabled city of Xanadu. The capital was far enough north that it allowed Kublai Khan to stay in touch with the steppe peoples.

- Although the system succeeded in the time of Kublai Khan, his successors were not as strong and powerful. From the start, they received, at best, provisional cooperation from the Confucian scholar class.

- Furthermore, Mongol control of the other *ulus* started to wane after 1294. The other three khaganates went their separate ways, and all eventually embraced Islam. That would act as a divide between them and the Great Khan ruling in China and the Mongolian heartland.

Zhu Yuanzhang

- The later Yuan emperors made high demands on the military. The emperors were accused of neglecting not only the Dao and the Confucian traditions but also the management of the empire itself. Events came to a head in 1351.

- Zhu Yuanzhang, a peasant leader who proved a highly capable opponent to the Yuan emperors, headed up a dissident group known as the Red Turbans. He actually spent most of his time fighting other dissident groups. By 1356, however, he controlled most of southern China and brought these other groups into alliance.

- In 1368, this man was able to proclaim himself the first Ming emperor, *Hongwu*. He sent an expedition north against the Mongol
capital. The reigning Yuan emperor, a young man, fled back to Mongolia and gave up the heritage. Henceforth, the Mongols would never again rule China.

**Overthrow of the Ming**

- The reoccupation of China by the Ming armies was a significant turning point. The Mongol capital was leveled, and a new city called Beijing was built on top of it.

- In addition, the Ming emperors ordered the reconstruction of the old Han and Tang walls. Earlier, this boundary had consisted of a set of fortresses, signal towers, and monitoring stations, but the Ming emperors now ordered the construction of masonry walls.

- It is ironic, however, that the Ming emperors failed to guard against their most dangerous threat. That came from the forest of Manchuria, when, in 1644, the Manchus entered China and overthrew the Ming Dynasty.

In some ways, the construction of the Great Wall was a psychological response to the humiliation of Chinese rule by outsiders—the Mongols.
Chagataid Khans

- Meanwhile, in central Asia, the Chagataid khans were able to prosper off the Silk Road. The khaganate extended from the regions around the Aral Sea, the upper Jaxartes, and east to the Altai Mountains. On those steppes were various Turkish and Mongol tribes who had preserved the traditions of Genghis Khan.

- They followed the notions of the Yassa—that is, the authority of the khan overrode all religious law and other customs. They were proud of their steppe heritage and claimed to be the true Mongols, even though most of them spoke Turkish.

- The region also included the Tarim Basin and the caravan cities, which steadily adopted Islam. The great Buddhist monasteries in the area gradually passed out of existence.

Ilkhans of Persia

- The ilkhans of Persia ruled one of the most prosperous of the ulus, second only to China. They were engaged in trade and cultural exchange. Hulagu and his successors long maintained a cosmopolitan court and were enthusiastic sponsors of Buddhism. Some of the greatest thinkers and scholars in the cultural exchange worked at Tabriz.

- We can get a sense of the cultural diversity and intellectual achievement among the ilkhans by looking at the people they patronized. In addition to the earlier scholar Rashid al-Din, there was a Mongol prince who had served in the court of Kublai Khan, Bolad. He had been trained in Chinese and the Confucian classics and supervised the improvement of agriculture and streamlined the Yuan bureaucracy.

- In 1285, Bolad was sent as an envoy by Kublai Khan to the reigning ilkhan of Tabriz. Bolad decided to stay at Tabriz and offer his services to the ilkhanate court. He spent the rest of his career carrying out important translations of Chinese works into Persian. He introduced court ceremony, dress, taste, and aesthetics from China.
The exchange enriched the high culture of eastern Islam, or Persian culture. This culture became the basis for the three great Muslim empires of the early modern period, often called the gunpowder empires: the Ottoman sultanate, the Safavid shahs of Iran, and the Mughal emperors of India.

The Golden Horde

- The Golden Horde was led by the family of Batu. Batu had transferred his power to his brother, Berke, a devout Muslim. He came to the throne in 1227 and aligned himself with the Mamluk sultans of Cairo. He furnished slave soldiers, mostly Kipchak and Cuman Turks, to the Mamluks.

- The later khans embraced a simpler Islam that was appropriate to nomadic peoples, emphasizing Sufis and mystics. Many of the tribes in the confederation were quite unconventional in their Islamic beliefs.

- This khaganate also exercised control over the Russian principalities, a result of the victories of Batu. The Russian princes who cooperated with the khagans at Saray prospered. One of the most important was Ivan I Danilovich of Moscow.
  - Ivan proved a very loyal vassal of the Golden Horde. In 1328, the ruling khagan entrusted Ivan with the collection of tribute from the Russian princes and gave him important cities, such as Vladimir.

  - The result was that Moscow emerged at the nexus of the river routes that linked up the systems of the Don, Dnieper, and Volga. Ivan I Danilovich gained a key principality and enriched himself as the collection agent for the Mongol khagans.

Battle of Kulikovo

- However, the khagans of the Golden Horde quickly came to realize their vulnerability vis-à-vis the Russian princes. This was dramatically revealed in 1380 in the Battle of Kulikovo.
• The then-reigning prince of Moscow, Vasily I Dmitriyevich, put together a coalition of Russian princes, marched the army to the Don, and surprised a Mongol force. In a hard-fought battle, in which they mounted heavy cavalry, the Russians won. For the first time, the Russians had defeated a Mongol army.

• Khan Tokhtamysh immediately summoned his protector, Tamerlane, and vast numbers of forces descended from central Asia. Vasily I Dmitriyevich and the other princes immediately gave their loyalty back to the Mongol khagan. It would be another 120 years before that kind of overlordship would end.

• The battle, however, was a significant turning point. It proved that the Russians could mount armies that could defeat the Mongols.

Russian Power

• Two important events occurred that tipped the balance in favor of the Russians. By 1500, the princes of Moscow—now the tsars of Russia—began a march to conquer the steppes.

• The first to fall was the Golden Horde, which broke up into a series of competing khaganates. They came to depend on the Ottoman sultan for military support, technical advice, and money.

• Meanwhile, the grand princes of Moscow embraced the new military technology of handheld firearms and artillery. In 1480, Ivan III Vasilyevich engaged the Mongol army on a tributary of the Volga.

• From there, he and his successor, Ivan IV (Ivan the Terrible), went on to conquer the Eurasian steppes. Through the fur trade, the influx of military colonists armed with firearms, and incursions of Cossacks (the Russians’ response to Mongol cavalry), Russia was able to expand its power across the tundra, the taiga, and the steppe zones.

• The success of the Russians was symbolized by the Treaty of Nerchinsk in 1689. This was an agreement between the young Tsar
Peter the Great (and his brother, Ivan) and the Qing court—the Manchu emperors of China who had overthrown the Ming.

- The partition outlined in the treaty meant that the steppes fell into the hands of the Russians and the Chinese. The Russians got most of the steppes and Transoxania. The Chinese got Tibet, the Tarim Basin, and inner Mongolia. The Mongolian heartland was preserved as a buffer between the two empires. This division has dictated politics and geopolitics ever since.

**Important Terms**

**Qing Dynasty**: The last imperial dynasty of China, founded by the Manchu conquerors (1644–1911).

**Safavids**: The dynasty of the Shi’ite shahs of Iran (1501–1732), rivals to the Ottoman sultans.

**Names to Know**

**Berke** (b. c. 1208; r. 1257–1266): Mongol khan; the son of Jochi and brother of Batu. He succeeded to the western ulus of the Mongol Empire (then known as the White and Blue Hordes). He had converted to Islam; thus, he aligned with Mamluk Egypt against his cousin, the ilkhân Hulagu (1256–1265).

**Bolad** (d. 1313): Mongol chancellor and cultural advisor; served Kublai Khan in 1260–1285. He established a directorate to gather and analyze geographic information and maps. In 1285, he arrived as the Great Khan’s envoy and entered into the service of the ilkhans Arghun (1282–1291), Gaykhatu (1291–1295), and Mahmud Ghazan (1295–1304) as a fiscal expert. He introduced Chinese-style paper money.

**Hongwu** (b. 1328; r. 1368–1398): Ming emperor of China and the peasant rebel leader and Buddhist monk Zhu Yuanzhang. In 1353–1367, he secured the Yangtze valley and, in 1328, occupied Dadu. He expelled the Mongol emperor Togon-temür (1333–1368) and was hailed emperor of the Ming
Dynasty (1368–1644). He razed the Mongol palace and replaced Dadu with the new Chinese city of Beijing.

**Ivan I Danilovich** (b. 1288; r. 1325–1340): Grand prince of Moscow; a loyal vassal of the khan of the Golden Horde (1312–1341). In 1328, the khan rewarded Ivan I with Vladimir and the right to collect from the other Russian princes the tribute due to the Mongols. Ivan, nicknamed Kalita (“Moneybags”), exploited his position to turn Moscow into the premier Russian principality.


**Ivan IV** (b. 1530; r. 1547–1584): Ivan the Terrible, tsar of Russia. Reformed the Russian army and conquered the khanates of Kazan (1152) and Astrakhan (1556). He ended the Mongol threat, securing the lower Volga valley and, thus, enabling Russian expansion across Siberia.

**Tokhtamysh** (d. 1406; r. 1376–1395): Khan of the Golden Horde. Fled to Tamerlane in 1376 after he failed to unseat his uncle Urus Khan (1361–1375). With the support of Tamerlane, he was received as khan of the Golden Horde. In 1382, he avenged the Mongol defeat at Kulikovo Field by sacking Moscow and forcing Grand Prince Vasily to return to his Mongol allegiance. In 1395, Khan Tokhtamysh blundered into a war with his overlord Tamerlane (1370–1405), who ruthlessly sacked Saray and appointed as his vassal a new khan, Temür Kutlugh (1395–1401). Tokhtamysh died in exile in 1406.

**Vasily I Dmitriyevich** (b. 1371; r. 1389–1425): Grand prince of Moscow; the grandson of Ivan I. He defeated a Mongol army of 35,000 on Kulikovo Field on September 8, 1380. In 1382, Khan Tokhtamysh invaded and stormed Moscow and sacked the city, forcing Grand Prince Vasily to return to his Mongol allegiance.
**Suggested Reading**

Allsen, *Culture and Conquest in Mongol Eurasia*.

Elverskog, *Buddhism and Islam on the Silk Road*.

Khodarkovksy, *Russia’s Steppe Frontier*.


Mote, *Imperial China, 900–1800*.

Rossabi, *The Mongols and Global History*.

Veith, “The Eastern Steppe.”

**Questions to Consider**

1. Why did Kublai Khan and his successors choose to rule as Chinese-style emperors of the Yuan Dynasty (1271–1368)? What were the strengths and weaknesses of this policy? How well did they succeed in winning over their Chinese subjects? How did the Neo-Confucian Mandarins view Yuan rule? What accounted for the overthrow of Yuan rule in 1368 and the establishment of the native Chinese Ming Dynasty?

2. Why did the Yuan emperors favor Buddhism? Why did the Mongols turn to Buddhism, received from Tibet in the 14th and 15th centuries?

3. In what ways did the Chagataid khans maintain best the Mongol military and political traditions? How did the adoption of Islam and the Turkish language transform the Chagataid court and society? How much did the later conquerors Tamerlane and Bābur owe to their Chagataid predecessors?

4. What was the contribution of the Mongol ilkhans at Tabriz for the future political, cultural, and religious evolution of Iran?

5. Why did the khans of the Golden Horde and its successor states fail to appreciate the danger posed by the grand princes of Moscow? What developments ended the power of steppe nomads in the 16th century?
In this lecture, we will explore the career of Tamerlane, whose nickname was the Prince of Destruction. His given name was Timur, and he was called Timur the Lame because he was wounded early in his career. Tamerlane had a mixed career. On the one hand, he was hailed as the Sword of Islam—the heroic Muslim conqueror. On the other hand, accounts of him are filled with tales of atrocities. Muslim scholars saw him as a barbarian conqueror with only a marginal claim to being the Sword of Islam. In fact, most of the fury of Tamerlane’s army was directed against his Muslim opponents.

An Astute Commander

- **Tamerlane** had the same powerful, charismatic personality that we saw in Genghis Khan and his successful grandsons. He also relished terror in the extreme.

- Tamerlane was the quintessential barbarian conqueror, a child of the steppes who was released on the Muslim world. He was born outside of the city of Samarkand into a relatively unimportant tribe, the Barlas. His father was a minor emir, at best, and Tamerlane grew up close to the urban civilization of Transoxania and its high Persian culture.

- He was greatly influenced by the political and legal traditions of the Mongol Empire, particularly the Chagataid khaganate, of the central steppes. By the time Tamerlane was born, it had...
divided into two competing khaganates, eastern and western, that battled for control of the cities and trade routes.

- It was in these wars that Tamerlane proved to be an astute commander. He had a many of the qualities of Genghis Khan, but he could never aspire to be a khan: He didn’t have the bloodlines. He was not really a Mongol but a Turk.

- Starting in 1361, Tamerlane positioned himself as the agent of a legitimate Chagataid khan: Tughluq Temür. Tughluq Temür empowered Tamerlane as the emir of the Barlas. Tamerlane used that position to secure Transoxania and eventually, in 1370, to create his own khan—a figurehead—in Samarkand.

**Tamerlane’s Early Career**
- Tamerlane held the rank of grand emir. He was the commander-in-chief of a Mongol army primarily composed of Turkish tribes from the central Eurasian steppes.

- In the 1360s, when he received both his wound, as well as lessons in statecraft and military training, Tamerlane returned to Genghis Khan’s method of organization for his army. He divided the army into the tumen—the 10,000-man units—all of whom swore oaths of loyalty.

- He came to rule an imperial-style army that eventually numbered at least 10 tumen—more than 100,000 mounted warriors drawn from the central and western steppes. Although not a descendant of Genghis Khan, this Turkish general was, in many ways, heir to the earlier conqueror’s military and political legacy.

- By the time of Tamerlane, there was no longer any great Mongol khagan. He had been deposed in 1368 when the Ming emperor of China chased the Mongols out of China forever. Tamerlane was on his own to carve out a career as a great conqueror.
Seven Major Campaigns

- Between 1381 and his death in 1405, Tamerlane conducted seven major campaigns. By 1381, he had established his position in Samarkand after 10 or 11 years of harsh fighting. His was an extraordinary career, both in time and in geography.

- Starting in 1381, Tamerlane opened up a series of campaigns that swept across the traditional caravan cities of Iran. He consolidated the domains of the old ilkhans of the house of Genghis Khan. The battles and campaigns were characterized by extraordinary devastation; the civilian population was slaughtered and great mounds of skulls were piled on the plains.

- These campaigns alarmed Tokhtamysh, khan of the Golden Horde, who crossed the Caucasus and invaded Azerbaijan. This was a strategic region, particularly Tabriz, where Tamerlane wintered his army when he was on western campaigns.

- Tamerlane beat back the invasion; he blitzed Georgia and Armenia, Christian kingdoms that were nominal allies of Tokhtamysh. Further, he singled out for destruction Muslim cities that had in any way supported his rival. The fighting in the early 1380s was particularly bitter because Tamerlane had earlier supported Tokhtamysh in a civil war.

Clashes with the Golden Horde

- Tamerlane singled out the Golden Horde for defeat. In 1391, he led a massive army across the steppes north of Samarkand in a huge sweep west. He went 700 miles north and 1,000 miles west, caught the army of Tokhtamysh, and crushed it.

- Tokhtamysh retreated westward onto the southwestern steppes, and Tamerlane decided to pull back to Samarkand—he was beyond his supply systems. He returned to Samarkand and plotted a second war, a second strategic invasion against the Golden Horde, across the Caucasus.
• That invasion involved Tamerlane in some complicated campaigns in Syria, especially fighting against the Mamluk sultans, who were trying to put a puppet sultan on the throne of Baghdad.

• In 1395, Tamerlane crossed the Derbent Pass, entered the Kuban steppes, maneuvered the army of Tokhtamysh into a decisive battle, and defeated them. The Kipchak Turks who were fighting in the ranks of Tokhtamysh defected to Tamerlane in the course of the fighting.

• The victory over Tokhtamysh, this second campaign, was absolutely extraordinary. As a result, Tamerlane now had his own vassal on the throne of the Golden Horde, and he could boast that he gathered together the three *ulus* of Genghis Khan: the western steppes, the central steppes, and the ilkhanate.

**Ottoman and Mamluk Sultans**

• The victory over the Golden Horde meant that Tamerlane was bound to clash with the Ottoman sultan and the Mamluk sultan of Egypt, who were long allied to the Golden Horde and dependent on the slave soldiers exported through the Genoese and Venetian ports in the Crimea.

• Before that final reckoning, Tamerlane—for reasons still uncertain—took a timeout and decided to invade India. His real target was the Tughluq sultan of Delhi. That resulted in a great victory in December 1398 outside of Delhi. Delhi was sacked, Lahore was sacked, and a number of Hindu temples were reduced to rubble.

• Tamerlane made his way back to Samarkand. He then moved west to reckon with both the sultan of the Ottomans and the sultan of Egypt. From 1399 to 1402, he conducted a series of complicated campaigns across the Middle East.

• In 1400, Tamerlane’s forces swept into Asia Minor, spreading terror everywhere. In 1401, he returned to Baghdad. In the course of the fighting, Baghdad exchanged hands four times and was sacked twice.
**Lecture 34: Tamerlane, Prince of Destruction**

- In 1402, at the climax of the campaign, Tamerlane decided to take out the Ottoman sultanate, to go after the then-ruling Sultan Bayezid (the Thunderbolt), one of the great sultans of early Ottoman history. Bayezid marched to the vicinity of Angora, and on July 20, 1402, Tamerlane fought perhaps his greatest battle.

- His engineers diverted the water supply before the actual fighting took place. He had brought an elephant corps from India. He had a superior cavalry and, perhaps, superior forces; the result was the Ottoman army went down in its first serious defeat. The sultan was captured.

**Campaign to Ming China**

- By the time Tamerlane returned to Samarkand, he had built an extraordinary career. He had defeated Mamluk armies, the Ottomans, the sultan of Delhi. He had overthrown the Golden Horde, and all the tribes of western and central Asia were in his employ.

- In 1405, he set out on a final expedition to reckon with Ming China. Still uncertain what his goals were, at best, he might have surprised the Chinese army in the Tarim Basin. Since 1368–1370, Ming Chinese armies had reoccupied that area.

- It was the first time Tamerlane had planned a winter campaign, however, and it was too much for him. He contracted an illness and died in February 1405.

**Bābur**

- In some ways, Tamerlane’s career was on a level with that of Attila the Hun or even Genghis Khan. However, his empire fragmented immediately—also true of Attila the Hun’s. There are several significant reasons that this empire failed to last.

- First, Tamerlane never was khan; he never ruled the Mongol nation. There was never an assembly, a *kurultai*, that could give him the tribal authority that all the Mongol khans had enjoyed. He was, after all, nothing more than the emir of the legitimate khan in Samarkand.
Second, Tamerlane could not aspire to religious authority. That was in stark contrast to the successor states that arose after Tamerlane.

The Ottoman sultans, who recovered from the Battle of Angora, eventually became the caliphs of Sunni Islam—a position they held until 1924. Ismail I, the shah who built the Iranian state, turned Iran into the Shi’ite Islamic society we see today.

The real successor to Tamerlane was his descendent Bābur, who built the great Mughal Empire in India, a precursor to the British raj. Although Bābur was a descendent of Tamerlane, he was also a direct descendent of Genghis Khan—and that counted for everything.

**Names to Know**

**Bābur (Zahir al-Din Muhammad)** (b. 1483; r. 1526–1530): First Mughal emperor of India; a descendant of Genghis Khan and Tamerlane. A Timurid prince of Ferghana, he lost his realm in the wars between the Uzbeks and Safavid Iran. In 1504, he seized Kabul and acknowledged the Safavid shah Ismail I as his overlord. In 1526, he invaded India and defeated Ibrahim Lodi, sultan of Delhi, at the Battles of Panipat on April 26, 1526; he then occupied Delhi and founded the Mughal Empire. He composed an engaging autobiography, Baburnama, in literary Turkish.

**Ismail I** (b. 1487; 1501–1524): First Safavid shah of Iran. Founded the Shi’ite state in Iran and revived Iran as one of the great Islamic powers. He fought for Transoxania against Muhammad Shaybani (1500–1510), who had united the Turkish tribes of the central Eurasian steppe as the Uzbek confederation. On December 2, 1510, Shah Ismail decisively defeated and slew Muhammad Shaybani at the Battle of Merv. But Shah Ismail had to confront the Ottoman threat from the west. He was defeated by the Ottoman sultan Selim I (1512–1520) on August 23, 1514.

**Tamerlane** (b. 1336; r. 1370–1405): “Prince of Destruction”; regarded as the third greatest conqueror of the steppes (after Genghis Khan and Attila). He was the heir to the Mongol military tradition, recruiting professional regiments of cavalry based on loyalty and rewards. Tamerlane, emir of the
Turko-Mongol Barlas tribe, emerged as the leading emir in the tribal wars in Transoxania in 1360–1370. In 1370, Chagatai khan Suurgatmish (1370–1384) named Tamerlane grand emir. Tamerlane also married Saray Mulk Khanum, a descendant of Genghis Khan. From his capital, he waged six campaigns of conquest between 1381 and 1401, in which he conquered most of the western half of the Mongol Empire. In 1391–1392 and 1393–1396, he defeated Tokhtamysh and broke the power of the Golden Horde. He won his greatest victories near Delhi over the Tughluq army in 1398 and at Angora over the Ottoman army of Bayezid Yildirim in 1402. Yet neither campaign resulted in territorial expansion. In February 1405, he died en route to his seventh campaign against Ming China. His exploits inspired legends; he is credited he with writing the flatterying Memoirs of Temur.

Suggested Reading

Golden, Central Asia in World History.

Gonzalez de Clavijo (Le Strange, trans.), Embassy to Tamerlane, 1403–1406.

Jackson, The Mongols and the West, 1221–1410.

Manz, The Rise and Rule of Tamerlane.

———, “Temür and the Early Timurids to c. 1450.”

Marozzi, Tamerlane: Sword of Islam, Conqueror of the World.

Saunders, The History of the Mongol Conquests.

Questions to Consider

1. What accounts for the different images of Tamerlane as a conqueror? Does he deserve either the title of Prince of Destruction or Sword of Islam?

2. What accounted for Tamerlane’s early successes? How did Tamerlane exploit the civil wars and succession crises within the Chagataid khanate to become the great emir at Samarkand in 1370?
3. In what ways was Tamerlane a worthy successor to the military traditions of Genghis Khan and the Mongol Empire? How did Tamerlane display his strategic genius in his campaigns against the Golden Horde, against the sultanate of Delhi, and the Ottoman and Mamluk sultanates? How were his battles at Delhi and Angora tactical masterpieces?

4. How did Tamerlane promote the high Persian culture of Islam? How was Samarkand transformed into a great capital?

5. Why did Tamerlane’s empire fail to survive his death? Why did Tamerlane fail to forge the institutions that would have preserved an imperial unity? Would Tamerlane’s successful invasion of China have compromised his empire?
In this lecture, we will look at the last descendant of Genghis Khan and the last great conqueror from the steppes, who would have a major impact on world history. His full name was Zahir al-Din Muhammad. Bābur (“Tiger”) was a name he adopted for his memoirs. In 1526, he invaded India, occupied Delhi, and founded the Mughal Empire—an empire that endured up to the arrival of the British and was the model for the British raj.

**Early Career of Bābur**

- Born into a Turkish-speaking family, Bābur was the great-grandson of Tamerlane. In the 10th generation, through his mother, he counted himself a descendent of Genghis Khan. Even more important, Bābur was a product of the political and military traditions of the Mongol Empire and the Timurid Empire: the empire of Tamerlane and his successors.

- He was conscious of the position and authority of any ruler who could base his authority on Yassa, which Tamerlane never had. Bābur followed the traditions of the steppes, including dependence on the traditional nomadic cavalry, as well as tolerance and a pragmatic attitude toward religion. It was only his great-grandsons who returned to true Sunni Islam.

- His early career was rather lackluster. He got swept up in the turbulent politics of late Timurid Iran, which saw the emergence of two new powers: the Uzbek Turks, who would eventually come to dominate the central steppes, and the Safavid Dynasty in Tabriz.

- In the course of his battles, Bābur became a vassal of the shah of Iran and was entrusted with the control of Kabul. Kabul, in today’s Afghanistan, was a strategic region, with access to the Khyber Pass that linked the region from northern India to the central Asian steppes to Transoxania and points farther west.
• With control of that pass, Bābur held an important strategic position. He nominally accepted Shi’ite Islam. He rendered homage to Ismail I and was able to amass warriors to follow him in battle. These were the traditional steppe nomads, the horse archers with a component of heavy cavalry.

**Defeat of the Sultanate and the Rajputs**

• By fighting in the armies of Ismail I, Bābur acquired new techniques, which included early handheld firearms and field artillery and the use of infantry to anchor two powerful wings of nomadic cavalry.

• With his forces and resources from the shah, in 1526, Bābur crossed the Hindu Kush, went through the Khyber Pass, and descended into India with the intent of claiming his heritage. Bābur did not intend to simply sack India and leave. He planned to overthrow the Lodi sultanate and rule India.

• The Lodi sultanate, at this point, was the last of a series of families that had ruled Delhi. They had all the classic problems in northern India of a Muslim administration over a large Hindu population. The sultan, Ibrahim Lodi, marched out with a large army to oppose Bābur at the town of Punjab on April 15, 1526.

• Bābur had a smaller force, but with the technology of handheld firearms and artillery, he defeated the traditional Indian army based on infantry and elephants. He then defeated the Rajputs, the Hindu warrior caste who ruled western India and had kept the Muslim sultans of Delhi in check.

• Bābur came to control most of the strategic regions of the Punjab. He realized that to run this area, he would need the cooperation of the existing Muslim population, as well as the Hindus. From the start, he pursued a policy of religious tolerance, which would characterize the reigns of his son and grandson and would culminate in the administrative reforms of Akbar.
Humayun

- However, in one way, Bābur was too much a child of the steppes. He practiced lateral succession and divided his state—which included not only India but also significant regions in Afghanistan and Transoxania—among his sons.

- The eldest son, Humayun, took over the Indian possessions in 1530 at the death of his father but did not hold them for long. Within a couple of years, he was opposed by Afghan mercenaries and tribal forces settled in Bengal, who followed Sher Khan. Control of Bengal was always a problem for the Mughal emperors because Bengal was a wealthy area. Any lord assigned there by the Mughal emperor or any previous sultan of Delhi could always evolve into an independent ruler.

- Humayun then went to the ruling shah of Iran to obtain money and forces to return to India. His army was successful, and by January 1556, when Humayun died, Delhi had been reoccupied and the nucleus of a great Indian empire was passed to Humayun’s son Akbar.

Akbar: An Administrative Genius

- Ruling from 1556 to 1605, Akbar proved to be an administrative genius. He retained many of the steppe traditions. He understood that the power of this emerging state depended on the steppe cavalry and, above all, Persian administrators—the educated and experienced officials and scholars who could run the empire in India.

- In addition, Akbar was heir to the steppe tradition of the Yassa: the notion that the ruler is the supreme authority. Therefore, he did not have to assume a religious authority, and his court was tolerant of all faiths.

- The administration built by Akbar transformed the state from a nomadic one to a bureaucratic one. The hierarchy of the state was
remarkably diverse and adopted a professional attitude toward administration and military service.

- Under Mughal auspices, large sections of the Ganges areas were brought under cultivation and turned into irrigated farms and fields. The Rajputs and Jats, the Hindu military castes, which made up at least 25 percent of the Mughal aristocracy by 1605, had been co-opted into the Mughal elite. They were not required to convert to Islam. Their hereditary lands could not be taken from them. This won over very powerful and important Hindu support. So long as the Mughal emperors could retain that support, they could rule effectively and expand their control over Hindu India.

**Fiscal Organization**

- Another important feature of Akbar’s empire was its fiscal organization. Paper and block printing were introduced into India by Akbar. That made it possible to keep the records to tax and administer an Indian state.

- Akbar’s administration was characterized by improved land measurements, standard weights and measures, and new currency based on the mohur, a gold coin, and the rupee. Much of this was the work of Hindu bureaucrats, as well as scribes and tax collectors.

- In addition, there is now increasing evidence that under the Mughal emperors, a good deal of the banking and trade throughout the Mughal Empire and into Iran came into the hands of Hindu and Jain moneylenders and bankers.

**The Mughal Empire**

- The result was that the Mughal Empire turned out to be a highly successful bureaucratic state. It drew on all sorts of nationalities and races to administer the vast empire. By the time of Akbar’s death in 1605, there were perhaps 1.5 million Muslims running an empire of at least 120 million Indians, who followed either Hinduism or Jainism.
This was an extraordinary achievement and quite in contrast to the other two states that arose out of the Tamerlane tradition: the Ottoman Empire and the Safavid shahs of Iran. In the case of the Ottoman sultan, almost all the ministers were slaves. Initially, the elite forces were Janissaries, which was a kind of slave soldier.

The Mughal state brought in many features of the high Islamic culture from Iran and popularized them among the upper classes of India. Rajputs and Jats, in particular, embraced much of the architecture, especially the use of tile and decoration. Marvelous palaces were built by the Hindu vassals of the early Mughal emperors that imitated the architecture of eastern Islam to create a unique Indo-Islamic style.

**A Syncretic Solar Religion**

- Akbar’s religious leanings went perhaps a bit too far, however, at least in the eyes of the orthodox Sunni Muslims, particularly the religious schools in Delhi and Agra.
• Akbar experimented with a kind of syncretic solar religion. It is still unclear exactly what he intended by it. We have various visual arts that suggest that this was some combination of different types of religious views. Akbar was known to have debates with all sorts of mystics, starting with the Sufis and bringing in Hindus, Jains, and others.

• This religion left a peculiar legacy. There were a number of gold coins issued by Akbar, later in his reign, that showed the signs of the zodiac. This was a curious and unusual use of figural art in Islamic coinage. Whatever this experiment was, it passed with his death.

**Bābur’s Ultimate Successor**

• Akbar’s successors proved to be ever more strict Muslims. Jahangir went back to Sunni Islam, and his great-grandson, **Aurangzeb** (r. 1658–1708), proved to be a zealous Muslim.

• Not only was Aurangzeb a great warrior, but he departed dramatically from the policy of accommodation of Hindus and other faiths. He spared no Hindu temples in his conquests. Although he brought the empire to its height territorially, he also ensured the seeds of its destruction.

• After his death in 1707, the later Mughal emperors lost the support of their Hindu subjects. They drove the Sikhs into opposition, they lost the Rajputs, and they saw the emergence of a new Hindu opposition group, the Maratha confederacy.

• The Mughal Empire had shrunk to a mere north Indian state. However, it had passed on its institutions. The ultimate successor of Bābur and the early Mughal emperors would not be the Hindu rulers; it would be a new invader who would, unexpectedly, come by sea: the British.
Important Terms

**Rajputs**: “Sons of the king”; the Kshatriya or warrior caste who dominated western India between the 9th and 12th centuries. They were later accommodated by the Mughal emperors.

**Timurids**: Descendants of Tamerlane (1370–1405), who ruled Iran and Transoxania (1405–1506).

Names to Know

**Akbar** (b. 1542; r. 1556–1605): Third Mughal emperor; the son of Humayun. He fiscally and administratively organized the Mughal Empire, laying the foundations of the future British raj. A mystic, he sponsored his own syncretist solar cult of the ruler, Din-i Ilahi (“divine faith”). His personal beliefs and toleration of subjects of all faiths alienated the Sunni *ulema*, and his son and successor, Jahangir (1605–1627), returned to Sunni Islam.

**Aurangzeb** (b. 1618; r. 1658–1707): Son of Shah Jahan (1628–1658) and grandson of Akbar. Hailed Alamgir (“world conqueror”), he united nearly all of India under Mughal rule. A zealous Muslim, he alienated his Muslim subjects, and his campaigns in the Deccan exhausted the imperial treasury.

**Humayun** (b. 1508; r. 1530–1539, 1555–1556): Mughal emperor of India; succeeded his father, Bābur. In 1539, he was expelled from India by Sher Khan, who had rallied the former Lodi mercenary bands of Afghans that had retired to the Bengal after 1527. With Safavid assistance, Humayun reconquered northern India in 1555–1556.

Suggested Reading

Alam and Subramanyam, eds., *Mughal State, 1526–1750*.

Dale, *The Muslim Empires of the Ottomans, Safavids, and Mughals*.

———, “The Later Timurids, c. 1450–1526.”

Richards, *The Mughal Empire*.
1. How did the rapid collapse of the empire of Tamerlane lead to the emergence of new political orders in the 15th century? What accounted for the success of the Shayanid khans of the Uzbeks and the Safavid shahs of Iran?

2. What led Bābur to conquer India in 1526–1530? Why did Humayun nearly lose the Indian empire? What accounts for Mughal military success?

3. What traditions and institutions of the Mongol empire did Akbar (1556–1605) adapt to his Indian empire? How important were these policies in ensuring the success of Mughal rule? Why would Mughal emperors never be able to Islamize the Indian subcontinent?

4. How did the Mughal Empire compare to the contemporary Muslim states of the Ottoman Empire and Safavid Iran? How did the Mongol legacy give the Mughals an advantage in ruling their empire?

5. What lessons did the British learn from the Mughals to construct their own imperial order in the India, the raj?
In this course, we have covered some 6,000 miles and 6,000 years. In our final lecture, we will explore two key issues. The first is why, by the year 1500, the nomadic peoples of the Eurasian steppes ceased to play a decisive military role and declined as a force of cultural exchange, trade, and prosperity in the civilizations of Eurasia, the Mediterranean world, the Near East, India, and China. The second issue is to examine what the legacy of the empires of the steppes means to us today.

Advances in Military Technology

- In the 15th and 16th centuries, a revolution in military technology took place, originating in northwestern Europe: the introduction of handheld firearms, the use of artillery on the battlefield, and the European mastery of oceangoing vessels that could mount artillery.

- Ironically, this revolution was possible, in part, because of the Mongol peace that had allowed dissemination of the knowledge of black gunpowder to the West during the 14th century.

- The advances in military technology meant that the horse archers, who were clearly the premier warriors since the early Iron Age, now had to face forces that could annihilate them on the battlefield at a capacity hitherto unknown.

New Political Orders

- In addition, new political orders had emerged that would restrict the migration of nomadic peoples and would begin to encroach on the Eurasian steppes.

- The states in the Islamic world were the Ottoman Empire and Safavid Iran, both of which had remote connections to the nomadic traditions. In each case, the dynasties traced their descent to Turkish conquerors going back to the 11th and 10th centuries.
• The other two great powers were the Russians and the Chinese, who in effect partitioned the steppes in the Treaty of Nerchinsk. That partition then gave later tsars the opportunity to expand into Transoxania.

• In the 19th century, the tsars crossed the Jaxartes and conquered the great caravan cities of Transoxania. These regions were forced to submit to the Russian Orthodox tsar. That situation persisted up to 1920, when Lenin eliminated the emirs. Those regions became independent republics after 1991.

• Another set of powers lay on the periphery that would forever change the balance. These were the five key states of northwestern Europe: the kingdoms of Portugal, Spain, and France; the peculiar kingdom of England, which is best described as a crowned republic; and the Dutch Republic.

• Those five European states launched out on the great Age of Discovery. They had with them oceangoing vessels that would transform not only the military and political balance of power but also the economic balance of the entire world.

New Dynamics of Economics and Trade

• Most significant for the nomads of the central steppes was the circumnavigation of Africa by Vasco da Gama in 1498. His voyages opened up India to direct contact by Portugal. In 1503, a Portuguese fleet mounted with artillery off the coast of India dispersed the Ottomans in a great battle.

• Henceforth, the Indian Ocean would be dominated by European powers. In the 16th century, the Portuguese colonized the Malabar Coast and Sri Lanka. They penetrated to the East Indies and even opened up trade with Japan. They were followed in the 17th century by the Dutch, English, and French.

• As a result, these great European imperial powers, which also colonized new lands in the Americas, Australia, and New Zealand,
took over control of ocean commerce. This changed the entire dynamic of world trade. A great transoceanic economy was born and, with it, came the globalization of today. Population and economic centers moved to the coasts.

- As a result, the caravan cities and trade routes across Eurasia that had been so crucial to the nomadic peoples simply faded away. They declined to the point of becoming provincial frontiers of great empires—most notably, of Russia, later the Soviet Union, and China.

Legacy of the Steppe Empires
- The first Indo-European pastoralists, or nomads, mastered the use of wheeled vehicles and domesticated the horse. Those innovations were as significant as the invention of farming; they opened up the Eurasian steppes to colonization by humans.

- The steppes then became the highway that linked the civilizations that emerged in the great river valleys of the Tigris-Euphrates, the Nile, the Indus, and the Huang He.

- The invention of light chariots and the improvement of wheeled vehicles led to the dispersion of Indo-European speakers across Europe, across much of western Eurasia, into India. In turn, this led to the evolution of many significant language families.

Contact with China
- The steppe nomads were able to create political orders—great confederations—that could challenge the powerful urban, literate civilizations.

- Modu Chanyu’s confederation dramatically altered the balance of power. It led to migrations from east to west. It brought the steppe peoples directly and indirectly into contact with Chinese civilization.

- Chinese civilization was arguably one of the great forces that transformed the steppe peoples. Many of the achievements of
Chinese civilization through the Mongol period were disseminated to the rest of humanity via the trade routes and empires built by these so-called barbarians of the steppes. The achievements in antiquity were astonishing.

**Role of the Turks**

- The early Middle Ages was characterized by another set of migrations from east and west and the expansion of the Turkish tribes. We saw this in the 6th century with the success of the Gök Turks.

- The Turks represented an explosive and powerful force across the steppes. They transformed the steppes ethnically and linguistically and introduced superior military technology: metal stirrups, improved saddles, and better composite bows.

- The Turks also played another important role: They brought the peoples of the steppes into closer association with Islam. Before that, Buddhism had been the major religious force on the steppes as a result of the achievements of the Kushan emperors and the Hephthalites.

- Starting in the 7th century, Islam came to play an increasingly important role. Islam resulted in a remarkable exchange with the Turks, and the Turks adapted it to create an identity that was both Turkish and Islamic.

- When the Seljuk Turks captured Baghdad in 1055, they were seen differently from all previous steppe conquerors; they were Muslims. They were accepted, however reluctantly, by the Muslim populations, by the Abbasid caliphs, and by the merchant princes of Transoxania and Iran.

- A unique partnership emerged between the Turks and the Persians—those Iranians who came to define Islamic civilization. There was a new expansion of Islam into Asia Minor and, ultimately, into northern India.
Terror and Destruction

- The period starting in the late 12th century and going into the 14th century was dominated by the Mongols. The Mongols were both the exception and the epitome of everything that preceded them. They made a decisive impact in history, but the costs were high.

- Mongol conquests brought misery and destruction on a scale hitherto unknown. Genghis Khan and his grandsons and Tamerlane—who, although not a Mongol in birth and descent, was certainly a Mongol in his military and political conceptions—waged a war of terror on a colossal scale.

- The destruction of the great cities of Iran and Transoxania by repeated Mongol attacks was devastating; many cities never recovered.

- We saw similar destruction in northern China, when Genghis Khan deliberately ravaged irrigated fields. One could argue this was a typical nomadic reaction. They needed the products of civilization, but they feared the urban populations.

The Mongol Century

- Whatever the concentration of good and evil, whatever the intentions, whatever the unintended consequences, the results were undeniable: The Mongols made the 13th century their own.

- They played a pivotal role in the revival of prosperity. To be sure, part of this was for pragmatic reasons; they needed to rehabilitate many of the areas that had been devastated in order to raise revenue to support their steppe armies.

- Because of the Mongols, the Islamic and Chinese worlds were brought into close association. Arabic numbers and astronomy made their way to China, as did sophisticated instruments for measuring the earth and for making maps.
• In turn, the knowledge of the Chinese, in aesthetics and arts, science, and medicinal lore, was then received by the Islamic world. These cultural exchanges ultimately resulted in better civilizations on both ends.

• One of the bitter ironies we encountered was in the transmission of military technology. The people who embraced the changes in military technology were the least important in the cultural exchanges of the 13th century. In fact, they were the least impressive in the eyes of the Mongol khans.
  ○ To Khan Güyük or Möngke, the embassies sent by Pope Innocent IV or the French Crusader king Louis IX were pitiful envoys of a distant set of pale rulers. A group of Franciscans who showed up barefooted and bringing trivial gifts could not compare with the multitudes of powerful and distinguished envoys from around the world who had come to seek the patronage of the Great Khan.

  ○ Yet it was those unimpressive Europeans who picked up the technology of black gunpowder and went on to crush the steppe nomad empires and create modern Western civilization.

Making of the Modern World
• In addition, Marco Polo’s experiences in the Far East, the seductive images of Xanadu and Cathay, provided the inspiration and motivation for the Age of Discovery.

• Our course has given us a unique glimpse into the development of all these civilizations and the making of the modern world.

• It is still remarkable how much of modern civilization was influenced by the fact that 130,000 Mongol warriors mounted on cavalry horses followed Genghis Khan into battle and glorious conquest. If those conquests had never happened, it’s difficult to imagine what the world would look like today.
Questions to Consider

1. What were the principal reasons for the passing of the power of the nomadic peoples of the Eurasian steppes? Why did the empire of Tamerlane represent not only the end of the Mongol legacy but also the end of imperial power for steppe nomads?

2. How did tsarist Russia and the Xing Empire of China partition the Eurasian steppes after 1689? Why did Russia emerge with control over the Eurasian steppes and the cities of Transoxiana? Did the Xing emperors of China buy frontier security at too high a price?

3. What were the decisive roles played by early Indo-European–speaking nomads on the Eurasian steppes in 4800 to 1200 B.C.? How significant were their contributions?

4. What was the role of the Scythians for the Persian Empire and the Greek world? How should the relationship between Scythians and their civilized neighbors be characterized? What were the contributions of Parthians, Sacae, and Kushans?
5. How did Modu chanyu of the Xiongnu set the standard for future conquerors from the steppes? What was the importance of the interaction of the Xiongnu and, later, Turkish tribes with the Han and Tang empires of China? How was each side transformed by trade, wars, and cultural exchange?

6. What role was played by the nomads in promoting trade and cultural exchange along the Silk Road? Why was the transmission of Buddhism so important?

7. How did imperial Rome respond to Attila the Hun? How did this experience dictate the future interaction of the Byzantine world with the nomads of the western Eurasian steppes? How did the interaction of the Sassanid shahs with Turks and Hephthalites in the 6th and 7th centuries anticipate the relationship of the caliphate and the Turks between the 9th and 11th centuries?

8. How did the Turkish khaganates of the Gök Turks, Khazars, and Uighurs transform the Eurasian steppes? Why did the Turks play a decisive role in the Islamic world from the 11th century on?

9. In what ways was the 13th century the Mongol century? What accounts for the success of the Mongol khans? What were the results of the Mongol peace?
Silk Road Routes
Eurasian Steppes
6500–5000 B.C. ......................... Proto-Indo-European speakers settle the Pontic-Caspian steppes

5000–4000 B.C. ......................... Domestication of the horse

Beginning of the Chalcolithic Age (4200–3800 B.C.): metallurgy on the Pontic-Caspian steppes

Riding of horses and herding on the Pontic-Caspian steppes

Migration of Proto-Anatolian speakers into the Balkans

4000 B.C.–3000 B.C. ..................... Emergence of Yamnaya culture on the Pontic-Caspian steppes (PIE)

Invention of wheeled vehicles

Migration of Proto-Tocharian speakers to Altai Mountains (Afanasevo culture)

Emergence of literate, urban civilization of Sumer (southern Iraq)

Unification of Egypt under Narmer: birth of Egyptian civilization

3000–2000 B.C. .......................... Emergence of urban civilization of Meluhha in India (Indus Valley civilization, 2600–1700 B.C.)
Anatolian speakers (Hittites, Luvians, and Palaic speakers) cross the Bosporus and enter Asia Minor

Division of Indo-European languages into centrum and satem branches

First known light chariots in central Asia

2000–1500 B.C. Chariots at Nesa (Kültpe) in central Asia Minor

Erlitou culture in the Yellow River valley: origins of Chinese civilization

Andronovo culture in Khazkhstan

Proto-Indo-Iranian speakers migrate to Transoxiana (BMAC)

Domestication of the Bactrian camel

Migrations of Eastern Iranian speakers across Central and Eastern Eurasian steppes

Hattusilis I founds the Hittite Empire in Asia Minor; spread of chariot warfare across the Near East

Migration of Indo-Aryan speakers of Mitanni from Transoxiana into northern Mesopotamia

Shang Dynasty (1600–1046 B.C.): urban, literate civilization in China
### 1500–1000 B.C.

- Indo-Aryans migrate into northern India, completing the end of urban civilization of Meluhha (Indus Valley civilization)
- Introduction of chariot and horses to China
- Collapse of the great states of the Bronze Age in the Near East and Greece
- Zhou Dynasty in China (1046–256 B.C.)

### 1000–500 B.C.

- Beginning of widespread use of iron technology
- Migration of Tocharian-speakers into the Tarim Basin
- Earliest mummies of Tarim Basin (Ur David and Beauty of Loulan)
- Spread of cavalry across Eurasian steppes
- Migration of Medes and Persians into western Iran
- Scythians dominate the Pontic-Caspian steppes
- Sacae dominate the central Asian steppes
- Sacae migrate into the Tarim Basin and upper valley of Yellow River
Cultural exchange between Iranian nomads and Chinese

Scythians compel Cimmerians to migrate across the Caucasus

Cimmerians invade Urartu, Phrygia, and the Assyrian Empire

Life and teachings of Mahavira Vardhamana, founder of Jainism

Cyrus I (559–530 B.C.) unites Iran and Transoxiana and conquers Asia Minor and Babylonia: birth of Persian (Achaemenid) Empire

King Cyrus slain by Massagetase north of the Jaxartes River (Syr Darya)

Life and teachings of Siddhartha Gautama, the Buddha

Reign of Darius I: consolidation of the Persian Empire

Scythian expedition of King Darius I of Persia

Founding of the Roman Republic

500–400 B.C. Period of Warring States in China (down to 221 B.C.)

Herodotus visits Olbia and receives reports about the Scythians
400–300 B.C. ................................. Alexander the Great conquers the Persian Empire

Alexander battles the nomadic Saca and Dahae across Jaxartes

Greco-Macedonian colonies founded in Bactria and Sogdia

Diadochoi: wars of successors and partition of Alexander’s empire

Chandragupta (322–298 B.C.) ends Macedonian rule in northern India

Foundation of Mauyran Empire (326–187 B.C.)

Seleucus I (312–281 B.C.) establishes Seleucid Empire (312–63 B.C.)

Hellenization of the Near East and expansion of the Silk Road

Genesis of Sarmartian tribes on the steppes between Volga and Ural rivers


Rome defeats Carthage in the First Punic War

Conversion of Ashoka to Buddhism

Diodotus of Upper Satrapies founds Greco-Bactrian kingdom
Third Buddhist Council: division of Buddhism into Theravada and Mayahana vehicles

Arsaces I (246–211 B.C.) founds Parthian kingdom

Unification of China by Qin Shi Huangdi (246–210 B.C.)

First Chinese empire under the Qin Dynasty (221–206 B.C.)

Building of the Great Wall to check the Xiongnu

Touman forges the Xiongnu confederacy on the eastern steppes

Rome defeats Carthage in the Second Punic War

Roman conquest of the Mediterranean world (201–31 B.C.)

Reign of Modu Chanyu (down to 174 B.C.): Xiongnu dominate eastern steppes

Emperor Gaozu (206–195 B.C.) founds Former (Western) Han Dynasty

200–100 B.C. Sarmatians subject Scythians and rule the Pontic-Caspian steppes

Sarmatians impose tribute on Greek cities of the Crimea
Battle of Magnesia: Romans defeat Seleucid King Antiochus III

Decline of Seleucid Empire and rise of Parthians

Reign of Mithridates I: expansion of Parthian kingdom

Gunchen Chanyu expands Xiongnu confederation

Yuezhi (Tocharians) driven by Xiongnu west into Ferghana

Yuezhi drive Sacae into Sogdiana and Bactria

Reign of Han Emperor Wudi

Mithridates I defeats and captures Seleucid king Demetrius II

Parthians conquer Media, Persia, and Mesopotamia

Sacae devastate Sogdiana and shatter the Greco-Bactrian kingdom

Sacae settle in Drangiana (Seistan; 140–120 B.C.)

Mission of Zhang Qian to the Yuezhi (Kushans) and Wusun

War between Han China and the Xiongnu
Expedition of Antiochus VII
Sidetes against Parthia

Tocharians subject the Greek cities
of Bactria (140–120 B.C.)

Phraates II of Parthia (138–128 B.C.)
defeats and slays Seleucus VII

Sacae and Tocharians invade Media
and defeat and slay Phraates II

Tocharians defeat and slay Parthian
king Artabanus I (128–124 B.C.)

Reign of Mithridates II (123–88 B.C.):
consolidation of Parthian Empire

Construction of Ctesiphon
on the Tigris River

Han armies secure Gansu and the
Tarim Basin (western regions)

Eudoxus of Cyzicus discovers use
of monsoons for sailing to India

Development of trade in the
Erthyrlean Sea (Indian Ocean)

War of the Heavenly Horses:
Li Guangli invades Sogdiana

Sogdians render tribute of horses
to Han Emperor Wudi
100 B.C.–1 A.D. ................................Roxolani migrate into eastern Rumanian steppes (Wallachia; down to 50 A.D.)

Iazyges migrate into eastern Hungarian steppes

Alans occupy Kuban and steppes north of the Caucasus

King Tigranes the Great of Armenia expels Parthians from Mesopotamia

Outbreak of Third Mithridatic War (74–63 B.C.)

L. Licinius Lucullus defeats Mithridates VI and secures Asia Minor

Battle of Tigranocerta: L. Licinius Lucullus defeats Tigranes the Great

Parthians subject Mesopotamia and Media Atropatene

Pompey the Great (Cn. Pompeius Magnus) imposes Roman suzerainty over Armenia

Pompey secures the Roman frontier on the upper Euphrates

Civil war on the eastern steppes: division into northern and southern Xiongnu
Battle of Carrhae: Parthians defeat M. Licinius Crassus

Abortive campaign of Mark Antony in Armenia and Media Atropatene

Octavian, hailed Augustus by the Senate, establishes the Roman Empire

Augustus imposes settlement on King Phraates IV

Return of Roman prisoners and standards of Carrhae

1–100 A.D. Wang Mang overthrows the Han Dynasty

Reforms in China and collapse of Chinese frontier policy

Reunification of the Xiongnu confederacy

Guangwu (25–57) founds Later (Eastern) Han Dynasty (25–220)

Accession of Kujula Kadphises (30–80): founding of Kushan Empire

Composition of the *Periplus Maris Erythraei*

War of the Armenian Succession; Rome opposes King Tiridates
Cn. Domitius Corbulo campaigns in Armenia

Settlement between Nero and King Vologeses I over Armenia

Roman governor Tib. Plautius Silvanus secures the lower Danube against the Roxolani and Dacians

Alans cross the Caucasus and ravage the Near East

Han general Bao Chao subjects the western regions (Tarim Basin)

Dissolution of the northern Xiongnu confederacy

Reign of Kushan emperor Vima Taktu

Reign of Kushan emperor Vima Kadphises (down to 127)

Extension of Kushan power into the Punjab

Introduction of Kushan gold currency to facilitate trade

Mission of Han envoy Gan Ying to Kushan Empire and Parthia

Gao Ying receives reports about Daqin (imperial Rome)
Emperor Trajan (98–117) wages the Parthian War

Roman legions capture and sack Ctesiphon, the Parthian capital

Trajan crowns Parthamasiris king of Parthia

Hadrian relinquishes Trajan’s conquests east of the Euphrates

Reign of Kushan emperor Kanishka I: height of Kushan Empire

Patronage of Iranian and Hindu gods and Buddhism

Arrian, Roman governor of Cappadocia, checks attack of Alans

Reign of Kushan emperor Huviskha

War of Marcus Aurelius against Parthia

Roman army sacks Seleucia ad Tigrim and Ctesiphon

Northern war of Marcus Aurelius against Germanic and Sarmatian tribes

Reign of Vasuveda I (down to 230): decline of Kushan Empire

War of Septimius Severus against Parthia
Roman army captures and sacks Ctesiphon

200–300

War of Caracalla against Parthia

Life and teachings of Mani, founder of Manichaeism

End of the Han Dynasty: political disunity in China

Era of Three Kingdoms (220–280): Wei, Shu, and Wu

Battle of Hormozgan: Shah Shapur defeats Parthian King Artabanus V

Shapur I (227–240) founds Neo-Persian (Sassanid) Empire

Reign of Sassanid Shah Ardashir I

Reforms of Kartir: codification of Zoroastrianism

War of Ardashir against Roman emperor Severus Alexander (222–235)

Reign of Sassanid Shah Shapur I

Shapur I invades Mesopotamia: first war against Rome (242–244)

Gordian III (238–244) marches east against Shapur I
Goths and Samartians raid Dacia and Danubian provinces of the Roman Empire

Death of Gordian III; accession of Philip I (244–249)

Philip I pays Shapur I 10,000 pounds of gold for peace

Battle of Abrittus: Goths defeat and slay Trajan Decius

Shapur I invades and sacks Syria: second war against Rome (253–254)

Shapur I invades Syria: third war against Rome (256–258)

Expedition of Valerian I (253–260) against Shapur I

Valerian I captured by Shapur I

Sassanid army ravages Mesopotamia, northern Syria, and eastern Asia Minor

Rally of eastern Roman army by Prince Odenathus of Palmyra (260–262)

Battle of Nassius: Claudius II Gothicus decisively defeats the Goths

Aurelian reunites the Roman Empire and secures frontiers
Aurelian withdraws Roman garrisons and colonists from Dacia

Emperor Wu (265–290) reunites China under the Jin Dynasty (280–420)

Accession of Diocletian (284–305): imperial reform and recovery

Foundation of the Dominate

Sassanid-Persian War: Caesar Galerius decisively defeats Shah Narses

Sassanid Shah Narses relinquishes strategic Mesopotamian provinces

300–400 .................................................. Conversion of Constantine I (306–337) to Christianity

Accession of Shah Shapur II (309–379)

Chandragupta I founds the Gupta Empire (219–550)

Constantine I campaigns against the Sarmatians and Goths

Constantine founds Constantinople (New Rome)

Yujiulu Muglu establishes the Rouran (Avar) confederacy (330–551)

First migrations of Turkish speakers into central Eurasian steppes
Shah Shapur II invades Mesopotamia and sacks Amida

Outbreak of Roman-Persian War (359–364)

Failure of the expedition of Julian II against Ctesiphon

Death of Julian II and accession of Jovian (363–364)

Jovian cedes Mesopotamian province to Shapur II

Shah Shapur II settles Hephthalites (White Huns) in Bactria

Hephthalites, as Sassanid allies, secure northeastern frontier (375–425)

Huns defeat Gothic King Ermanaric, who commits suicide

Huns subject Goths and Alans on the Pontic-Caspian steppes

Goths received as federates by Roman emperor Valens (364–378)

Battle of Adrianople: Goths defeat and slay Valens

Accession of Theodosius I, the Great (379–395)
Rome cedes Armenia to the Sassanid Empire

Uldin, king of the Huns (down to 414)

Theodosius I declares Nicene Christianity as the empire’s official faith

Death of Theodosius I: division of western and eastern Roman empires

Honorius, western Roman emperor (395–423)

Arcadius, eastern Roman emperor (395–408)

Huns cross the Dariel Pass and invade the Sassanid Empire (395–396)

Daowu (398–409), ruler of the Tuoba, founds northern Wei Dynasty (398–535)

400–500............................... Migration of Visigoths under Alaric into Italy

Germanic tribes migrate into Gaul and Spain: collapse of the Rhine frontier

Huns migrate into Pannonia: collapse of the middle Danube frontier

Accession of Theodosius II, eastern Roman emperor (408–450)

Goths sack Rome
Construction of the Theodosius Walls of Constantinople

Reigns of Rugila (420–434) and Octar (420–430) over the Huns

Death of Jin emperor Gong (419–420): disunity in China (420–581)

Ruglia raids into Thrace and receives subsidy to withdraw

Reign of Taiwu, emperor of the northern Wei Dynasty

Construction of colossal Buddhas at Yungang Caves

Accession of Valentinian III as western Roman emperor (425–455)

Aetlius, patrician and magister militum, directs western Roman policy

Third Ecumenical Council at Ephesus: condemnation of Nestorianism

Nestorian Christians establish churches in Sassanid Babylonia

Accession of Attila (434–453) and Bleda (434–445) as kings of the Huns

Attila forges a barbarian empire from the Rhine to the Volga
Attila invades Thrace and extorts the Treaty of Margus

Annual subsidy (700 pounds of gold) paid by Theodosius II

Shah Yazdegerd II wages frontier wars against the Hephthalites

Huns annihilate Burgundians at Worms; origins of the legend of the Nieblungs

Attila murders Bleda: Attila sole king of the Huns

Attila devastates the Balkan provinces of the eastern Roman Empire

Treaty of Anatolus: Attila ends the Roman frontier on the lower Danube

Accession of Marcian, eastern Roman emperor (450–457)

Reform of eastern Roman army and end of subsidies to Attila

Marriage proposal of Honoria to Attila rejected by the western court

Attila declares war on the western Roman Empire

Battle of Chalons: Aetius checks Attila

Invasion of northern Italy by Attila
Death of Attila: civil war and rebellion within the Hun Empire

Battle of Nedao: collapse of the Hun Empire

Hephthalites defeat, capture, and ransom Shah Peroz (457–484)

Odoacer deposes last western Roman emperor, Romulus Augustulus (475–476)

End of the western Roman Empire

Hephthalites defeat and slay Shah Peroz and overrun Transoxiana

Wei emperor Xiaowen (471–499) locates his court at Luoyang

Sinification of the northern Wei Dynasty

Hephthalites subject northern India and the Tarim Basin (down to 513)

500–550 Construction of the first colossal Buddha at Bamiyan

Outbreak of Persian–Roman War (526–532)

Accession of Roman emperor Justinian (527–565)

Battle of Daras: Belisarius defeats the Persian army
Accession of Shah Khursau I (521–570)

Perpetual peace between Justinian and Shah Khurau I

Justinian reconquers North Africa, Italy, and southern Spain

550–600

Bumin overthrows rule of the Rouran (Avar) khagans

Turks expel Avars and occupy the Orkhon valley

Establishment of the Gök Turk khaganate under the Ashina clan

Istami (552–581), brother of Bumin and yabgu of the western Gök Turks, pursues the Avars and secures the central and western Eurasian steppes to the Volga

Accession of Mukan as khagan of the Gök Turks

Gök Turks subject Tocharian cities of the Tarim Basin and control the Silk Road

Construction of the second colossal Buddha at Bamiyan

Istami, yabgu of the western Turks, and Shah Khosrow attack the Hephthalites

Turks subject Transoxiana
Avars flee into the Pontic-Caspian steppes

Avar khagan Bayan and Lombard king Albion (560–572) defeat the Gepidae

Avars occupy the Pannonian grasslands

Khagan Bayan (560–602) rules the steppes from the Danube to the Don

Avars raid the Byzantine Balkan provinces

Beginning of migration of Slavs into the Balkans

Justin II (565–578) receives a delegation of the western Turks

Lombards migrate into northern Italy

Justin rejects annual subsidy to Khosrow I

Outbreak of Roman–Persian War (572–590)

Tiberius II (578–582) allies with the Avars; collapse of Byzantine-Turkish alliance; western Turks attack Byzantine cities in the Crimea

Accession of Tardush as second yabgu of the western Turks
Emperor Wen (581–604) unites China and establishes the Sui Dynasty (581–618)

Death of Taspar Khagan: civil war between Ishbara Khagan and Apa Khagan

Tardush asserts de facto independence of the western Turks (On Ok, “Ten Arrows”)

Division of the Gök Turks into eastern and western Turkish khaganates

First Persian-Turkish war over Transoxiana

Vaharam Chobin defeats the Western Turks

Vaharam Chobin usurps the Sassanid throne

Khosrow II flees to Constantinople and receives an army from Maurice Tiberius

Khosrow II (591–626) occupies Ctesiphon and restores Sassanid rule

Peace between the Byzantine Empire and Sassanid Persia

Outbreak of civil war in Turk khaganate
600–650

Phocas (602–610) overthrows and murders Maurice Tiberius

Shapur II invades Roman Mesopotamia and northern Syria

Outbreak of the Byzantine–Persian War (602–626)

Accession of Sui emperor Yang (604–617)

Reign of Harsha-Vardhan: unification of northern India

Accession of Shibi Khan to eastern (Gök) Turk khaganate

Accession of Heraclius (610–641) as Byzantine emperor

Shibi Khan defeats Sui emperor Yang at Yanmen (Shanxi)

Gök Turks raid the northern frontiers of China

Accession of Tong yabgu khagan (Ziebel) of western Turks (On Ok)

Khazars emerge as dominant Ashina tribe of On Ok

Emperor Gaozu imposes unity in China and founds the Tang Dynasty (618–907)
Second Persian–Turkish war; Tong yabgu khagan raids to Isfahan

Muhammad (575–632) flees from Mecca to Medina (Hegira)

Heraclius launches his eastern campaigns against Persia (622–626)

Alliance of Heraclius and Tong yabgu khagan against Shah Khosrow II

Ilig, khagan of eastern Turks, defeats Tang emperor Taizong at Xuanwu Gate

Turks raid northern China to Wei River

Avars and Persians besiege Constantinople

Accession of Tang emperor Taizong (626–649)

Turks under Böri Shad cross the Derbent Gates and devastate Azerbaijan

Tang emperor Taizong promotes rebellions within the eastern Turkish khaganate

Campaign of Li Jing smashes the power of the eastern Turkish khaganate

Gök Turks submit to Tang emperor Taizong
Pilgrimage of Buddhist monk Xuanzang to central Asia and India

Khazars assert domination over the western Turkish tribes (down to 670)

Bulgars expel Avars from the steppes between the Don and Dnieper rivers

Death of Muhammad: election of Caliph Abu Bakr (632–634)

Death of Abu Bakr: election of Caliph Umar I (634–644)

Battle of the Yarmuk: Arabic conquest of Syria

Battle of Kadisiya: Arabs conquer Iraq and western Iran (639–642)

Arabs conquer Egypt

Death of Heraclius; accession of Constans II (641–668) as Byzantine emperor

Fragmenting of the western Turkish khaganate

Arabs conquer Cyrenaica and Tripolitana

Election of Caliph Uthman (644–656)

650–700................................. Khazars repel first Arabic invasion north of the Caucasus
Timeline

Accession of Tang emperor Gaozong (650–683)

Death of Shah Yazdgerd III (632–651): end of Sassanid Empire

Arab armies reach Merv and secure Oxus River as a frontier

Mutiny of Arab army in Egypt: Murder of Caliph Uthman

Outbreak of Muslim civil war between Ali and Muawiya

Tang emperor Gaozong imposes hegemony over western Turks

Turgesh emerge as leading tribe of western Turks

Arabs raid Mawarannahr (Transoxiana)

Assassination of Ali; Muawiya (661–680) establishes Umayyad caliphate at Damascus

Muwaiya (661–680) establishes Umayyad caliphate at Damascus

Khagan Busir Glavan (c. 670–715) consolidates the Khazar Empire

Succession of Constantine IV (668–685) as Byzantine emperor

Abraham intercedes for his children

Khagan Busir Glavan (c. 670–715) consolidates the Khazar Empire

Arabs raid Mawarannahr (Transoxiana)
Ziyad ibn Abihi (670–673),
governor of Iraq, fortifies Merv

Tribal armies settled in Khurasan

First Arabic siege of Constantinople

First revolt of eastern Turks under
Ashina Nishu Beg against Tang rule

Tang general Pei Xingjian
crushes Turkish rebels

Pei Xingjian crushes second Turkish
revolt under Ashinde Wenfu and Ashina
khagan Funian; public execution
of Turkish nobility at Chang’an

Khan Asparuch (681–702) settles
Bulgars in Moesia south of the Danube

Third Turkish revolt under Ashina
Kutlag against Tang rule

Kutlag declared Ilterish khagan
(682–694); end of Tang hegemony

Reestablishment of eastern
Turkish khaganate

Accession of Justinian II
(685–695) as Byzantine emperor

Accession of Caliph Abd
al-Malik (695–705)
Timeline

Creation of Arabic-Muslim administration in Umayyad caliphate

Accession of Kapagan (694–716) to eastern khaganate

Overthrow and exile of Justinian II to Cherson

Battle of Bolchu: Kapagan khagan imposes hegemony over the western Turks

Turks occupy Transoxiana in alliance with Sogdian cities against Arabs

Arab capture of Carthage

700–750 Qutaibah bin Muslim, governor of Merv

Arab conquest of Transoxiana

Marriage alliance between Justinian II and Khazar khagan Busir Glavan

Restoration of Justinian II (705–711) at Constantinople

Khan Tervel of the Bulgars (702–705) concludes a treaty with Justinian II

Dowager Empress Wu directs Tang policy (705–712)

Qutaybah ibn Muslim (705–715) appointed Arab governor of Khurasan
Qutaybah initiates Arab conquest of Transoxiana

Qutaybah captures Bukhara: forced conversions to Islam

Arab conquest of Spain (711–713)

Arab conquest of the Sind (711–712)

Accession of Tang emperor Xuanzong (712–756)

Byzantine–Bulgar treaty: annual tribute to Bulgars and frontiers confirmed

Tokuz Oghuz Turks, backed by Tang court, defeat and slay Kapagahan khagan

Kul Tigin and Tonyukuk impose Bilge as khagan of the eastern Turks

Suluk, khan of Turgesh (716–738), asserts power over western Turks

Accession of Leo III (717–741), who founds the Isaurian Dynasty

Byzantine-Khazar alliance against the Umayyad caliphate

Second Arabic siege of Constantinople

Erection of Turkish monumental inscription of Tonyukuk in the Orkhon valley
Arab governor al-Karashi massacres population of Khujand, Ferghana

General rising of Sogdian cities and Turkish tribes in Transoxiana

Suluk khagan of Turgesh defeats Arab expedition (“day of thirst”)

Suluk khagan defeats second Arab expedition into Transoxiana

Byzantine-Khazar marriage alliance

Constantine V marries Chichek, daughter of Bihar Khagan of the Khazars

Death of Bilge Khagan; civil wars in eastern Turkish khaganate

Monumental inscriptions in Orkhon valley to Bilge and brother Kül Tigin

Arab army under Marwan defeats Khazars and occupies Balanjar

Khazars compelled to convert to Islam

Assassination of Suluk; collapse of Turkish resistance to Arabs in Transoxiana

Nasr ibn Sayyar, Arab governor of Khurasan (738–748), secures Transoxiana
Khazar Khagan Bulan renounces Islam in favor of Judaism

Foundation of new Khazar capital at Atil on the lower Volga

Rebellion of Uighurs and Karluks: overthrow of eastern Turkish khaganate

Accession of Umayyad caliph Marwan II (744–750)

Kurluk Bilge proclaimed first khagan of the Uighurs

Karluks, vassals of Kurluk Bilge, secure the central Eurasian steppes

Uighur khagan Bayanchur Khan founds capital of Baghlasun (Ordu Balik)

Outbreak of rebellion of Arab army in Khurasan against Caliph Marwan II

750–800 Battle of the Greater Zab: as-Saffrah defeats Caliph Marwan II

End of Umayyad caliphate

As-Saffrah (750–756) establishes the Abbasid caliphate

Battle of Talas: Arab-Karluk army defeats Tang army

Chinese garrisons withdrawn from the Tarim Basin
Outbreak of An Lushan Rebellion

Uighur khagan Bayanchur Khan supports Tang court against rebels

Abd ar-Rahman (756–788) proclaims Umayyad emirate of Cordova

Byzantine emperor wars against Bulgars

Caliph al-Mansur founds Baghdad, capital of Abbasid caliphate

Uighur khagan Bogu converts to Manichaeism

Karluks defeat Turgesh and reorganize the On Ok confederacy

Karluks dominate central Eurasian steppes as vassals of Uighur khagans

Emergence of Oghuz (Ghuzz) Turks on the steppes between the Aral and Caspian seas

Accession of Caliph Harun ar-Raschid (786–809): height of Abbasid caliphate

Charlemagne, king of the Franks, smashes the Avar khanate

800–850....................................................... Coronation of Charlemagne as Holy Roman Emperor (800–814)

Magyars migrate into the Pontic-Caspian steppes (c. 800–830)
Accession of Krum, khan of the Bulgars (802–813)

Outbreak of Abbasid civil war between al-Amin and al-Mamun (809–813)

Formation of Turkish bodyguard (haras)

Bulgar khan Krum defeats and slays Byzantine emperor Nicephorus I at Pliska

Tahir ibn al-Husayn captures Baghdad: end of Abbasid civil war

Accession of Caliph al-Mamun (813–833)

Khan Krum defeats Emperor Michael I at Versinicia

Bulgars devastate the hinterland of Constantinople

Accession of Leo V (813–820): extension of Theodosian Walls

Peace between Leo V and the Bulgar khan Omurtag (814–831)

“Great Fence of Bulgaria”

Ahad obm Asad I appointed Abbasid governor of Ferghana (819–864)

Foundation of the Samanid Dynasty (819–1005)
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Event</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>821–873</td>
<td>Tahirid emirs rule Khurasan and Transoxiana</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Uighur-Tibetan clash for control of the Tarim Basin</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>836–892</td>
<td>Turkish bodyguard dominates Abbasid court</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Caliph al-Mutasim relocates the Abbasid capital to Samara</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>930–895</td>
<td>Magyars consolidate power in the steppes west of the Don</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Pechenegs migrate west from the central Eurasian steppes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>821–873</td>
<td>Caliph al-Mamun appoints Tahir ibn al-Husayn in Khurasan</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Caliph al-Mutasim invades Byzantine Asia Minor and sacks Amorium</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Emperor Theophilus wins tactical victory over Turks at Dazimon</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Khazars, with Byzantine assistance, fortify the fortress Sarkel against Magyars</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Karluk and Krygyz sack Baghlasun: end of Uighur khaganate</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Uighurs migrate into the Tarim Basin</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Beginning of migrations of Oghuz Turks westward (840–925)

Karakhanids dominate central Eurasian steppes (840–1137)

850–900................................. Migration of Pechenegs to steppes west of the Don River

Rurik (Erik) founds Holmgard (Novgorod) as a Rus settlement

First Rus attack on Constantinople

Saint Cyril fails to convert the Khazars to Orthodox Christianity

Khan Boris of the Bulgars (852–889) converts to Orthodox Christianity

Formation of the kingdom of Bulgaria

Tulunid emirs rule over Egypt (down to 905)

Ahmad ibn Asad ibn Saman appointed emir of Transoxiana (875–886)

Samanid emirs create the high Persian culture of eastern Islam (875–1005)

Accession of Oleg (Helgi) as prince of the Rus (c. 880–912)

Oleg transfers capital to Kiev

Magyars settle on Pannonian grasslands
Accession of Tsar Symeon of Bulgaria (893–927)

Outbreak of Symeon’s first war against Byzantium (894–897)

Magyars migrate into Pannonian steppes (Hungary)

Magyars raid into western Europe (896–955)

**900–950**

Death of Emperor Li Zhu (904–909): end of the Tang Dynasty

Period of disunity: Five Dynasties and Ten Kingdoms (907–980)

Second Rus attack on Constantinople

Abaoji unites the Khitans

Ubaydallah al-Mahdi (909–934) proclaims the Fatimid caliphate in North Africa

Accession of Byzantine emperor Constantine VII (913–959)

Symeon wages second war against Byzantium (913–924)

Abaoji subjects 16 prefectures and seizes power of northern China
Abaoji takes Chinese throne name Taizu (916–926), establishing the Liao Dynasty

Conversion of Volga Bulgars to Islam

Mission of Ibn Fadlan to the Bulgars and Khazars

Reign of Khitan emperor Yelü Deguangr (Taizong)

Ikhshidid emirs rule Egypt and Syria

Accession of Satuk Boghra Khan (940–955)

Satuk Boghra Khan promotes Islam among the Karakhanid Turks

Third Rus attack on Constantinople

Khitans conquer Kaifeng

Fourth Rus attack on Constantinople

950–1000................................. Li Xixing (954–967) establishes the Xi Xia kingdom in the Gansu Corridor

Battle of the Lech: Otto I of Germany defeats the Hungarians

Zhao Kuangyin seizes power in Kaifeng as emperor Taizu (960–976)

Taizu establishes Northern Song Dynasty (960–1127)
Taizu unites southern China into a Neo-Confucian state

Alp Tigin (961–975) takes over the town of Ghazna

 Establishment of the Samanid emirate

Prince Sviatoslav of Kiev (965–967) and Pechenegs sack Atil

Collapse of the Khazar khaganate

Pechenegs dominate the Pontic-Caspian steppes

Prince Sviatoslav of Kiev invades Bulgaria (967–971)

Reign of Khitan emperor Yelü Xian (Jingzong; 969–982)

Sinification of Khitan court

Fatimid army occupies Egypt

Prince Sviatoslav overruns Bulgaria and attacks Byzantium

Battle of Dorostolum: Byzantine emperor John I defeats Prince Sviatoslav

Byzantine annexation of eastern Bulgaria
Pechenegs defeat and slay Prince Sviatoslav on the Dnieper River

Fatimid al-Mu’izz transfers the capital to Cairo

Accession of Byzantine emperor Basil II (976–1025)

Height of Byzantine Empire under the Macedonian Dynasty

Accession of Song emperor Taizong (976–997)

Emergence of the Song bureaucratic state and examination system

Accession of the Samind emir Nuh II (976–997)

Sebüktigin (977–997) establishes the Ghaznavid emirate (977–1163)

Reign of Khitan emperor Yelü Longxu (Shengzong; down to 1031)

Migration of Seljuk Turks to the steppes south of Khwarazm

Sebüktigin raids Kabul and Punjab—domains of the Shahi Jayapala (964–1001)

Battle of Langhan: Sebüktigin defeats Shahi Jayapala
Conversion of Prince Vladimir of Kiev (980–1015) to Orthodox Christianity

Foundation of Orthodox Russia

Jiqian of the Xi Xia ends vassalage to Song and Liao emperors

Sebüktigin and Tafgach Bughra Khan of the western Karakhanids agreed to partition the Samanid emirate

Mahmud Ghaznavi (998–1030) succeeds to the Ghaznavid emirate

Karakhanids occupy Bukhara; Samanid court flees to Tabaristan (999–1005)

Collapse of the Samanid emirate; Karakhanids control Transoxiana

1000–1050 Conversion of King Stephen of Hungary (997–1036) to Latin Christianity

Battle of Peshawar: Mahmud Ghaznavi annihilates army of Shahi Jayapala

Mahmud raids across the Punjab and Doab (1001–1024)

Treaty of Chauyuan: Song emperor Zhenzong (997–1022) recognizes Khitan control of the 16 prefectures of north China

Mahmud Ghaznavi and Karakhanids clash along the lower Oxus River
Mahmud Ghaznavi occupies Khwarazm

Mahmud Ghaznavi sacks Somnath, the sanctuary of Shiva

Tughril Bey and Chagri settle near Bukhara in Karakhanid service

Mahmud Ghaznavi secures Khurasan and northern Iran

Mahmud Ghaznavi settles Seljuk Turks under Tughril Bey in Khurasan

Reign of Yuanhao of the Xi Xia under the Chinese imperial name Jingzong

Promotion of Buddhism in Xi Xia domains

Tughril Bey declared sultan at Nishapur

Tughril Bey defeats Ghaznavid sultan Masud I near Merv

Seljuk Turks conquer cities of northern Iran (1040–1055)

1050–1100 Tughril Bey and Seljuk Turks enter Baghdad

Tughril Bey restores the Abbasid caliphate under Seljuk protection

End of the Macedonian Dynasty at Constantinople
Clash of civil and military aristocracies: decline of Byzantine power

Accession of Alp Arslan (1063–1072) as Seljuk sultan

Alp Arslan directs raids against Byzantine and Fatimid empires (1063–1071)

Accession of Byzantine emperor Romanus IV (1068–1072)

Battle of Manzikert: Seljuk sultan Alp-Arslan defeats Emperor Romanus IV

Seljuk Turks overrun Byzantine Asia Minor (1071–1081)

Malik Danishmend (1071–1084) seizes Niksar as Danishmend emir

Cumans migrate west, attacking the Pechenegs

Accession of Malik Shah (1072–1092) as Seljuk sultan

Sulayman (1077–1086) seizes Konya and is proclaimed sultan of Rûm

Accession of King Ladislaus of Hungary (1077–1095)

Hungarian–Cuman border wars
Accession of Byzantine emperor Alexius I Comnenus (1081–1118)

Establishment of Comnenian Dynasty (1081–1185)

Pechenegs migrate into Byzantine Empire

Battle of Levounion: Emperor Alexius I and the Cumans destroy the Pechenegs

First Crusade

Battle of Dorylaeum: First Crusade defeats Sultan Kilij Arslan I of Konya

First Crusade captures Antioch

First Crusade captures Jerusalem

1100–1150

Accession of Vladimir Monomakh (1113–1125) of Kiev

Russian–Cuman wars

Wanyan Aguda (1115–1123) unites the Jurchens in Manchuria

Jurchen rebellion against the Liao (Khitan) emperor Tianzuo (1101–1125)

Wanyan Aguda assumes Chinese throne name Taizu of the Jin Dynasty
Alliance of the Sea: Wanyan Aguda and Song emperor Huizong (1100–1125) agree to partition the Khitan Empire

Wanyan Aguda conquers the 16 prefectures of China (1121–1123)

Accession of Jurchen emperor Wanyan Sheng (1123–1135)

Wanyan Sheng ends the Khitan (Liao) Empire

Yelü Dashi (1124–1143) and the Kara-Khitans flee to central Eurasian steppes

Yelü Dashi establishes Kara-Khitan khaganate

Wanyan Sheng conquers from Song the lower Yellow River valley (1125–1127)

Wanyan Aguda captures Kiafeng, the Song capital

Gaozong (1127–1162) relocates the Song capital to Lin’an (modern Hangzhou)

Beginning of the Southern Song Dynasty (1127–1279)

Yelü Dashi and the Kara-Khitans conquer cities of the Tarim Basin
Treaty of Shaoxing:
Song emperor Gaozong acknowledges loss of north China

Jurchen (Jin) Empire supreme in north China and eastern Eurasian steppes

Battle of Qatwan: Yelü Dashi defeats Seljuk sultan Ahmed Sanjar

Kara-Khitans conquer Transoxiana

First reports of legendary Prester John in western Europe

1150–1200............................... Collapse of the great Seljuk sultanate

Abbasid caliph al-Muqtadi asserts independence in Iraq

Birth of Temujin (future Genghis Khan)

Tatars poison Yesugei, father of Temujin

Temujin; his mother, Hoelun; and siblings live in exile

Ghiyath-ad-Din seizes Ghaznva and establishes the Ghurid sultanate

Muhammad Ghor as emir directs Ghurid attacks into India (1173–1192)

Battle of Myricoephalon: Sultan Kilij Arslan II defeats Emperor Manuel I
Decline of Byzantine power in Asia Minor

Enslavement and escape of Temujin

Temujin, as ally of Toghrul Khan of the Keraits, wars against the Merkits

Jamukha and Temujin swear brotherhood and battle the Merkits

Prithviraj III (1149–1192) of the Chauhan kingdom builds the capital at Delhi

Marriage of Temujin and Börte, birth of Jochi

Clashes between Jamukha and Temujin; Jamukha allies with the Merkits and Naimans

Jin emperor Zhangzong (1189–1208) promotes tribal wars among the Mongols

Expedition of Prince Igor of Novgorod-Seversk against the Cumans

Second Battle of Tarain: Muhammad Ghuri defeats Prithviraj III

Muhammad Ghuri occupies Delhi

Qutb ud-din Aybak directs Ghurid conquest
Aybak orders the construction of the Quwwatt-ul Islam mosque complex

Bakhtiyar Khilji, Ghurid general, sacks Nalanda: end of the Pala kingdom

Aybak orders the construction of the Qutb Minar

1200–1250 Temujin defeats Jamukha, Naimans, and Merkits near Khingan Mountains

Muhammad Ghori declared sultan (1202–1206)

Toghrul Khan allies with Jamukha

Toghrul Khan and Jamukha defeat Temujin at the Battle of Baljuna

Temujin rallies Mongols and the kurultai declare war on Jamukha

Temujin wins decisive victory near Karakorum over Jamukha and Toghrul Khan

Temujin imposes his authority over the eastern Eurasian steppes

Kuchlug, prince of Naimans, flees to Kara-Khitan Gurkhan Mozhu (1178–1211)

Fourth Crusade sacks Constantinople and partitions the Byzantine Empire
Accession of Sultan Kay-Khusraw I (1204–1210) of Konya (Rûm)

Theodore I founds the Byzantine splinter empire at Nicaea

Seljuk conquest of Anatolia: subjection of Sivas and Kayseri

The *kurultai* declares Temujin Genghis Khan

Genghis Khan refuses homage to the Jin emperor Zhangzong (1189–1208)

Aybak establishes the slave sultanate of Delhi (1206–1290)

Genghis Khan campaigns against Xiangzong of the Xi Xia (1207–1209)

Birth of Jalal-ud-din Rumi, the Mevlana (1207–1273)

Mongol siege of Ningxia; submission of Xiangzong

Accession of Iltutmish (1210–1236) as sultan of Delhi

Genghis Khan campaigns against the Jin Empire

Mongol army conquers the 16 prefectures of north China (1211–1214)
Muhammad Shah of Khwarazm defeats Gurkhan Mozhu and takes Transoxiana

Kuchlug overthrows Mozhu and rules the Kara-Khitans

Genghis Khan besieges Zhongdu (future Beijing)

Jin emperor Xuanzong (1213–1224) relocates his capital to Kaifeng

Mongol army captures and sacks Zhongdu

Family of Rumi migrates from Balkh to Baghdad

Mongol army under Jebe defeats Kuchlug and ends Kara-Khitan khanate

Mongol conquest of Tarim Basin and central Eurasian steppes

Muhammad Shan of Khwarazm provokes war with Genghis Khan

Genghis Khan wages campaign against Muhammad Shah (1219–1220)

Mongol conquest of Transoxiana; flight of Muhammad Shah

Genghis Khan sacks Bukhara and Samarkand

Death of Muhammad Shah in exile
Sübetei and Jebe command Mongol western expedition (1220–1223)

Siege of Urgench: quarrel between Jochi and Chagatai

Genghis Khan invades Khurasan; Mongols sack Merv and Nishapur

Jalal al-Din rallies Khwarazmian forces in India

Sübetei and Jebe ravage Armenia and Georgia

Genghis Khan invades India and defeats Jalal al-Din near Multan

Meeting of Genghis Khan and Daoist sage Qiu Chuji

Genghis Khan orders Mongol rule in Khurasan and Transoxiana

Sübetei and Jebe cross the Derbent Pass and invade the Pontic-Caspian steppes

Genghis Khan withdraws to Mongolia

Sübetei and Jebe defeat the Russian-Cuman army at the Battle of Kalka

Family of Rumi settles in Karaman, Anatolia

Death of Jochi; Batu assigned the Western ulus (future Golden Horde)
Death of Genghis Khan: regency and succession crisis (1227–1229)

Partition of Mongol Empire among Ögödei, Chagatai, and Batu

Family of Rumi settles in Konya and establishes medrese

Ögödei (1229–1241) elected as Great Khan by kurultai

Ögödei initiates the conquest of the Jin Empire (1229–1235)

Rumi succeeds to family medrese at Konya

Rumi reorganizes Maulawiyah order (whirling deverishes)

Rumi hailed Mevlana

Beginning of the Islamization of Anatolia

Ögödei and Song emperor Ningzong (1194–1224) agree to partition the Jin Empire

Mongols invade Sichaun (Szechwan)

Ögödei ends the Jin Empire

The kurultai approves the conquest of the west by Batu
Batu subdues the Kipchak Turks and secures the lower Volga steppes as his base

Batu subdues the Volga Bulgars

Accession of Sultana Radiyya Begum (1236–1240) at Delhi

Civil wars in the Delhi sultanate

Accession of Sultan Kaykubad (1219–1236) of Konya

Height of the sultanate of Konya

Batu invades Russia and sacks Ryazan and Moscow

Kay-Khusraw II (1237–1246) seizes the throne of the sultan of Konya

Kay-Khusraw II seeks to subdue the Turkmen tribes of eastern Anatolia

Batu captures and sacks Vladimir-Suzdal

Batu defeats and slays Yuri II of Vladimir-Suzdal (1212–1238) at the Sit River

Mongol army devastates southern Russia, sacking Rostov and Yaroslavl

Mongol army subdues the Cumans and ravages the Crimea (1238–1239)
Turkish tribes rebel under Baba Ishak (1239–1242) against Kay-Khusraw II

Turkish rebels appeal to Mongol general Baiju in Iran

Batu captures and sacks Kiev; Batu declares war against King Bela IV of Hungary

Mongol army invades Tibet; sack of Rwa-sgeng and submission of Tibetans

Batu campaigns against Poland and Hungary

Battle of Chmielik: Mongols defeat Duke Boleslav V of Cracow (1243–1279)

Battle of Liegnitz: Mongols annihilate the army of Duke Henry II of Silesia

Battle of Mohi: Batu defeats King Bela IV of Hungary

Mongols ravage Hungary and Croatia and withdraw to lower Volga

Mongols invade northern India and sack Lahore

Death of Great Khan Ögödei and regency of Töregene (1241–1246)

Baiju and the Mongol army in Iran invade eastern Anatolia
Timeline

Battle of Köse Dağ: Mongol general Baiju defeats Sultan Kay-Khusraw II

Sultanate of Konya submits to Mongol rule

Election of Güyük as Great Khan (1246–1248)

Mission of papal envoy Giovanni da Plan del Carpini (1246–1247)

Death of Great Khan Güyük: succession crisis

Regency of Sorghaghtani Beki, widow of Tolui (1248–1251)

1250–1300

Möngke elected by kurultai as Great Khan

Marco, Niccolo, and Matteo Polo journey to court of Kublai Khan (1251–1257)

Kublai Khan, as deputy of Möngke, conquers the Dali kingdom

King Louis IX of France sends William of Rubruck as envoy to Khan Möngke

Mongol conquest of Yunnan and Annan (North Vietnam)

Hulagu and Mongol army invade Iran
Mongol capture and destruction of Alamut, stronghold of the Assassins

Berke succeeds to the Western ulus (Golden Horde)

Western Mongols embrace Islam

Möngke and Kublai Khan invade Song China

Hulagu sacks Baghdad: end of the Abbasid caliphate

Hulagu conquers the al-Jazirah and the Levant

Submissions of Prince Bohemond VI of Antioch and Armenian King Hethoum I

Death of Great Khan Möngke; Arigh Böke elected Great Khan by kurultai

Mongol army in China acclaims Kublai Khan Great Khan

Outbreak of civil war in the Mongol Empire (1260–1263)

Kublai Khan appoints Drogön Chögyal Phagpa “minister of Tibet”

Drogön Chögyal Phagpa commissioned to create script for Mongolians

Hulagu sacks Aleppo and Damascus
Hulagu retires from Syria to Azerbaijan

Battle of Ain Jalut: Mamluk sultan Qutuz defeats Mongol army under Kitbuka

Baybars (1260–1277) murders Qutuz and is proclaimed Mamluk sultan

Alliance of Khan Berke and Sultan Baybars against Hulagu

Kublai Khan invests Hulagu with the ilkhanate in Iran and Transoxiana

Battle of Shimultai: Kublai Khan decisively defeats Arigh Böke

Surrender of Arigh Böke; end of Mongol civil war

Kublai Khan reorders the Mongol Empire (1263–1268)

Death of Hulagu: accession of Ilkhan Abaqa (1265–1282)

Kublai Khan recognizes Barak (1266–1271) as Chagataid Khan

War between Barak and Kaidu over central Asia (1266–1267)

Kaidu, grandson of Ögödei, seizes power in the Altai Mountains
Barak and Ilkhan Aqaba (1265–1282) battle for Transoxiana

Kublai Khan invades Song China

Desultory fighting along the Yangtze River (1268–1273)

Mongols besiege fortresses at Xianyang and Fengcheng

Kublai Khan claims the mandate of heaven and takes the Chinese throne name Shizu

Establishment of the Yuan Dynasty (1271–1368)

Mongols capture Fengcheng

Fall of Xianyang: collapse of Song resistance (1273–1275)

First Mongol expedition against Japan

Surrender of Song court at the capital of Linan (Hangzhou)

Battle of Yamen: defeat of the Song army

Second Mongol expedition against Japan
Appointment of Bolad Aqa as ilkhanate fiscal minister (1285–1313)

Jalal-ad-Din Firuz Shah II (1290–1296) overthrows the slave sultanate

Establishment of the Khalji sultans of Delhi

Departure of Marco, Niccole, and Matteo Polo to ilkhanate court

Mongol invasion of Java (1292–1293)

Death of Kublai Khan; Temür Khan (1294–1307) succeeds as Great Khan

Temür Khan renounces Yuan control over the Tarim basin

Ilkhan Mahmud Ghazan (1205–1304) coverts to Islam

Marco, Niccole, and Matteo Polo reach Venice

Accession of Ala-ad-Din Muhammad Shah I (1296–1316)

Height of the Khalji sultanate of Delhi

Marco Polo, in prison, dictates *Livres des merveilles du monde*

**1300–1350.................................** Malik Kafir commands Khalji raid into southern India
Accession of Ilkhan Abu Sa’id (1317–1335)

Transformation of ilkhanate into a Muslim state

Tughluq seizes power in Delhi; Ghiyath-ad-Din Tughluq Shah (1320–1325)

Establishment of the Tughluq sultanate of Delhi (1320–1414)

Khan Tamashinin (1226–1334) succeeds to Chagataid khanate

Khan Tamashinin embraces Islam

Death of Ilkhan Abu Sa’id (1317–1335), last effective ilkhan of Iran

Fragmenting and collapse of the ilkhanate of Iran (1335–1353)

Birth of Tamerlane (Timur)

Death of Khan Qazan (1343–1346), last effective Chagataid khan

Division of Chagataid khanate

Tribal warfare on the central Eurasian steppes and Transoxiana (1347–1370)

1350–1400 Division of the western Mongol ulus into the White and Blue Hordes
Hongwu (1368–1396) captures Dadu and expels Khan Toghan Temür from China

End of Mongol rule (Yuan Dynasty) in China

Emperor Hongwu establishes the Ming Dynasty (1368–1644)

Tamerlane crowned Great Emir at Samarkand

Tamerlane subjects Khwarazm

Tamerlane campaigns in Moghulistan (Chagataid central Asia)

Civil war on the western Eurasian Steppes (White and Blue Hordes)

Khan Urus expels Tokhtamish

Tokhtamish flees Saray and is received by Tamerlane

Tokhatmish, with Tamerlane’s assistance, crowned khan of the White Horde

Tokhatmish unites White and Blue Hordes into the Golden Horde

Tamerlane sacks the city of Urganch in Khwarazm
Battle of Kulikovo Field: Grand Prince Dmitri Ivanovich (1359–1389) annihilates a Mongol army

Tokhatmish is received as khan of the western Mongol *ulus* (Golden Horde)

Tamerlane subjects Khurasan and Afghanistan

Tokhatmish sacks Moscow and Ryazan: Russian princes submit to Tokhatmish

Tamerlane launches campaign into Seistan and Kandahar (1383–1386)

Tamerlane sacks Herat

Tokhatmish declares war against Tamerlane and sacks Tabriz, Iran

Tamerlane initiates campaign to conquer Iran (1386–1388)

Tokhatmish invades Khurasan, besieges Herat, and promotes rebellion in Iran

Tamerlane expels Tokhatmish and sacks Isfahan

Tamerlane crushes revolts in Khurasan and Moghulistan

Tamerlane leads first campaign against Tokhatmish
Tamerlane defeats Tokhatmish at the Battle of Kunduzcha

Tamerlane wages his great western campaign

Tamerlane overruns Iran and receives the surrender of Baghdad

Mamluk sultan of Egypt Barkuk provokes war with Tamerlane

Sultan Barkuk and Tokhatmish conclude an alliance against Tamerlane

Tamerlane conquers Armenia and Georgia

Tokhatmish raids into northwestern Iran

Battle of Terek: Tamerlane decisively defeats Tokhatmish

Tamerlane sacks Saray and ravages the Golden Horde

Tamerlane celebrates his triumphs at Samarkand

Ottoman sultan Beyezid I defeats Crusaders at the Battle of Nicopois

Tamerlane invades northern India

Battle of Delhi; Tamerlane captures and sacks Delhi
Tamerlane returns to Samarkand and initiates building program

Tamerlane leads second western campaign

Ottoman sultan Beyezid besieges Constantinople (1399–1402)

**1400–1450**

Tamerlane invades eastern Asia Minor and sacks Sivas

Tamerlane invades northern Syria and sacks Aleppo

Tamerlane besieges and sacks Damascus

Meeting of Tamerlane and Arab historian Ibn Khaldun

Tamerlane invades Asia Minor

Battle of Angora: Tamerlane defeats and captures Ottoman sultan Beyezid I

Tamerlane initiates new building projects at Samarkand

Arrival of Ruy Gonzalez de Clavijo, ambassador from Castile

Tamerlane declares wars on Ming emperor Yongle (1402–1424) of China

Tamerlane dies at Otrar on campaign against Ming China
Western expedition of Ma Huan and the fleet of Ming China

1450–1500

- Ottoman sultan Mehmet II captures Constantinople
- Foundation of the Ottoman Empire (the Porte)
- Grand Prince Ivan III of Moscow defeats Khan Ahmet of the Golden Horde
- Muscovite army occupies Saray, capital of the Golden Horde
- Ivan III ends the “Mongol yoke”
- Birth of Zahir ud-din Muhammad Bābur, future Mughal emperor
- Bābur succeeds as khan of the Turco-Mongol tribes of Ferghana

1500–1550

- Shah Ismail I (1501–1524) founds the Safavid Shi’ite state in Iran
- Muhammad Shaybani of the Uzbeks defeats Bābur at Samarkand
- Bābur secures and rules from Kabul as a vassal of Shah Ismail I
- Shah Ismail I defeats and slays Muhammad Shaybani at the Battle of Merv
Ottoman sultan Selim I defeats Shah Ismail I at the Battle of Chaldarin

Ottoman army occupies Tabriz

Bābur declares war on the Lodi sultan Ibrahim (1517–1526) of Delhi

First Battle of Panipat: Bābur defeats Lodi army and occupies Delhi

Foundation of Mughal Empire

Battle of Khanwa: Bābur defeats the Rajput army under Rana Sanga (1509–1527)

Death of Bābur; accession of Humayun (1530–1539; 1555–1556), as Mughal emperor

Sher Khan defeats Humayun at the Battle of Chausa

Sher Khan occupies Bengal and is declared shah of Delhi

Humayun flees to Safavid court

1550–1600........................................... Ivan IV, “the Terrible,” conquers the khanate of Kazan on the middle Volga

Humayun returns to India and establishes the Mughal Empire

Death of Humayun and accession of Akbar (1556–1605) as Mughal emperor
Ivan the Terrible conquers the khanate of Astrakhan

Akbar imposes his authority over Bengal and northern India

Akbar secures Kabul, and the Panthan tribes to submit to Mughal rule

1600–1700

Death of Akbar and accession of Jahangir (1605–1627) as Mughal emperor

Accession of Shah Jahan as Mughal emperor (1628–1658)

Aurangzeb overthrows his father, Shah Jahan, and is declared Mughal emperor

Reign of Aurangzeb (1658–1707); height of Mughal Empire

Treaty of Nerchinsk; Tsar Peter the Great (1682–1725) and the Qing emperor Kangxi of China (1661–1721) partition the Eurasian steppes
**Glossary**

**Abbasid caliphate**: The hereditary dynasty of caliphs (749–1258) established by as-Saffah (r. 750–754) and, from 762 on, resident at Baghdad. Hulagu ended the dynasty with the sack of Baghdad in 1258.

**Achaemenid**: The royal family of the great kings of Persia (559–329 B.C.).

**Ahura Mazda**: The supreme god of creation in Zoroastrianism.

**Airak**: Mongolian fermented mare’s milk; nomadic beverage of choice.

**Alani**: Sarmatians who settled on the steppes north of the Caucasus in the 1st century B.C. In A.D. 375, many Alani submitted to the Huns, while others, along with Goths, migrated west. The Alani entered the Roman Empire as allies of the Vandals in 406–407.

**Altaic languages**: A family of languages with common agglutinative grammar and syntax, vowel harmony, and vocabulary. The major branches are Turkic, Mongolian, and Tungusic; Korean and Japanese may also be branches of this language family.

**Amber Road**: Overland routes between the lands of the Baltic and the Mediterranean and Black seas since the Bronze Age (2200–1500 B.C.), over which amber and the products of the northern forests and Arctic lands were exported south. Pliny the Elder (23–79) first described the route in his *Natural History*.

**An Lushan Rebellion**: A rebellion (755–762) raised by the Tang general An Lushan against the emperor Xuanzong (712–756). The revolt, even though it failed, wrought great destruction throughout China and compelled the emperor to withdraw garrisons from the Tarim Basin.
**Anatolian languages**: The first language family to diverge from Proto-Indo-European (4000–3800 B.C.). Speakers of these languages who migrated into Asia Minor circa 2500–2300 B.C. were ancestors of those speaking Hittite, Luwian, and Palaic.

**anda**: Sworn brothers in Turkish and Mongolian society.

**Arsacid**: The royal family of the kings of Parthia (246 B.C.–227 A.D.).

**Aryavarta**: The “Aryan homeland,” which comprises the lands of the upper Indus and Ganges rivers that are home to the sacred cities of Hinduism.

**Aryan**: From Sanskrit *arya*, meaning “noble”: (1) designation of related languages that has been replaced by Indo-European languages; (2) speakers of Sanskrit who entered India circa 1500–1000 B.C.

**Ashina**: The royal clan among the Gök Turks; descended from the brothers Bumin and Istami.

**atman**: In Hinduism, the imperishable soul, subject to reincarnation by the rule of *dharma* until enlightenment, when it achieves union with the universal soul (*brahman*).

**Avars**: Peoples who founded the first confederation of Turkish-speaking tribes on the eastern Eurasian steppe (330–551). In 551–552, Bumin of the Gök Turks overthrew the Avars, who then migrated west to establish a new khaganate on the Pannonian plains (580–796).

**Avesta**: The compilation of the sacred texts of Zoroastrianism. The Persian language of the texts, known as Avestan, shares close similarities to the Sanskrit of the Rigveda.

**Bactria**: Today, northern Afghanistan, this is a fertile region of the upper Oxus River. Its principal city, Bactra, was the nexus of routes of the Silk Road between central Asia and India.
Balghasun: Capital of the Uighur khaganate (744–840). The city was sacked by the rebel Kyrgyz tribes and abandoned in 840.

Bamiyan Buddhas: Two colossal statues (created in 507 and 554) carved out of rock in the Bamiyan valley, 140 miles northwest of Kabul. They were destroyed by the Taliban in March 2001.

bashlyk: The distinctive nomadic felt cap.

BMAC: Bactria-Margiana Archaeological Complex (2300–1700 B.C.); the culture centered on the lower Oxus valley that was likely the common homeland to the Indo-Iranian speakers.

brahman: The universal soul of Hinduism to which the enlightened atman will return upon moksha.

Brahmi: The oldest alphabetic script employed in India, based on Aramaic scripts of the Near East. The earliest inscriptions date from the reign of Ashoka (268–232 B.C).

Brahmin: In Hinduism, the first or priestly caste; see varna.

caliph: Ruler of the Muslim community. In 661, Muawiya established the first line of hereditary caliphs.

caravansary: Walled quarters, stables, and storage rooms constructed and maintained by the Turkish Muslim rulers for the benefit of caravans. The upkeep of the caravansary was paid by the profits of a foundation.

cataphracti: Heavily armored shock cavalry wearing chain mail or lamellar armor. This heavy cavalry, first attested among the Sarmatians, was adopted by the Romans during the reign of Hadrian (117–138).

Cathay: Medieval European name for China; it was derived from a misunderstanding of Khitan, Mongolian-speaking nomadic rulers of northern China who ruled as the Liao Dynasty (907–1125).
centum languages: Western language families that evolved out of Proto-Indo-European in 3000–2500 B.C. These language families shared common changes in sound and morphology. They include the language families of Celtic, Italic, Germanic, and Balkan Indo-European languages (the putative mother language for later Greek, Macedonian, Phrygian, Illyro-Thracian languages, and possibly, Armenian).

Chagatais: Descendants of Khan Chagatai (1226–1242), second son of Genghis Khan; they were rulers of the central Asian steppes and Transoxania.

chanyu: Meaning “son of endless sky,” this was the title of the ruler of the Xiongnu reported by Han and Song Chinese sources. In the early 5th century, the title was abandoned, and steppe nomadic rulers henceforth styled themselves as khan.

Chihilgan: Meaning “The Forty,” the Turkish military elite who dominated the Delhi sultanate in 1240–1290.

Chingisids: Descendants of Genghis Khan (1206–1227).

Cumans: Western Turkish-speaking nomads and scions of the Kipchak Turks, who migrated from the central Asian steppes into the Pontic-Caspian steppes in the 11th century.

cuneiform: The first writing system, devised by the Sumerians circa 3500–3100 B.C. The wedge-shaped writing was inscribed by a stylus on wet clay.

devsirme: The Ottoman levy of Christian youths who were converted to Islam and enrolled in the Ottoman sultan’s corps of Janissaries.

dharma: In Hinduism, the moral law that dictates the cycle of reincarnation.

dhimmi: In Islam, members of protected religious communities of the book, who practiced their faith by payment of a special tax. They were originally Jews and Christians; later, Sabians (polytheists of Harran) and Zoroastrians were so protected.
**digvijaya**: The ceremonial royal progress made by an Indian maharaja atop an elephant.

**Doab**: The fertile lands between the Punjab and the upper Ganges and Yamuna rivers; Delhi and Agra are in the Doab.

**Fatimid caliphate**: Shi’ite caliphs (909–1171) who claimed descent from Fatimah, daughter of the prophet Muhammad and wife of Caliph Ali. In 969, the Fatimid caliphs ruled from Cairo and protected the holy cities of Medina and Mecca.

**Finno-Ugric languages**: A family of the Altaic languages, which includes Magyar (Hungarian), Estonian, Finnish, and the Samoyedic languages of Siberia.

**Five Dynasties; Ten Kingdoms**: Rival kingdoms (907–960) ruling in China between the Tang (618–907) and Song (960–1279) dynasties.

**foederati**: Barbarian military units commanded by their own leaders who fought as allies of the Roman Empire in the later 4th and 5th centuries.

**Gansu Corridor**: The narrow zone between the Eurasian steppe and the Tibetan highlands that connects China with the Tarim Basin.

**ger**: Portable home on wheels made of felt stretched over a lattice frame. See yurt.

**ghazi**: The epitome of the heroic nomadic warrior, prized by Turks.

**Ghaznavid**: A dynasty of Turkish slave emirs (963–1186), who ruled from Ghazna (Afghanistan) over Transoxania and Iran and raided northern India.

**ghulam, ghilman (pl.)**: Arabic word for slave soldiers, usually of Turkish origin. See Mamluk.

**Ghurid sultans**: Leaders (1148–1210) of Iranian origin, who used Turkish Mamluks and tribal regiments to establish the first Muslim sultanate in
northern India. They clashed with the rival Khwarezm shahs for control of Transoxania and Iran.

**Ghuzz Turks**: Speakers of western Turkish or Oghuz languages who emerged on the central Asian steppes between the 9th and 11th centuries. They included Seljuk Turks, Cumans, and Kipchak Turks.

**Gog and Magog**: Figures (or nations) in the Bible and the Qur’an, whose arrival marked the great wars leading to the final days of the Apocalypse. Since the 5th century, Christian and, later, Muslim writers identified them with the nomadic invaders of the Eurasian steppes.

**Gök Turks**: The “Celestial Turks” who overthrew the Avar khanate in 551–552. Khan Bumin established the senior Gök Turk khaganate (551–744). His brother Istami (551–575) established the western Turkish khaganate (553–659) on the central and western Eurasian steppe. In 681, after ending Tang Chinese overlordship, the western khaganate was reconstituted as the Confederation of the Ten Arrows.

**Golden Horde**: The western part of the Mongol Empire (1240–1502), established by Khan Batu; see also **Jochids**.

**Gupta Empire**: The second great empire of India (320–550), founded by Chandra Gupta I (319–335). The Gupta emperors patronized Sanskrit letters and Hinduism and ended Kushan rule in northern India.

**Han Dynasty**: Rulers of imperial China as the Former or Western Han (206 B.C.–9 A.D.) and then as the restored Later or Eastern Han (25–220). The usurper Wang Mang, who overthrew the Former Han Dynasty, failed to establish his own Xin Dynasty (9–25).

**Hephthalites**: The “White Huns” were Tocharian-speaking nomads, driven from the eastern Eurasian steppe by the northern Wei emperors of China and Avar khagans. They founded an empire (408–670) encompassing the western Tarim Basin, Transoxania, and northern India.

**Hexi Corridor**: See **Gansu Corridor**.
**Hinayana Buddhism**: The “Lesser Wheel,” which includes Buddhist ascetics who rejected the doctrines of Mahayana Buddhism and adhered more closely to the teachings of Siddhartha Gautama (563–483 B.C.).

**Huns**: Altaic-speaking nomads who conquered the Pontic-Caspian steppes circa 375 and, under Attila, forged a barbarian empire from the Rhine to the Volga that challenged the Roman Empire. The Huns were probably descendants of subject or allied tribes of the northern Xiongnu.

**ilkhan**: Meaning “loyal khan,” the title granted by Kublai Khan to his brother Hulagu in 1260. It was carried by his descendants, the Ilkhanids (1265–1353), who ruled over Iran, Iraq, and Transoxania.

**Indo-Scythians**: See Sacae.

**iqta**: A military tenure granted to Muslim soldiers by the sultans of Delhi.

**Jade Gate**: The name for the strategic Yumen Pass on the Silk Road that connected the Tarim Basin to China.

**Jazyges**: Sarmatians who settled as allies of Rome on the eastern Pannonian grasslands west of Dacia in the mid-1st century.

**jihad**: In Islam, “holy war.”

**Jin Dynasty**: See Jurchens.

**jinshi**: The highest level of mandarin officials in the Song examination system (960–1279).

**Jochids**: Descendants of Jochi (1181–1227), the first son of Genghis Khan. Jochi’s son Batu founded the western part of the Mongol Empire, or Golden Horde.

**Jurchens**: Tungusic-speaking peoples of Manchuria who overthrew their overlords and ruled northern China under the Chinese dynastic name Jin, or
“Golden” (1115–1234). The Jurchen emperors exercised a loose hegemony over the Mongol tribes.

**Karakhanid**: A Turkish confederation on the central Asian steppes that ruled Transoxania from Kashgar and Samarkand (840–1212). They converted to Islam in 934.

**Kara-Khitans**: Sinicized Khitans (1123–1218) who migrated to the central Asian steppes and, thus, escaped the rule of the Jurchens. In 1141, the Kara-Khitans defeated the Karakhanids near Samarkand—a victory that gave rise to the legend of Prester John. Also called the western Liao; see also **Khitans**.

**Karakorum**: Located on the Orkhon River, the political capital of the Mongol Empire in 1225–1260.

**karma**: In Hinduism and Buddhism, the individual merit acquired by an individual through meritorious deeds.

**kashuik**: The bodyguard of 10,000 of the Great Khan of the Mongols.

**khagan**: Meaning “khan of khans,” a Turkish term denoting a great royal figure ruling over many subordinate khans.

**Khalji sultanate**: The second Persian-speaking dynasty of Turkish sultans in northern India (1290–1320).

**khan**: Turko-Mongolian royal title, meaning “king.”

**Kharoshti**: Northern Indian alphabet, based on the Aramaic alphabet of the Near East, used to write Sanskrit and vernaculars of Sanskrit.

**khatun**: Mongolian queen, meaning “lady.”

**Khazars**: Members of the Ashina clan and western Turkish khaganate, who established their own khaganate (c. 670–967) over the Pontic-Caspian steppes. The Khazar court converted to Judaism in the late 8th century. Circa
965–967, the Khazar capital was sacked by Prince Svyatoslav of Kiev and the Pechenegs.

**Khitans:** Mongol-speaking conquerors who ruled northern China under the Chinese dynastic name of Liao (907–1125). They were overthrown by their vassals, the Jurchens.

**Khwarezm:** Fertile delta lands of the lower Oxus River, flowing into the Aral Sea; the land has been home to important caravan cities since the 5th century B.C.

**Khwarezmian shahs:** Persian-speaking Sunni Muslim rulers appointed as governors of Khwarezm by the Seljuk sultans (1077–1231). After 1156, the Khwarezmian shahs clashed with the Ghurids over domination of former Ghaznavid lands in Iran and Transoxania.

**Kipchak Turks:** Ghuzz or western Turkish-speaking nomads who dominated the central Asian steppes in the 11th through 13th centuries. They submitted to Mongol Khan Batu in 1238–1241 and constituted the majority of tribes of the Golden Horde.

**Kshatriya:** In Hinduism, the caste of warriors.

**kurgan:** A stone-and-earth tumulus raised as monumental grave on the Pontic-Caspian steppes and central Asian steppes from the Bronze Age to the 13th century A.D. The kurgans of Scythians, between the 6th and 4th centuries B.C., have yielded the richest burial goods.

**kurultai:** The national council of Mongols summoned to elect the khan or to declare war or conclude a peace.

**Kushans:** Tocharian speakers who forged an empire embracing the central Asian steppes, Transoxania, and northern India (30–230). They promoted Buddhism and trade along the Silk Road. See also **Yuezhi**.

**lamellar armor:** Armor of overlapping plates sewed together and often worn as a second layer of protection over chain mail armor.
Liao Dynasty: See Khitans.

limes: Meaning “path,” the word originally designated a Roman military highway. The term came to designate the political and cultural boundary between imperial Rome and the foreign peoples.

magister militum: “Master of the soldiers,” the supreme commander of field armies in the Roman Empire. From the reign of Constantine I (306–337), commanders of the cavalry and infantry commanded regional field armies. After 395, their supreme commander was designated magister militum, one for the western and one for the eastern Roman Empire.

Magyars: Finno-Ugric nomads who migrated from the Siberian forests east of the Urals to the Pontic-Caspian steppes in the 9th century. In 896, they settled on the Pannonian grasslands in 896; they are the ancestors of the Hungarians.

Mahayana Buddhism: The “Greater Wheel” was the school of Buddhism that emerged in India in the 1st century B.C., stressing the divine status of the Buddha. The schools of Mahayana Buddhism today are in East Asia (Tibet, Mongolia, China, Korea, and Japan).

Mamluk: From the Arabic for “servant”: (1) Turkish slave soldier in the Islamic world; (2) dynasty of Turkish slave soldiers that ruled Egypt (1250–1517); (3) dynasty of Turkish slave soldiers that ruled the Delhi sultanate (1206–1290).

Manichaeism: The dualist, monotheistic faith proclaimed by the prophet Mani in Sassanid Mesopotamia. The faith was popular among Sogdian merchants of the Silk Road; the khagan of the Uighurs converted to Manichaeism in 763.


Mawarannahr: “Land beyond the river,” the Arabic name for Transoxania.
**maya**: In Hinduism, the illusion of the physical world.

**Meluhha**: The Sumerian name for the earliest urban civilization of India, known as the Indus Valley civilization (2600–1700 B.C.).

**Ming Dynasty**: Founded by Emperor Hongwu (1368–1398), who expelled the Mongols, the Ming Dynasty (1368–1644) was the last native dynasty of imperial China.

**Mitanni**: Indo-Aryan speakers who migrated from Transoxania into northern Mesopotamia in the 16th century B.C., where they established a kingdom over Hurrian- and Amorite-speaking populations. Their language is closely related to Sanskrit and Avestan Iranian.

**moksha**: The liberation of an enlightened Hindu who is freed from the cycle of rebirths, according to dharma.

**Mughal Empire**: The last Muslim empire (1526–1857) in India; established by Bābur (1526–1530), a descendant of both Genghis Khan and Tamerlane.

**muqti**: A military governor of the Delhi sultanate who held a military tenure in lieu of a salary.

**Nestorian Christianity**: The Christian church that followed the teachings of Patriarch Nestorius of Constantinople (429–431), who taught that Mary gave birth only to the man Jesus rather than man and God. The Nestorians, condemned at the Third Ecumenical Council (431), spread their faith across the Silk Road, converting Turkish and Mongol tribes.

**northern Wei Dynasty**: Sinicized nomadic rulers (386–535) of northern China and the Gansu Corridor. They promoted Buddhism along the Silk Road. They were Turkish-speaking Tuoba, the royal clan of the Xianbei tribes.

**oracle bones**: Inscribed divination bones of the Shang Dynasty (1600–1046); they are the first examples of Chinese writing.

**ordu**: Turko-Mongolian army or military encampment.
Orkhon inscriptions: The earliest memorial inscriptions in Turkish (722); written in a distinct runic alphabet.

Parthians: An Iranian-speaking tribe melded into a kingdom, and then a Near East empire of the Arsacid kings (246 B.C.–227 A.D.).

Pechenegs: Turkish-speaking tribes whose confederation dominated the Pontic-Caspian steppes west of the Don River from circa 860 to 1091.

Prakrit: The vernacular language of India that evolved out of Sanskrit after 600 B.C. Buddhist texts were written or translated into Prakrit.

Proto-Indo-European (PIE): The reconstructed mother language of the Indo-European languages, circa 6000–5000 B.C.

Qin Dynasty: The dynasty (221–206 B.C.) founded by Shihuangdi (257–210 B.C.), when he unified China in 221 B.C.

Qing Dynasty: The last imperial dynasty of China, founded by the Manchu conquerors (1644–1911).

Qutb Minar: Built by Sultan Aybak of Delhi in 1198, it is the largest minaret in India.

Quwat ul Islam: Meaning “Might of Islam,” the mosque outside of Delhi built from plundered architectural elements of Hindu and Jain temples. It was ordered by Sultan Aybak in 1193.

Rabatak: The site in Afghanistan where a Kushan royal inscription in the Bactrian language was discovered in 1993. The Kushan emperor Kanishka I (127–147) gives his genealogy and names the tutelary gods of the empire.

Rajputs: “Sons of the king”; the Kshatriya or warrior caste who dominated western India between the 9th and 12th centuries. They were later accommodated by the Mughal emperors.
**rammed earth**: A construction technique using earth, gravel, lime, and clay. The Qin and Han emperors employed this method to build the Great Wall. The construction is simple but labor intensive.

**Rashidun caliphs**: The first four elected caliphs from among the immediate associates of Muhammad: Abu Bakr (632–634), Umar (634–644), Uthman (644–656), and Ali (656–661).

**Rashtrakuta**: Prakrit-speaking kings who united most of southern and central India (753–982); they favored Hinduism.

**Rigveda**: The earliest religious texts of Hinduism. The hymns, written in Sanskrit, have been dated as early as 1500 B.C. and as late as 600 B.C.

**Roxolani**: Sarmatians who settled on the grasslands between the Carpathian Mountains and the Black Sea in the 1st century.

**Sacae**: An eastern branch of the Scythians dwelling on the central Asian steppes. In 145–135 B.C., they migrated across Sogdiana and Bactria into the Helmand Valley, then via the Bolan Pass into India in the early 1st century B.C., where they were known as the Indo-Scythians.

**Safavids**: The dynasty of the Shi’ite shahs of Iran (1501–1732), rivals to the Ottoman sultans.

**Samanid**: The family of Iranian emirs (819–1005) who ruled from Bukhara, eastern Iran, and Transoxania as the representatives of the Abbasid caliphate. They defined the visual arts and letters of eastern Islam.

**sangha**: The community of Buddhist believers (laity and ascetics) established by Siddhartha Gautama (563–483 B.C.).

**Sanskrit**: The sacred literary language of Hinduism.

**Sarmatians**: Iranian-speaking nomads who succeeded the Scythians on the Pontic-Caspian steppes between the 3rd century B.C. and the 3rd century A.D. The tribes included the Alani, Roxolani, and Jazyges.
**Sassanid**: The dynasty of Zoroastrian shahs of the neo-Persian Empire (227–651).

**satem languages**: The eastern branch of language families that evolved out of Proto-Indo-European circa 3000–2500 B.C. The language families share sound changes and morphology. These include the Balto-Slavic and Indo-Iranian language families.

**satrapy**: A province of the Persian Empire (550–329 B.C.) ruled by a satrap; Darius I (521–486 B.C.) organized the empire into 20 satrapies.

**Scythians**: The general name applied by classical Greeks to the Iranian-speaking nomads on the Eurasian steppe.

**Seljuk Turks**: Ghuzz or western Turks who founded the Seljuk sultanate (1055–1194) that revived the power of Abbasid caliphate. Seljuk Turks settled in Asia Minor after the Battle of Manzikert (1071).

**Shah-nameh**: “Book of Kings”; the Middle Persian national epic composed by Abu al-Qasem Mansur (c. 940–1020).

**shaman**: A mystic prized for insights gained by contact with the spiritual world through trances often induced by hallucinogens, notably hashish.

**Shang Dynasty**: The first historical dynasty of China (c. 1600–1046 B.C.), centered in the lower and middle Huang He (Yellow River).

**Sharia**: Muslim religious law based on the Koran.

**Shi’ite**: The sectarian school of Islam that desired a descendant of Ali (656–661) as the rightful caliph and, thus, upheld the authority of Ali.

**Shudra**: In Hinduism, the caste of laborers or peasants; see *varna*.

**Silk Road**: The network of caravan routes across central Asia that linked China with Europe and the Mediterranean world. The German explorer Ferdinand von Richthofen coined the term in 1877.
**Sogdiana**: Lands of northern Transoxania and the Fergana Valley; the Sogdians spoke an eastern Iranian language that was long the commercial language of the Silk Road.

**Song Dynasty**: The Song Dynasty (960–1279) reunited most of China as the successors of the Tang emperors, promoted Confucian traditions, and perfected the bureaucratic state. The Khitans and, later, the Jurchens denied the Song the recovery of northern China.

**spolia**: Architectural elements or sculpture of older buildings recycled into new buildings.

**Strategikon**: Byzantine military manual, attributed to the emperor Maurice, with sound recommendations for countering nomadic cavalry.

**Sufi**: Muslim mystic who follows the Sunni tradition.

**Sui Dynasty**: The dynasty (581–618) that reunited China and founded the third great imperial order; immediately succeeded by the Tang Dynasty.

**Sunni**: “The orthodox”; Muslims who accepted the Umayyad caliphate of Muawiya (661–680). The majority of Muslims follow Sunni Islam and the authority of the Qur’an.

**suren**: The hereditary commander of the Drangiana and Arachosia (today, western Afghanistan and Pakistan). The suren had the right to crown the Arsacid king of Parthia.

**sutra**: A Buddhist sacred text of aphorisms.

**taiga**: Forest zones of Siberia.

**Tang Dynasty**: Founded by Emperor Gaozu, the Tang Dynasty (618–907) represented the greatest imperial family of classical China.

**tantric**: The higher moral and mystical interpretation of traditional village rites in either Hinduism or Buddhism.
**Tarim Basin**: An area that encompasses the valleys of the tributaries of the Tarim River between the Tien Shan and the Tibetan highlands. The central zone comprises the Taklamakan Desert, and the eastern end is dominated by the salt depression of the Lop Nur. Today known as Xinjiang or eastern Turkestan, the region was been home to caravan cities on the Silk Road.

**Ten Arrows**: See Gök Turks.

**Tengri**: The sky god and progenitor of humankind in Turkish and Mongol polytheism.

**Three Kingdoms**: The period of political division (220–280) in China after the fall of the eastern Han Dynasty.

**Tien Shan**: “Celestial Mountains” that define the northern boundary of the Tarim Basin (today Xinjiang).

**Timurids**: Descendants of Tamerlane (1370–1405), who ruled Iran and Transoxania (1405–1506).

**Tocharian**: The name given to two, possibly three, related Indo-European languages spoken in the Tarim Basin and used to translate Buddhist texts between the 6th and 9th centuries. The ancestors of the Tocharians migrated from the original Indo-European homeland on the Pontic-Caspian steppes to the Altai Mountains and then the Tarim Basin in circa 3700–3500 B.C.

**Toluids**: Descendants of Tolui (1227–1229), the fourth son of Genghis Khan.

**Transoxania**: Lands between the Oxus and Jaxartes rivers; in antiquity, known as Bactria and Sogdiana.

**Tughluq sultans**: Members of the third dynasty of Turkish Muslim rulers in India (1320–1414).

**tumen**: Mongol military unit of 10,000 soldiers.

**tundra**: Arctic zones of Siberia.
**Tungusic languages**: A branch of the Altaic language family, today spoken in Manchuria and eastern Siberia.

**türbe**: Memorial tomb to a Muslim ruler or mentor.

**Uighurs**: Turkish-speaking nomads who founded the third Turkish confederation on the eastern Eurasian steppe (744–840). They converted to Manichaeism in 763.

**ulema**: The religious community of Muslim scholars who interpret Sharia.

**ulus**: The Turko-Mongolian nation, designating related tribes.

**Umayyad caliphate**: The first hereditary line of caliphs (661–750), established by Muawiya (661–680) and ruling from Damascus.

**ummah**: In Islam, the community of believers as proclaimed by the prophet Muhammad (575–634).

**Upper Satrapies**: The Greek designation of the satrapies of Bactria and Sogdiana (Transoxania) in the Achaemenid Empire of Persia (550–329 B.C.).

**Vaishya**: In Hinduism, the caste of merchants.

**varna**: From the Sanskrit for “outward appearance,” any one of the original four castes of Indo-Aryan society described in the Rigveda: Brahmins (priests), Kshatriyas (warriors), Vaishyas (merchants), and Shudras (laborers). Only the first three castes were considered twice born; the Shudras represented the subjected populations.

**vihara**: Meaning “secluded place,” the community of Buddhist ascetics.

**Vikrama era**: The era of reckoning from the year 57 B.C.; widely used by Buddhists in India and Nepal. The year 1 of the era was the accession date of Azes I (57–35 B.C.), king of the Sacae.
**Warring States**: Kingdoms in the period of political disunity in China following the collapse of effective rule by the Zhou Dynasty (481–221 B.C.).

**western regions**: Also called Xiyu, the designation by the Han and Tang emperors of their provinces in the Tarim Basin.

**White Huns**: See Hephthalites.

**Xi Xia**: Sinicized Tanguts who had settled in Gansu and western China in the 10th century as nominal vassals of the Song emperors. With Jingzong (1038–1048), Xi Xia monarchs ruled as Chinese-style emperors who favored Buddhism (1038–1227).

**Xia Dynasty**: The legendary first dynasty of China (c. 2100–1600 B.C.).

**Xinjiang**: Eastern Turkestan; see Tarim Basin.

**Xiongnu**: Altaic-speaking nomads who forged the first nomadic confederacy on the eastern Eurasian steppe. In 56–53 B.C., the Xiongnu divided into the southern and northern Xiongnu.

**yabgu**: The subordinate of a khan or khagan; among the Khazars, the leading commander of the army.

**Yassa**: Customary Mongol law codified by Genghis Khan; it exalted the authority of the khan over all other legal and religious authorities.

**Yuan Dynasty**: The Chinese dynasty adopted by Kublai Khan (1260–1294) and his successors who ruled China and Mongolia (1279–1368).

**Yuezhi**: The Chinese name for Tocharian-speaking nomads who dwelled on the central Asian steppes north of the Tarim Basin. In 155 B.C., the Xiongnu drove the Yuezhi west into Ferghana, where Zhang Qian visited them in 128 B.C. These Tocharian speakers, called Da Yuezhi (“Great Yuezhi”) were the ancestors of the Kushans.

**yurt**: The residence and social bonds of the kinship group of a ger. See ger.
**Zhou Dynasty:** The second imperial dynasty of China (1045–256 B.C.), ruling in the early Iron Age. After 481 B.C., Zhou emperors lost control over their vassals, and China lapsed into the period of Warring States.

**Zoroastrianism:** The monotheistic religion of the Iranians, based on the teachings of Zoroaster, born circa 628 B.C. The Sassanid shahs favored Zoroastrianism as reformed in the 3rd century.
Biographical Notes

Abaoji (b. 872; r. 907–926): Emperor of Liao Dynasty; assumed the Chinese throne name Taizu. He was of the Yila tribe within the confederation of Khitans. In 904, he seized supreme power over the Khitans. In 907, he assumed the name and role of a Chinese emperor, conquering the 16 prefectures in northeastern China and the eastern Eurasian steppe. He established his Sinicized court at Shangjing.

Abd al-Malik (b. 646; r. 685–705): Umayyad caliph who imposed Arabic as the language of administration and forged the first Muslim administrative institutions. He appointed able governors who conquered Carthage in 698 and raided into Transoxania.

Abu Bakr (b. c. 573; r. 632–634): Caliph and friend and associate of Muhammad who succeeded as the first of the Rashidun caliphs after the prophet’s death. His reign saw the unification of Arabia under the banner of Islam.

Aetius (d. 454): A magister militum (425–454) from a military family in Moesia. By his influence with King Rugila and, later, Attila, Aetius secured Hun foederati so that he dominated policy at the court of the western emperor Valentinian III. His policy of alliance with the Huns was ruined by the invasions of Attila in 451–452. In 454, Aetius was executed on grounds of treason.

Ahmad ibn Arabshah (1389–1450): Arabic historian; a native of Damascus who wrote a critical biography of Tamerlane in 1435. He visited the Timurid court at Samarkand, and he consulted Turkish and Persian sources and spoke to eyewitnesses. In his account, Tamerlane is depicted as a savage prince, deformed and spiteful, whose base birth was the reason he committed atrocities.
Akbar (b. 1542; r. 1556–1605): Third Mughal emperor; the son of Humayun. He fiscally and administratively organized the Mughal Empire, laying the foundations of the future British raj. A mystic, he sponsored his own syncretist solar cult of the ruler, Din-i Ilahi (“divine faith”). His personal beliefs and toleration of subjects of all faiths alienated the Sunni ulema, and his son and successor, Jahangir (1605–1627), returned to Sunni Islam.

Ala-ad-Din Muhammad Shah I (1296–1316): Khalji sultan of Delhi; greatly extended his sway over the Deccan. Malik Kafur, a Hindu convert to Islam and general, conducted audacious and destructive campaigns into the southern Deccan and Tamil Nadu in 1310–1311. Khalji raids ultimately led to the consolidation of the powerful Hindu kingdom of Vijayanagara (1336–1565) at Hampi.

Ala al-Din Muhammad (r. 1200–1220): Shah of Khwarezm; conquered Iran from the Seljuk Turks in 1205. By 1217, he had secured Transoxania, assumed the title shah, and extended his unwanted protection over the Abbasid caliph al-Nasir. In 1218, he provoked a war with Genghis Khan, who overran the Khwarezmian Empire in 1219–1220. Muhammad Shah died a fugitive on an island in the Caspian Sea near Abaskun.

al-Amin (b. 787; r. 809–813): Abbasid caliph; the unpopular son of Harun al-Rashid. He faced rebellions in Syria and Iraq. In 812–813, the Persian general Tahir ibn al-Husayn besieged Baghdad in the name of al-Mamun (813–833), half-brother of al-Amin. In 813, al-Amin was captured while escaping Baghdad and executed.

Alaric (395–410): King of the Visigoths; served under Theodosius I. Alaric, denied high command by the imperial government, led the Visigoths into Greece in 395–397 and then to Italy in 400–402. Flavius Stilicho checked Alaric until 408. In 410, Alaric sacked Rome in a bid to pressure the emperor Honorius for a command, but he died soon after.

Alexander III, the Great (b. 356 B.C., r. 336–323 B.C.): King of Macedon; son of Philip II (359–336 B.C.) and the Epirote princess Olympias (375–316 B.C.); arguably the greatest commander in history. In 334–329 B.C., he conquered the Achaemenid Empire and defeated the Great King Darius III
of Persia (336–329 B.C.). He subdued Bactria and Sogdiana (Transoxania) in 329–327 B.C. and the Indus Valley in 327–325 B.C. Alexander defeated the nomadic Saca, secured the Upper Satrapies (Bactria and Sogdiana), and established a frontier on the upper Jaxartes. His Greco-Macedonian military colonies in the Upper Satrapies were the basis for the Greco-Bactrian kingdom (c. 250–125 B.C.).

**Alexius I Comnenus** (b. 1056; r. 1081–1118): Byzantine emperor; seized power in the civil war of 1081 and founded the Comnenian Dynasty (1081–1185). He restored imperial power in western Asia Minor by summoning the First Crusade (1095–1099). He allied with the Cumans to destroy the Pechenegs, who had invaded Thrace, at the Battle of Levounion in 1091.

**Al-Hajjaj** (b. 661; r. 694–715): Umayyad governor of Khurasan; directed the Muslim conquests of Seistan, Baluchistan, and the Sind.

**Ali ibn Abi Talib** (b. c. 600; r. 656–661): Fourth of the Rashidun caliphs. Cousin of the prophet Muhammad, Ali married the prophet’s only daughter, Fatimah (606–632). Ali was twice passed over for the caliphate. As caliph in 656, he faced opposition from Muawiya in the first Muslim civil war. Ali was slain by sectarian extremists, and in later Shi’ite theology, he was elevated to prophetic status almost on par with Muhammad.

**al-Mamun** (b. 786; 813–833): Abbasid caliph; son of Harun al-Rashid. In 813, he defeated his half-brother al-Amin and gained the throne. But he surrendered control over Khurasan and the northeastern frontier to Tahir ibn al-Husayn.

**al-Mansur** (754–775): Second Abbasid caliph; dedicated Baghdad as the new capital in 762 and shifted the locus of Islamic civilization to Iran and Transoxania.

**Almish Yiltawar** (c. 900–940): Khagan of the Volga Bulgars. Converted to Islam to obtain Abbasid support so that he could renounce his allegiance to the Khazars. In 921–922, he was visited by Ahmad ibn Fadlan, envoy of the Abbasid caliph al-Muqtadir (908–932).
al-Mutasim (833–842): Abbasid caliph. Waged prestige campaigns against the Byzantine Empire. He reformed the army, recruiting a bodyguard of 10,000 Turkish slave soldiers, as well as allied and mercenary Turkish tribal regiments of horse archers.

al-Mustasim Billah (b. 1213; r. 1242–1258): Last Abbasid caliph. Sought to restore the power and authority of the Abbasid state. He blundered into a war against the Mongols. He was slain and his capital, Baghdad, was sacked by the khan Hulagu in February 1258.

Alp-Arslan (b. 1029; r. 1063–1072): Seljuk sultan and nephew of Tughril Beg. Defeated and captured the Byzantine emperor Romanus IV at the Battle of Manzikert. Alp-Arslan opened Asia Minor to settlement by Turkish tribes.

Alp Tigin (961–975): Turkish Mamluk; ruled Ghazna (today Afghanistan) as a vassal of the Samanid emir Mansur I (961–976). He promoted Sunni Islam and raided the Punjab, sacking Hindu temples and Buddhist monasteries. He was succeeded by Ishaq (975–977), and then his son-in-law Sebüktigin (977–997).

al-Tabari (839–923): Persian historian and Qur’anic scholar; was a native of Tabaristan. Tabari wrote in Arabic a universal Muslim history that is the principal source for the Umayyad and early Abbasid caliphates.

Ammianus Marcellinus (c. 325–391): A historian of imperial Rome, a native of Antioch, and a staff officer. He wrote a history of the Roman world from the reign of Trajan (98–117) to Valens (364–378). He provides invaluable information on the Goths, Alani, and Huns, as well as Roman relations with the Sassanid Empire.

An Lushan (c. 703–757): Chinese general of Sogdian-Turkish ancestry. Raised a rebellion against the Tang emperor Xuanzong (712–756). Upon occupying Luoyang, he declared himself the first emperor of the Yan Dynasty. He was murdered by his ministers in January 757, and the rebellion collapsed in 763.
An Shigao (d. 168): Styled a Parthian prince; arrived at the Han court in 148 and translated into Chinese a number of works of the Sarvastivada school of Buddhism. He set the traditions of Chinese Buddhist monasteries.

Antiochus III, the Great (b. c. 241 B.C.; r. 223–187 B.C.): Seleucid king. Restored the power of his empire. In 309–203 B.C., he conducted an eastern expedition and received the homage of the Parthian prince Arsaces II and the Greco-Bactrian king Euthydemus. At the Battle of Panium in 200 B.C., he defeated the Ptolemaic army, conquering Phoenicia, Coele-Syria, and Judaea. He was decisively defeated by the Roman consul Lucius Cornelius Scipio Asiaticus at Magnesia in 190 B.C. Thereafter, the Seleucid Empire fragmented.

Antiochus VII Sidetes (b. c. 158 B.C.; r. 138–129 B.C.): Seleucid king; was crowned after the capture of his brother Demetrius II (146–139 B.C.) by the Parthian king Mithradates I. In 130 B.C., Antiochus recovered Mesopotamia, Babylonia, and Media from the Parthians, but Phraates II decisively defeated and slew Antiochus VII in 129 B.C. and ended the revival of Seleucid power in the Near East.

Antony, Mark (Marcus Antonius) (83–30 B.C.): Roman senator and commander; a member of the Second Triumvirate, along with Octavian and M. Aemilius Lepidus in 43–30 B.C. He was awarded the eastern half of the Roman Empire in 42 B.C., but he steadily broke with his colleague Octavian and allied with Ptolemaic queen Cleopatra VII (51–30 B.C.). In 39 and 37–36 B.C., he waged two unsuccessful Parthian wars. In 31 B.C., he was defeated at the Battle of Actium and subsequently committed suicide.

Arcadius (b. 377; r. 395–408): Elder son of Theodosius I. He was proclaimed Augustus in 383 and, in 395, succeeded to the eastern half of the Roman Empire. He proved a weak-willed emperor, dominated by his ministers, who averted the crisis posed by Alaric and the Visigoths.

Ardashir I (227–240): Shah of Persia; overthrew Parthian rule and founded the Sassanid Neo-Persian Empire. He initiated the first of a series of wars by the Sassanid shahs to conquer the eastern provinces of the Roman Empire.
Arigh Böke (b. 1219; r. 1259–1264): Mongol khan; the fourth and youngest son of Tolui. He was entrusted with the Mongolian homeland by Great Khan Möngke. In 1259, upon the death of Möngke, Arigh Böke was declared Great Khan, but the Mongol army in China acclaimed Kublai Khan. Arigh Böke was defeated in the ensuing civil war in 1260–1254 and forced to abdicate.

Arrian (Lucius Flavius Arrianus) (86–160): Native of Nicomedia (Izmit); a Roman senator and historian who composed a history of Alexander the Great. He also wrote a treatise of his battle line against the Alani in 135, when he was governor of Galatia-Cappadocia.

Arsaces I (246–211 B.C.): Prince of the Iranian-speaking tribe Parni and founder of the Arsacid Dynasty in northeastern Iran. His descendants ruled as the kings of Parthia.

Arsaces II (211–191 B.C.): King of Parthia and a vassal of the Seleucid kings. In 190 B.C., he asserted his independence after the Romans decisively defeated the Seleucid king Antiochus III (223–187 B.C.) at the Battle of Magnesia.

Artabanus II (128–124 B.C.): King of Parthia; the uncle and successor of Phraates II. He was defeated and slain by the Tocharians, ancestors of the Kushans, when they invaded Margiana.

Artabanus V (216–227): King of Parthia; faced an invasion by the Roman emperors Caracalla and Macrinus in 214–218. He was defeated and slain by the Sassanid shah Ardashir I at the Battle of Hormozgan.

Ashoka (b. 304 B.C.; r. 268–232 B.C.): The greatest Mauryan emperor. He ruled most of the Indian subcontinent and published the earliest surviving royal edicts in India that were erected as monumental inscriptions. By 263 B.C., he converted to Buddhism; he promoted the faith throughout India and encouraged Buddhist missionaries on the Silk Road.

as-Saffah (b. 721; r. 749–754): Abbasid caliph; governor of Khurasan who overthrew the Umayyad caliphate in 749–750. He founded the Abbasid caliphate, a Muslim, as opposed to Arabic, state based on the lands of eastern Islam.
Attila (b. c. 410; r. 434–452): Regarded as the second greatest conqueror of the steppes. He and his brother Bleda succeeded their uncle Rugila as joint kings of the Huns. Circa 445, Bleda was murdered by Attila. In 442–443 and 447, Attila launched devastating raids into the Balkans, earning the sobriquet “Scourge of God.” In 451, he invaded Gaul and suffered at Châlons a strategic defeat from a Roman-Gothic army under Aetius. In 452, he invaded northern Italy but withdrew due to the intercession of Pope Leo I. Attila died in 452 from overindulgence at his wedding celebrations. The Hun Empire collapsed within two years after his death.

Augustus (Gaius Julius Caesar Octavianus) (b. 63 B.C., r. 27 B.C.–14 A.D.): Roman emperor; the nephew and adopted son of Julius Caesar (101–44 B.C.). Augustus ended nearly 60 years of civil war and, in 27 B.C., founded the principate.

Aurangzeb (b. 1618; r. 1658–1707): Son of Shah Jahan (1628–1658) and grandson of Akbar. Hailed Alamgir (“world conqueror”), he united nearly all of India under Mughal rule. A zealous Muslim, he alienated his Muslim subjects, and his campaigns in the Deccan exhausted the imperial treasury.

Azes I (c. 58–38 B.C.): Indo-Scythian king, conquered the Indus valley, and was remembered by Buddhists, who took his year of accession as the first year for reckoning by the Vikrama era.

Bābur (Zahir al-Din Muhammad) (b. 1483; r. 1526–1530): First Mughal emperor of India; a descendant of Genghis Khan and Tamerlane. A Timurid prince of Ferghana, he lost his realm in the wars between the Uzbeks and Safavid Iran. In 1504, he seized Kabul and acknowledged the Safavid shah Ismail I as his overlord. In 1526, he invaded India and defeated Ibrahim Lodi, sultan of Delhi, at the Battles of Panipat on April 26, 1526; he then occupied Delhi and founded the Mughal Empire. He composed an engaging autobiography, Baburnama, in literary Turkish.

Baiju (d. 1260): Mongol general; appointed by Töregene to the command of Mongol forces in Iran in 1242. He decisively defeated the Seljuk sultan Kay-Khusraw at the Battle of Köse Dag on June 26, 1243. In 1246, Khan Güyük
recalled the popular Baiju, but he was restored to his command by Khan Möngke in 1251–1255.

**Ban Chao** (30–102): Han general who completed the subjection and organization of the western regions in 75–91 and ended the power of the northern Xiongnu.

**Baraq, Ghiyas-ud-Din** (1266–1271): Mongol khan recognized by Kublai Khan as ruler of the Chagatai khanate in central Asia. He converted to Islam and assumed the Muslim name Ghiyas-ud-Din. He was opposed by rival Khan Kaidu, grandson of Ögödei. In 1267, they concluded a truce so that Kaidu could move against Kublai Khan. In turn, Baraq warred with little success against Ilkhan Abaka (1265–1282) for control of Transoxania.

**Batu** (b. 1207; r. 1227–1255): Mongol khan; the son of Jochi (the eldest son of Genghis Khan). In 1227, he succeeded to the western ulus (the future Golden Horde). He conquered the Cumans in 1235–1236. In 1237–1240, he subdued the Russian principalities. He won a brilliant victory over King Bela IV of Hungary at the Battle of the Mohi on April 11, 1241. The news of the Mongol victory panicked Western Christendom, but in 1242, Batu withdrew to the grasslands of the Volga when he received news of the death of Khan Ögödei. Thereafter, Batu ruled in splendid isolation, professing loyalty to Güyük and Möngke.

**Bayan** (c. 560–602): Khagan of the Avars; settled his nation on the Pannonian grasslands (eastern Hungary) after defeating the Gepidae in 562. His allies, the Lombards, thereupon invaded Italy, while Bayan raided the Byzantine provinces of Thrace and Moesia in the Balkans.

**Bayan** (1236–1295): Mongol general; the leading field commander of Kublai Khan in the conquest of Song China. He received the final surrender of the dowager empress Xie Daoqing and the boy emperor Gong (1275–1276) at the Song capital of Linan (Hangzhou).

**Bayanchur Khan** (747–759): Second Uighur khagan; extended the power of the Uighur khaganate, exploiting Chinese weakness due to the An Lushan
Rebellion (755–763), and welcomed Sogdian merchants from the Tarim Basin to the Uighur capital.

**Baybars** (1260–1277): Mamluk sultan of Egypt; architect of the victory over the Mongols at Ain Jalut in 1260. Soon afterwards, he seized power in Cairo and reoccupied the Levant. He also claimed to have removed the Abbasid heir from the ruined city of Baghdad to Cairo; thus, he was hailed as the champion of Islam against the Mongols and Crusaders.

**Bela IV** (b. 1206; r. 1235–1270): King of Hungary; a conscientious ruler who extended royal justice and restored his kingdom after the Mongol invasion. He was, however, decisively defeated by Khan Batu at the Battle of the Mohi on April 11, 1241.

**Berke** (b. c. 1208; r. 1257–1266): Mongol khan; the son of Jochi and brother of Batu. He succeeded to the western *ulus* of the Mongol Empire (then known as the White and Blue Hordes). He had converted to Islam; thus, he aligned with Mamluk Egypt against his cousin, the ilkhan Hulagu (1256–1265).

**Bilge** (b. c. 683; r. 717–734): The fourth Ashina khagan of the Gök Turks (or eastern Turks) since the end of the Tang overlordship in 681. The protégé of his *yabgu* and father-in-law Tonyukuk, Bilge restored the power of the Gök Turks on the eastern Eurasian steppe. His deeds are celebrated on the memorial inscriptions in the Old Turkic language in the Orkhon Valley (today Mongolia).

**Bleda** (434–445): King of the Huns and elder son of Octar. He ruled jointly and clashed repeatedly with his brother Attila, who ordered Bleda’s murder.

**Bögü Khan** (759–780): Uighur khanag; promoted trade and settlements within the Uighur khanate. In 762, he converted to Manichaeism.

**Bolad** (d. 1313): Mongol chancellor and cultural advisor; served Kublai Khan in 1260–1285. He established a directorate to gather and analyze geographic information and maps. In 1285, he arrived as the Great Khan’s envoy and entered into the service of the ilkhans Arghun (1282–1291),
Gaykhatu (1291–1295), and Mahmud Ghazan (1295–1304) as a fiscal expert. He introduced Chinese-style paper money.

**Boris I** (r. 858–899): Tsar of Bulgaria; converted to Orthodox Christianity in the 860s and, thus, assured the conversion of the southern Slavs. He presided over the conversion of the Bulgar khanate into a Christian Slavic kingdom.

**Börte** (1161–1230): Principal wife of Genghis Khan. She was affianced to marry him to link their clans, but around 1180, she was abducted by the Merkits; eight months later, she was rescued by Genghis Khan and married. It was widely believed that her first son, Jochi, was the son of Börte’s captor, Chilger Bökh. She bore Genghis Khan three sons: Chagatai, Ögödei, and Tolui. Both Genghis Khan and Ögödei valued her for her shrewd judgment.

**Buddha:** see Siddhartha Gautama.

**Bumin** (546–553): Khagan of the Gök Turks and a member of the Ashina clan. He ruled as vassal king to the Avars over the Turks dwelling in the Altai Mountains. In 552–553, he overthrew his Avar overlord Anagui and established the Gök Turk khaganate on the eastern Eurasian steppe.

**Caracalla** (b. 188; r. 198–217): Roman emperor; son of the emperor Septimius Severus (193–211). He ruled as co-emperor with his father and, later, his brother Geta (209–212). In 212, he murdered Geta and was remembered as a savage emperor. He waged successful campaigns in Germania, but he was murdered while on campaign against the Parthians (214–217).

**Carpini, Giovanni Da Pian Del** (1182–1252): Franciscan friar; the envoy of Pope Innocent IV (1243–1254) to the Mongol court in 1246–1247. His party traversed the steppes from Kiev to Karakorum in 106 days. Carpini witnessed the *kurultai* that elected Güyük (1246–1248), and he records important details about the court a generation after the death of Genghis Khan.

**Chagatai** (b. 1183; r. 1227–1242): Mongol khan; the second son of Genghis Khan and Börte and founder of the Chagatai khanate. In 1227, he was assigned the ulus in central Asia, originally comprising the central Eurasian steppes, Tarim Basin, and Transoxania. He was notorious for his violent
temper, but he ruled justly and was praised for his adherence to Mongol traditions. He resented his brother Ögödei, but he supported Töregene as regent in 1241–1242.

**Chao Cuo** (c. 200–154 B.C.): Han minister and legalist writer; composed a memorandum to Emperor Wen (180–157 B.C.) in which he presented the strategy for battling the Xiongnu. The emperor Wudi (141–87 B.C.) based his strategy on the recommendations of Chao Cuo.

**Charlemagne (Charles the Great)** (b. c. 747; r. 768–814): King of the Franks; forged the Carolingian Empire. He was crowned Roman emperor in 800, thereby founding the Holy Roman Empire. He built the first effective state in western Europe since the collapse of Roman power. In 791–796, he destroyed the Avar khaganate.

**Comnena, Anna** (1083–1153): Byzantine historian and daughter of Alexius I; wrote the *Alexiad*, a primary source on the Pechenegs and Cumans of the Pontic-Caspian steppes.

**Constantine I, the Great** (b. 272; r. 306–337): First Christian Roman emperor; founded New Rome, or Constantinople, in 330 and reorganized the Roman state as an autocracy known as the Dominate. In 323–324, he imposed treaty obligations on the Goths and Sarmatians on the Pontic-Caspian steppes that lasted down to the arrival of the Huns in 375.

**Corbulo, Gnaeus Domitius** (6–67): Roman senator and consul; a distinguished general under the emperors Claudius (41–54) and Nero (54–68). He commanded the eastern legions in the War of Armenian Succession (54–66), but his success and fame gained him the enmity of Nero, who ordered his loyal commander to commit suicide in 67.

**Crassus, Marcus Licinius** (115–53 B.C.): Roman senator and consul in 70 and 55 B.C.; a leading commander of the republic and a member of the First Triumvirate. He was defeated and slain by the Parthians at the Battle of Carrhae in 53 B.C.
Cyril (827–869) and Methodius (826–885): Fraternal monks, born at Thessalonica. They are hailed “Apostles to the Slavs,” converting Moravians, Serbians, and Bulgarians. Cyril devised the Cyrillic alphabet and translated the Bible into Slavic.

Cyrus the Great (b. c. 590 B.C., r. 559–530 B.C.): Achaemenid king; founded the Persian Empire, conquering Lydia in 546 B.C. and Babylonia in 539 B.C. He was hailed in classical sources as the greatest conqueror before Alexander the Great. He was killed in a frontier war against the Massagetai, a Scythian tribe, north of the Jaxartes River.

Darius I (b. c. 550 B.C.; r. 521–486 B.C.): Achaemenid king of Persia; succeeded to the throne during the Great Revolt of 522–521 B.C. He organized the satrapies of the Persian Empire and built the capital of Persepolis. In 515 or 512 B.C., he waged unsuccessful war against the Scythians on the Pontic-Caspian steppes.

Demetrius II Nicator (b. c. 160 B.C.; r. 147–141 B.C., 129–125 B.C.): Seleucid king and son of Demetrius I Soter (161–150 B.C.). This dashing monarch was defeated and captured by the Parthian king Mithradates I in 141 B.C. Demetrius lived in gilded captivity at the Arsacid court and married the sister of Phraates II. In 129 B.C., King Phraates II, at war with Demetrius’s brother Antiochus VII, released Demetrius to raise a rebellion in Syria. Demetrius regained his throne but failed to restore Seleucid power.


Drogon Chogyal Phags-pa (1235–1280): Fifth leader of the Sakya school of Buddhism in Tibet and the spiritual mentor to Kublai Khan. In 1268, at the behest of Kublai Khan, he devised the Phags-pa script, an adaptation of the Tibetan script, so that all official documents could be published in Mongolian.

Duzong (b. 1240; r. 1264–1274): Song emperor; faced rebellions and a fiscal crisis and, thus, was ill prepared to face the renewed Mongol conquest by Kublai Khan in 1268. In March 1273, the fall of Xianyang, the last strategic
fortress on the Yangtze River, signaled the doom of the Song Dynasty, and Duzong died as the Mongol army advanced against his capital in August 1274.

**Ermanaric** (d. 376): King of the Goths; committed suicide upon the defeat of his people by the Huns. He was remembered in the Norse legend of the Volsungs as the tyrant Jörmunrek.

**Eucratides** (c. 175–145 B.C.): Greco-Bactrian king; overthrew the royal family of Euthydemus and issued an extensive coinage used along the Silk Road. He lost Herat and other western provinces to the Parthian king Mithradates I.

**Eudoxus of Cyzicus** (fl. c. 130–90 B.C.): Greek navigator for King Ptolemy VIII (126–116 B.C.); credited with the discovery of the use of the monsoon season to sail the Indian Ocean.


**Fadlan, Ahmad ibn** (fl. 10th c.): Persian geographer and envoy to the Bulgars in 921–922 who wrote a detailed account of his encounters with the Khazars, Bulgars, and Rus on the Volga River.

**Faxian** (337–422): Chinese Buddhist monk who visited India in 399–412 and penned an account of his travels.

**Ferdowsi (Abu al-Qasem Mansur)** (940–1020): Persian poet; wrote the epic *Shah-nameh* ("Books of Kings") in 977–1010. This national epic celebrated Persian historical traditions before the advent of Islam and set the standard of expression in literary Middle Persian.

**Galla Placidia** (c. 388–450): The daughter of Theodosius I; married to King Ataulphus of the Visigoths in 410–414. In 417, she married the Roman general Constantius III, who was briefly emperor in 421. She acted as the regent for her son, the western emperor Valentinian III.
Gan Ying (fl. 1st c. A.D.): Han envoy; sent by Ban Chao on a mission to contact imperial Rome in 97. He visited Sogdiana, Bactria, Gandhara, and Parthi, and likely reached the shores of the Persian Gulf. He wrote the only Chinese account about the Roman world and gained important new information on the lands of the Near East and Transoxania.

Gao Xianzhi (d. 756): Tang commander of the Four Garrisons (Tarim Basin) and an experienced general of Korean ancestry. He commanded the Tang army that was defeated by the Arabs and Karluks at the Battle of Talas in 751.

Gaozong (b. 628; r. 649–683): Tang emperor of China; ruled in the Confucian tradition. He faced serious rebellions, and in 679–681, the Gök Turks regained their independence. After he suffered a series of strokes, his principal wife and empress took charge of policy and, later, succeeded as regent empress (690–705).

Gaozu (b. 247 B.C.; r. 206–195 B.C.): First Han emperor of China. Overthrew the Qin Dynasty. Born Liu Bang and of humble origin, he preferred negotiation to war with Modu Chanyu after he suffered an embarrassing defeat at Mount Baideng in 200 B.C. Gaozu instituted the tribute system whereby nomadic tribes could be turned into allies dependent on Chinese silk and goods.

Gaozu (b. 566; r. 618–626): Tang emperor of China. One of the greatest soldier-emperors of Chinese history. Under the Sui emperors, Gaozu, or Li Yuan, ruled strategic borderlands in Shanxi. In 618, he seized power. He waged war against the Gök Turks of the eastern khaganate.

Gautama, Siddhartha (563–483 B.C.): The Buddha, a prince of the Kshatriya Shakya clan, was the sage who founded Buddhism. Around 534 B.C., he assumed an ascetic life to achieve understanding of human suffering. In the deer park at Sarnath, he achieved enlightenment and went on to teach the noble truths of the Middle Way, the fundamental tenets of Buddhism.

Genghis Khan (b. 1162 or 1167; r. 1206–1227): Born Temujin, he was the son of Yesugei (d. c. 1171). He was the greatest conqueror of the steppes and founder of the Mongol Empire. In 1180–1204, he defeated his rival,
Jamukha, and united the Mongol tribes. In 1206, the kurultai acclaimed Genghis Khan “Universal Lord.” In 1209–1210, he compelled the Emperor Xiangzong (1206–1211) of Xi Xia to submit. In 1211–1216, he wrested northern China from the Jin (Jurchen) Empire. In lightning campaigns, he overthrew the empire of Khwarezm in 1218–1223 and, thus, opened the lands of eastern Islam to Mongol conquest. He died while planning his final campaign against the Jin Empire. His generalship and organizational genius place him among the great captains of warfare. By his principal wife, Börte, he had four sons: Jochi, Chagatai, Ögödei, and Tolui.

Ghazan (b. 1271; r. 1295–1304): Ilkhan of Iran; assumed the name Mahmud upon his conversion to Islam. Although he tolerated Buddhism and shamanism, he promoted the high Persian culture of Islam and initiated the first major building program of Muslim monuments at Tabriz.

Guangwu (b. 5 B.C.; r. 25–57 A.D.): Han emperor; restored the Han Dynasty and moved the capital to Luoyang. He pursued a defensive policy against the nomadic tribes, but he reimposed Chinese rule over what is now Korea and Vietnam.

Gunchen (161–126 B.C.): Chanyu of the Xiongnu; long abided by treaty arrangements with Han China. Raiding by the Xiongnu and Han retaliatory measures led to the outbreak of war in 133 B.C.

Güyük (b. 1206; r. 1246–1248): Mongol khan; the son of Ögödei and Töregene. The strong-willed Töregene assumed a regency in 1241–1246, until she could arrange for the acclamation of Güyük as Great Khan by the kurultai. Güyük, a suspicious ruler and an alcoholic, discredited the house of Ögödei in the eyes of many Mongols. He died while en route to settle scores with his cousin Batu.

Harshavardhana (b. c. 590; r. 606–647): Ruled the Indo-Gangetic Plain from Kannauj. A convert to Buddhism, Harshavardhana maintained the aesthetics and arts of the Gupta Empire. The Chinese pilgrim Xuanzang wrote a description of his court.
Harun al-Rashid (b. 763; r. 786–809): Abbasid caliph; celebrated for his patronage of letters and arts. He proved a foe of Byzantium, and he concluded a treaty with Charlemagne guaranteeing the safety of Christian pilgrims to the Holy Land. With his death, the caliphate experienced civil war and fragmentation.

Heraclius (b. c. 576; r. 610–641): Byzantine emperor and exarch of Carthage; overthrew the usurper Phocas (r. 602–610). Heraclius rescued the eastern Roman Empire from near collapse and transformed it into the Byzantine state. He defeated Shah Khosrow II in 626–628 and recovered the eastern provinces. He nearly succeeded in reconciling the monophysites and Chalcedonians. Incapacitated by illness, the aging Heraclius failed to prevent the loss of Syria and Egypt to the Arab armies in 636–641.

Heraios (c. 1–30): Ruler of the Tocharians and ancestor to the Kushan kings; he is known from his coins, on which he is styled “tyrant.”

Herodotus (c. 490–425 B.C.): Known as the father of history. A native of Halicarnassus, he traveled the Persian Empire and the lands around the Black Sea. He wrote his History to explain the wars between the Greeks and Persians. He gives a detailed account of the nomadic Scythians on the Pontic-Caspian steppes in the fourth book of the History.

Hongwu (b. 1328; r. 1368–1398): Ming emperor of China and the peasant rebel leader and Buddhist monk Zhu Yuanzhang. In 1353–1367, he secured the Yangtze valley and, in 1328, occupied Dadu. He expelled the Mongol emperor Togon-temür (1333–1368) and was hailed emperor of the Ming Dynasty (1368–1644). He razed the Mongol palace and replaced Dadu with the new Chinese city of Beijing.


Honorianus, Flavius (b. 384; r. 395–421): Second son of Theodosius I; was created Augustus in 393 and succeeded as western emperor in 395. Real power was in the hands of Stilicho down to 408. Honorius, at his
capital at Ravenna from 402 on, witnessed the loss of northwestern and Spanish provinces.

**Hulagu** (b. 1218; r. 1256–1265): Mongol ilkhan; the son of Tolui and founder of the ilkhanate. In 1256–1260, he waged a war of conquest of the Islamic world, destroying Alamut, the seat of the Assassins, and sacking Baghdad in 1258. He halted his campaign against Mamluk Egypt and withdrew to support his brother Kublai Khan in his civil war against Arigh Böke. Kublai Khan bestowed on Hulagu the rank of *ilkhan*, “loyal khan”—the title held by his successors.

**Humayun** (b. 1508; r. 1530–1539, 1555–1556): Mughal emperor of India; succeeded his father, Bābur. In 1539, he was expelled from India by Sher Khan, who had rallied the former Lodi mercenary bands of Afghans that had retired to the Bengal after 1527. With Safavid assistance, Humayun reconquered northern India in 1555–1556.

**Huo Qubing** (c. 140–117 B.C.): Han general; nephew of the general Wei Qing. He distinguished himself as a tactician against the Xiongnu. In 119 B.C., he and his uncle Wei Qing captured Mobei, the encampment of Ichise Chanyu. A favorite of Emperor Wudi, Huo Qubing died prematurely from plague and was honored with a spectacular burial.

**Huvishka** (147–180): Kushan emperor, succeeded Kanishka I. He consolidated Kushan rule in India and patronized Buddhism and the leading Hindu cults. His coinage reveals that he venerated all the gods of his empire.

**Ibn Khaldun** (1332–1406): Arab historian; born in Tunis of an Arab family from Andalusia. He wrote the influential *Muqaddimah*, a treatise on the rise and fall of Islamic governments. At the siege of Damascus in 1401, he reportedly met with Tamerlane and conversed on statecraft and proper government.

**Ichise** (126–114 B.C.): *Chanyu* of the Xiongnu; suffered successive defeats at the hands of Han armies. In 121 B.C., he was driven out of the Gansu Corridor, and he suffered a humiliating defeat and the loss of his capital Modei in 119 B.C. Repeated defeats undermined his authority, and he was assassinated by a disaffected general.
Igor Svyatoslavich, “the Brave” (b. 1151; r. 1180–1202): Prince of Novgorod-Seversky. Led an abortive expedition against the Cumans. He is celebrated in the earliest Russian epic poem.

Illig Khagan (r. 620–630): Ruled over the eastern Turkish khaganate. His raids into northern China precipitated war with the Tang emperor Taizong. In 626–630, the Tang general Li Jing defeated and captured Illig, thereby ending the eastern Turkish khaganate and imposing Chinese overlordship in 630–681.

Ilterish Khagan (682–694): Khagan of the eastern Turks. Ended Chinese rule in 681 and in 682 reestablished the eastern Turkish khaganate.

Iltutmish (r. 1210–1236): Sultan of Delhi; succeeded his father-in-law, Aybak, and reestablished the capital at Delhi. He organized a system of land grants to his emirs and soldiers, but he also co-opted loyal Hindu princes into the military hierarchy.

Ishbara Khagan (650–658): Khagan of the western Turks. Was defeated by a Tang army under Su Dingfang in 657. Henceforth, the western Turks acknowledged as their overlord the Tang emperor Gaozong (649–683).

Isidore of Charax (fl. 1st c. B.C.): Wrote Parthian Stations, an itinerary of the Silk Road across the Parthian Empire.

Ismail I (b. 1487; 1501–1524): First Safavid shah of Iran. Founded the Shi’ite state in Iran and revived Iran as one of the great Islamic powers. He fought for Transoxania against Muhammad Shaybani (1500–1510), who had united the Turkish tribes of the central Eurasian steppe as the Uzbek confederation. On December 2, 1510, Shah Ismail decisively defeated and slew Muhammad Shaybani at the Battle of Merv. But Shah Ismail had to confront the Ottoman threat from the west. He was defeated by the Ottoman sultan Selim I (1512–1520) on August 23, 1514.

Istami (553–575): Yabgu of the western Gök Turks; brother of Khagan Bumin, who commissioned Istami to pursue the Avars, who had fled west. Istami established western Turks on the central Eurasian steppe. In 557–561,
in alliance with Shah Khosrow I, he occupied Transoxania and ended the Hephthalite Empire.

Ivan I Danilovich (b. 1288; r. 1325–1340): Grand prince of Moscow; a loyal vassal of the khan of the Golden Horde (1312–1341). In 1328, the khan rewarded Ivan I with Vladimir and the right to collect from the other Russian princes the tribute due to the Mongols. Ivan, nicknamed Kalita (“Moneybags”), exploited his position to turn Moscow into the premier Russian principality.


Ivan IV (b. 1530; r. 1547–1584): Ivan the Terrible, tsar of Russia. Reformed the Russian army and conquered the khanates of Kazan (1152) and Astrakhan (1556). He ended the Mongol threat, securing the lower Volga valley and, thus, enabling Russian expansion across Siberia.

Jalal al-Din Mingburnu (1220–1231): Khwarezm shah; the son and successor of Muhammad Shah. In 1221, he was forced to retreat across the Hindu Kush into India. In 1224, he returned from exile, but he failed to regain his kingdom.

Jalal al-Din Rumi (1206–1273): Persian mystic and poet; known as Rumi. He was born in Balkh, the son of the Baha al-Din Walad, a celebrated jurist and theologian. His family relocated to Konya in 1228, where Rumi succeeded his father as head of the madrasah in 1232. In 1244, he adopted an ascetic life and founded the Mevlevi mystical order of Sufism. The members of this order, the dervishes, converted the Christians of Anatolia in the 13th and 14th centuries.

Jalal-ud-Din Firuz (1290–1296): Khalji sultan of Delhi; ended the rule of the slave sultans and founded the second Muslim dynasty in India, the Khilji. His talented nephew and successor, Ala-ud-Din Khilji, repelled Mongol attacks and campaigned in the Deccan.
Jamal al-Din (fl. c. 1250–1300): Persian astronomer and native of Bukhara. Entered the service of Kublai Khan circa 1255. In 1285, he presented to Kublai Khan a massive geographical compendium and introduced sophisticated instruments for measuring the earth. He played a pivotal role in the transfer to China of the science of the Islamic world.

Jamukha (c. 1165–1206): Mongol prince; the sworn brother and then rival of Temujin, Genghis Khan. In 1197–1202, he fought against Temujin and Wang Khan and, in 1203, in alliance with Wang Khan, defeated Temujin at the Battle of Baljuna. Temujin, however, later rallied and defeated Jamukha.

Jayapala Shahi (964–1001): Rajput ruler over the Punjab and Kabul Valley. Devoted to Shiva. He was decisively defeated by Sebüktigin at the Battle of the Neelum River in Kashmir in 986. The victory gained Kabul and Peshawar, the future bases for Muslim expansion into India.

Jebe (d. 1225): Mongol general; born as Zurgadai but received his nickname Jebe (“Arrow”) when he boldly confessed that he had accidentally wounded Genghis Khan in battle in 1201. He was a trusted field commander and, thus, he shared with Subutai command of the western expedition in 1221–1223.

Jiu Zhuji (1148–1227): Daoist Chinese monk. Was invited to converse with Genghis Khan on matters of immortality and just rule. Jiu Zhuji departed his home in Shandong in 1220 and journeyed west, meeting Genghis Khan at the Mongol camp at the base of the Hindu Kush in May 1222. Even if embroidered, the exchange captures the religious outlook of Genghis Khan.

Jizhu Chanyu (178–154 B.C.): Ruler of the Xiongnu, whose attacks drove the Yuezhi (Tocharian speakers) westward to Ferghana.

Jochi (1181–1227): Mongol prince; the first son of Genghis Khan and Börte, but he was suspected to be the son of the Merkit warrior Chilger Bökh, who had held Börte captive for eight months. Genghis Khan accepted Jochi as his son. Jochi, while personally brave, was perceived as lacking the qualities of a khan. He also had quarreled with his brother Chagatai during the Khwarezmian campaign in 1220. Hence, Genghis Khan decided to assign to
Jochi the western ulus. Because Jochi predeceased his father, Jochi’s domain (the future Golden Horde) was assigned to his son Batu.

**Julian the Apostate** (b. 331; r. 360–363): Roman emperor and Neo-Platonic philosopher; nephew of Constantine I. Julian restored the worship of the pagan gods. He waged an unsuccessful campaign against Persia in 363. He failed to capture the Persian capital Ctesiphon, and he was slain in a skirmish in upper Mesopotamia during the retreat of his army.

**Justin II** (b. c. 520; r. 565–578): Byzantine emperor; nephew and heir of Justinian I. He precipitated a Persian war in 572 and, from 574, because of mental illness, was under the regency of his wife, Sophia (niece of Theodora), and Tiberius II.

**Justinian I** (b. 482; r. 527–565): Known as Justinian the Great; the greatest emperor since Constantine. He promoted the most talented at his court without regard to birth. He restored imperial rule in Italy and Africa, sought religious reconciliation, and sponsored arts and letters. His most enduring achievements are the Hagia Sophia and the *Corpus Juris Civilis*.

**Justinian II** (b. c. 669; r. 705–711): The last Heraclian emperor and an unbalanced tyrant. He was overthrown, mutilated (by slitting his nose), and exiled to Cherson. He escaped to the Khazar court and returned with a Khazar army to regain his throne. He was deposed in 711. His foreign policy led to defeats at the hands of the Arabs and exposed Constantinople to a second Arabic siege.

**Juvayni** (1226–1283): Persian historian and native of Khurasan, served both Khwarezmian shah Jalal al-Din (1220–1231) and the Mongol khans Öködei (1229–1241) and Hulagu (1256–1625). He wrote his *History of the World Conqueror* based on contemporary sources. He witnessed the sack of Baghdad, and he twice visited the court at Karakorum.

**Kaidu** (b. 1230; r. 1260–1301): Mongol khan; a grandson of Öködei with aspirations to the throne of the Great Khan. In the civil war of 1259–1264, he dominated the central Eurasian steppe and clashed with the Chagatai khan Baraq for control of Transoxania. In 1267, he concluded a truce with Baraq
and turned against Kublai Khan and his successor, Temür Khan (1294–1307). Based in the Altai Mountains, he waged local rebellion down to his death in 1301.

**Kanishka** (127–140): Fourth Kushan emperor; revered as convert to Buddhism, although he was more likely a patron who promoted favorable conditions for the spread of Buddhism into central Asia and Han China. He is credited, anachronistically, by a later Buddhist tradition with summoning a Fourth Buddhist Council in 78.

**Kartir** (fl. 3rd c.): Zoroastrian priest who reformed the monotheistic faith; he was patronized by shahs Ardashir I (227–240) and Shapur I (240–272).

**Kay-Khusraw I** (1204–1210): Seljuk sultan of Konya (Rûm). United the Turkish tribes in central and eastern Anatolia. He turned Konya into a Muslim capital. He promoted the caravan trade and minted the first Muslim silver coinage in Asia Minor.

**Kay-Khusraw II** (1237–1246): Seljuk sultan of Konya (Rûm). He failed to maintain control over the Turkish tribes and, thus, faced repeated rebellions. He refused to render homage to the Mongol khan Ögödei (1228–1241). Bayju, the Mongol commander in Iran, invaded Asia Minor and decisively defeated Kay-Khusraw at the Battle of Köse Dag on June 26, 1243. Thereafter, the sultans of Konya, as Mongol vassals, lost control over the emirs and Turkish tribes of Asia Minor.

**Khalid ibn Barmak** (705–782): Abbasid vizier; first appointed by as-Saffah (750–754). He was descended from the Barmakid family of Balkh, which had converted from Buddhism to Islam circa 670. He patronized scientists, mathematicians, and physicians and promoted the study of Buddhism among Muslim scholars.

**Khosrow I** (531–579): Sassanid shah; waged two wars against Justinian, emperor of the eastern Roman (Byzantine) Empire, in 530–532 and 550–545. He sought prestige, plunder, or subsidies of gold under treaty from Justinian rather than conquest. In 557–561, he allied with Istami, *yabgu* khagan of the western Turks, to defeat the Hephthalites.
Khosrow II (591–628): Last great Sassanid shah. He gained his throne with the support of the Byzantine emperor Maurice. In 602–628, he waged a war of conquest of the eastern provinces of the Byzantine Empire. In alliance with the Avars, he besieged Constantinople in 626. In 622–628, the emperor Heraclius, along with Turkish nomadic allies, launched offensives in Armenia, Iran, and Mesopotamia that led to the defeat and overthrow of Khosrow II. Heraclius recovered his lost eastern provinces, so weakening the Sassanid state that it fell to Arab armies in 636–651.

Kitbuqa (d. 1260): Mongol general; the leading field commander of Hulagu in 1256–1259. He was defeated and slain by the Mamluk army at the Battle of Ain Jalut on September 3, 1260.

Kokchu (d. 1206): Shaman and advisor to Genghis Khan; credited with great influence over the khan. He was executed on grounds of treachery based on information supplied by Börte, principal wife of Genghis Khan.

Krum (r. c. 803–814): Khan of the Bulgars; defeated the Byzantine emperors Nicephorus I and Michael I. He negotiated the first treaty with Byzantium that delineated the Bulgar state.

Kublai Khan (b. 1215; r. 1260–1294): Mongol khan; the second son of Tolui. Kublai Khan distinguished himself in campaigns against the Jin Empire in 1234–1235 and against Song China in 1257–1259. He was proclaimed khan by the Mongol army in 1260 and defeated his rival brother, Arigh Böke, in the civil war of 1260–1264. In 1268–1279, he completed the conquest of Song China. In 1274 and 1281, he launched two costly, abortive expeditions against Japan. In 1271, he assumed the Chinese temple name Shizu, the first of a new Yuan Dynasty (1271–1368). He founded a new capital, Dadu (Beijing), which Marco Polo called Kanbalu (Xanadu). Kublai Khan ruled through imperial servants of various nationalities rather than the Confucian bureaucratic classes. A convert to Buddhism, he assured the eventual triumph of Buddhism among the Mongol tribes.

Kuchlug (d. 1218; r. 1211–1218): Prince of the Naimans. Refused to submit to Genghis Khan in 1204 and took service with the Kara-Khitan gurkhan Mozhu (1178–1211). In 1211, he seized power at Balasagun, deposed the
king, and intrigued with Muhammad Shah of Khwarezm against Genghis Khan. A zealous convert to Buddhism, Kuchlug persecuted his Muslim subjects. In 1218, he was overthrown and died an exile when the Mongol army under Jebe invaded the Kara-Khitan Empire.

**Kujula Kadphises** (30–80): Kushan emperor; crossed the Hindu Kush and conquered Taxila and Punjab. He forged a confederation of the Tocharian tribes in Bactria into a bureaucratic state. He is hailed in the Rabatak inscription as the founder of the Kushan royal family.

**Leo I, the Great** (b. c. 390; r. 440–461): The first pope of a noble Roman family. Leo upheld papal primacy against the patriarch of Constantinople. He defined the creed of the western church in his *Tome* (449), accepted at the Fourth Ecumenical Council in 451. He won a moral victory by convincing Attila to withdraw from Italy in 452.

**Li Guangli** (fl. 1st c. B.C.): Courtier and general of Emperor Wudi (141–87 B.C.). Commanded two expeditions to subdue Sogdiana in the so-called War of the Heavenly Horses (104–102 B.C.). In 102 B.C., Li Guangli forced the Sogdians to capitulate and pay a tribute of horses, but he lost most of his army and the horses on his return.

**Li Jing** (571–649): Tang general and chancellor; proved the ablest commander under emperors Gaozu and Taizong. In 629–630, he defeated and captured Khagan Illig, thereby ending the eastern Turkish khaganate.

**Li Shiji** (594–669): Tang general; distinguished himself in the campaign against the Gök Turks in 629–630. He pacified the caravan cities of the Tarim Basin and defeated the nomadic Xueyantuo, who occupied the grasslands of eastern Mongolia.

**Lizong** (b. 1205; r. 1224–1264): Song emperor. He was a noted patron of letters and architecture, but he proved unequal to the task of facing renewed Mongol attacks in 1257. He was saved by the outbreak of the Mongol civil war in 1269–1264.
**Lokaksema** (b. c. 147): A Kushan from Gandhara and a Buddhist monk at the Han capital of Luoyang. In 178–189, he translated a number of Sanskrit sutras into Chinese. His student Zhi Yao, also styled a Kushan monk, translated a number of Mahayana Buddhist texts in the late 2nd century.

**Longjumeau, Andrew of** (d. after 1253): Dominican friar. Sent as the envoy of Pope Innocent the IV (1243–1254) to the ilkhanate court in 1245–1247. In 1248–1251, he traveled to Karakorum as the envoy of King Louis IX of France (1226–1270). In 1249, he reached the Mongol Empire after the death of Gıyûk. The regent Sorghaghtani Beki, although a Nestorian Christian, received the letters and gifts as token of submission by both Pope Innocent IV and King Louis IX.

**Lucullus, Lucius Licinius** (118–56 B.C.): Consul in 74 B.C.; assumed the command as proconsul against Mithradates VI, king of Pontus, in 73–66 B.C. In 69 B.C., his victory at Tigranocerta over King Tigranes II of Armenia and Mithradates VI made Rome the premier power in the Near East.

**Ma Huan** (1380–1460): Admiral of Ming China; a Muslim and Arabic speaker. At the command of the Ming emperor Yongle (1402–1424), he set sail with 57 ships in a great expedition to the western lands in 1413. He visited Champa, Java, Sumatra, Malaya, the southern Indian port of Cochin, Hormuz, and ultimately, Mecca.

**Mahavira** (599–527 B.C.): Sage and teacher; the founder of Jainism. He is hailed as the 24th and last Tirthankara, or teacher, of the Jain faith. Born into a royal family of Bihar, of the Kshatriya caste, he assumed an ascetic life, attained enlightenment, and taught the cardinal principles of a life based on *ahimsa*, or nonviolence, and respect for all living creatures.

**Mahmud al-Kashgari** (1005–1102): Turkish poet and scholar under the Karakhanids; wrote the first compendium on the Turkish language, *Diwan lughat at-Turk*, and adapted the Arabic-Persian script for writing Turkish. His work contains a wealth of information about early Turkish history and religious traditions. He also drew the first world map showing the location of Turkish tribes.
Mahmud of Ghazni (b. 971; r. 997–1030): Ghaznavid sultan; the son and successor of Sebüktigin. He waged 17 campaigns in northern India, whereby he gained the loot and slaves to sustain his professional army. He clashed with the Karakhanids over Transoxania, and in 1015–1071, he secured Khwarezm. In 1027–1028, he extended his sway over the caravan cities of northern Iran.

Malik-Shah (b. 1055; r. 1072–1092): Seljuk sultan; son of Alp-Arslan. He concentrated on war against the Fatimid caliphate at Cairo, and he faced threats in Transoxania. Independent ghazi warriors, who only nominally recognized Malik-Shah, migrated into Asia Minor and established their own states at Konya and Sivas.

Marcus Aurelius (161–180): Roman emperor; considered the last and noblest of the so-called Five Good Emperors of Rome. A Stoic in outlook, he ruled judiciously and waged successful Parthian (161–166) and German (167–180) wars. Merchants, claiming to represent the emperor, are reported to have arrived by sea and were received at the Han court in 166.

Marwan II (b. 688; r. 744–750): Umayyad caliph; moved the capital from Damascus to Harran. In 737, as governor in Armenia, he waged a campaign north of the Caucasus and compelled the Khazars to accept Islam. In 750, he was defeated by as-Saffah at the Battle of the Zab and, later, captured and executed.

Maurice (582–602): Byzantine emperor; waged campaigns against the Avars in the Balkans and ended the Persian war (572–590) by supporting Shah Khosrow II to the Sassanid throne. He is credited with writing the Strategikon, a manual of tactics against nomadic horse archers.

Mawlana: see Jalal al-Din Rumi.

Meng Tian (d. 210 B.C.): The leading general of the Qin emperor Shihuangdi. In 221 B.C., he led a major expedition against the Xiongnu and established the empire’s northern frontier. He directed the construction of the continuous Great Wall of China.
Midas (c. 725–696 B.C.): King of Phrygia. Constructed a great royal tumulus near his capital, Gordion. He was remembered by Greeks for his patronage of the oracle of Delphi. He committed suicide after the Cimmerians, Iranian-speaking nomadic invaders, destroyed his kingdom.

Mithradates I (171–138 B.C.): King of Parthia, defeated and captured the Seleucid king Demetrius II in 140 B.C. and then the Greco-Bactrian king Eucratides. He conquered Media, Persia, Mesopotamia, Margiana, and Aria.

Mithradates II (137–88 B.C.): King of Parthia. Turned the Arsacids into a Near East monarchy. He founded the capital Ctesiphon.

Mithradates VI Eupator (121–63 B.C.): King of Pontus. Fought three wars with Rome (89–85 B.C., 83–81 B.C., and 74–63 B.C.) for mastery of Asia Minor. He was finally defeated by Pompey the Great, fled to the Tauric Chersonese, and committed suicide.

Modu Chanyu (b. c. 234 B.C.; r. 209–174 B.C.): Succeeded his father, Touman, as chanyu of the Xiongnu. He gave the tribal confederation administrative organization and effective leadership in raiding China, and he defeated the army of Han emperor Gaozu at the Battle of Mount Baideng in 200 B.C. Thereafter, he received gifts and silk from the Han court in return for an alliance and sale of horses to the Han armies.

Möngke (b. 1209; r. 1251–1259): Mongol khan and eldest son of Tolui and Sorghaghtani Beki. He proved an intelligent ruler, who commissioned his brother Hulagu to conquer the Islamic world in 1256. In 1257–1259, he along with his brother Kublai Khan, invaded Song China. He died of dysentery while besieging the fortress Diaoyu on the Yangtze River. His death precipitated a civil war.

Montecorvino, Giovanni da (1247–1328): Franciscan missionary; ordained in Cathay in 1307. He had Christian works translated into Uighur. He was credited with converting 6,000 Mongols, including Temür Khan, after 35 years of proselytizing.
Muawiya (b. 602; r. 661–689): Umayyad caliph; general of the Syrian army and father of the Arabic navy. In 656, he refused to accept Ali, the cousin of Muhammad, as the fourth Rashidun caliph because of Ali’s implication in the murder of Caliph Uthman (644–656). Muawiya triumphed over the forces of Ali and, thus, founded the first hereditary Umayyad caliphate at Damascus.

Muhammad (570–632): The prophet of God (Allah), he was called to cleanse the religion of Abraham and, thus, founded Islam. His revelations were collected into the Qur’an. Driven from his native Mecca in 622, Muhammad created an ummah (community of believers) at Medina that defeated the Meccans. At his death, Muhammad had united all of Arabia under Islam.

Muhammad Ghuri (b. 1150, r. 1202–1206): Ghurid emir; extended the Ghurids into northern India. He conquered the Punjab and Doab in the name of his older brother Ghiyas al-Din (1163–1203). His decisive victory over the Rajput King Prithviraja III (1149–1192) in 1192 gained him control of Delhi. As emir, he entrusted the administration of the Indian conquests to his Turkish general Qutb al-Din Aybak.

Muhammad Shaybani (b. 1451; r. 1500–1510): Khan of the Uzbek confederation, who occupied Bukhara and Samarkand. He clashed with Ismail I, Safavid shah of Iran, and Bābūr, who quit his homeland in Ferghana to invade India. On December 2, 1510, Shah Ismail decisively defeated and slew Muhammad Shaybani at the Battle of Merv.

Nasr ibn Ahmad (864–892): Samanid emir; ruled as the Abbasid deputy over Khurasan and Transoxania. Nasr secured the frontier on the Jaxartes and gained wealth from the slave trade with the Turkish tribes. He turned Bukhara into the model of a Muslim city, with its architecture and arts, and sponsored the Persian literary culture of eastern Islam.

Nasr ibn Sayyar (b. 663; r. 738–748): Umayyad governor of Khurasan; completed the conquest of Transoxania. He pursued conciliatory policies toward all religions and reformed taxation and administration.
Nicephorus I (802–811): Byzantine emperor; served as treasurer of the empress Irene (797–802). He was an Arabian by birth and seized power as Irene lost popularity. He suffered humiliating defeats at the hands of the Abbasid caliph Harun al-Rashid. He was defeated and slain by Khan Krum of the Bulgars.

Ningzong (b. 1168; r. 1194–1224): Song emperor of China. Allied with Khan Ögödei to partition the remaining domains of the Jin Empire in 122. But the Song army sought to retake Kaifeng and, thus, precipitated an inconclusive war in 1234–1241.

Octar (c. 420–430): Ruled over the western Huns on the Pannonian grasslands; he was the father of Attila (434–453) and Bleda (434–445). See also Rugila.

Octavian: See Augustus.

Ögödei (b. 1186; r. 1229–1241): Mongol khan; the third son of Genghis Khan and Börte. Ögödei, popular and affable, was elected by the kurultai as successor to Genghis Khan. He ruled directly over the Mongolian homeland, but he was recognized as Great Khan by his brothers Chagatai and Tolui and his nephew Batu. He transformed Karakorum into a capital city and authorized Batu’s conquest of the west. His death precipitated the first succession crisis of the Mongol Empire.

Otto I (b. 912; r. 936–973): Holy Roman Emperor; duke of Saxony and son of Henry the Fowler. Otto was elected king of Germany. In 955, he decisively defeated the Hungarians on the Lech, and his campaigns against the Danes and Slavs secured imperial frontiers. In 962, he was crowned Holy Roman Emperor.

Ouyang Xiu (1007–1072): Song official and polymath; rose from obscure origins to high rank through the examination system. He sponsored the literary movement stressing clear expository prose within the tradition of Confucian classics. He epitomized the neo-Confucian scholar-official.
Peroz I (457–484): Sassanid shah; was deposed by his brother Hormizd II. He regained his throne with a Hephthalite army provided by King Khush-Nevaz. Peroz twice waged campaigns against his former ally Khush-Nevaz. In either 469 or 472, Peroz suffered a defeat and had to pay a ransom for his release. In 484, he was slain near Herat, enabling the Hephthalites to raid deep into Iran.

Phraates II (138–128 B.C.): King of Parthia; defeated Antiochus VII Sidetes and ended Seleucid power in the Near East. Phraates, however, was defeated and slain by the Sacae, who had migrated into Aria and Drangiana.

Phraates IV (38–2 B.C.): King of Parthia; negotiated with Augustus the return of the Roman standards and prisoners taken at the Battle of Carrhae in 20 B.C. He recognized Roman hegemony in Armenia—an agreement that lasted down to 54. In turn, Augustus sent the Greek courtesan Musa Urania, who became Phraates’s principal wife and mother to his heir, Phraates V (2 B.C.–A.D. 4).

Plautius Silvanus Aelianus, Tiberius (c. 15–85): Roman senator and consul (45 and 74) of patrician lineage. As legate of Moesia in 66–67, he repelled Sarmatian attacks against the Greek cities and secured the lower Danube against nomadic invaders.

Pliny the Elder (23–79): Roman senator, naturalist, and philosopher. He wrote the encyclopedic Naturalis Historia, which has a wealth of information on the Amber Road, Silk Road, and trade routes of the Indian Ocean. He died on August 25, 79, while attempting to effect rescues of friends trapped by the eruption of Mount Vesuvius.

Polo, Marco (1254–1324): Venetian adventurer; took service with Kublai Khan as the administrator of the salt monopoly at Yangzhou and as an emissary to the Burmese court. In 1251–1257, Marco Polo, along with his father Niccolò, and uncle Maffeo (who had previously visited the ilkhanate court), journeyed to Dadu. In 1292–1294, the three returned to Venice. In 1298, Marco was captured by the Genoese at the Battle of Curzola. While in prison in 1298–1299, he dictated his adventures of 23 years (1271–1294) to fellow prisoner Rustichello da Pisa, who composed the Livres des merveilles
Marco’s book was an instant success and fired the European imagination and desire to reach Cathay.

**Pompey the Great (Gnaeus Pompeius Magnus)** (106–48 B.C.): Roman senator and consul (70, 56 and 52 B.C.); a member of the First Triumvirate, along with Gaius Julius Caesar and Marcus Licinius Crassus (59–51 B.C.). He commanded the republican forces against Julius Caesar in the civil war and was decisively defeated at the Battle of Pharsalus (48 B.C.), fled to Egypt, and was murdered on orders of King Ptolemy XIII. In 66–63, Pompey had ended the war against King Mithradates VI of Pontus, reorganized the eastern province, and secured Rome’s frontier on the upper Euphrates with an overlordship over Armenia.

**Prester John**: “Priest John”; a legendary Christian king in inner Asia who would deliver Jerusalem from the Muslims. He was probably inspired by garbled reports about Yelü Dashi (1124–1143), khan of the Kara-Khitans, who had defeated Seljuk sultan Ahmad Sanjar (1118–1153) at the Battle of Qatwan on September 9, 1141. Genghis Khan was later hailed by western European Christians as Prester John or his descendant, David.

**Priscus of Panium** (c. 410–472): Roman diplomat. Accompanied the mission of the emperor Theodosius II to the court of Attila, king of the Huns, in 441–442. He wrote a perceptive account about the customs of the Huns and the character of Attila.

**Procopius** (500–565): Byzantine historian and native of Caesarea. He wrote a narrative history of the wars of the emperor Justinian (527–565) and Buildings (a monograph of the emperor’s building programs). In his *Secret History*, or *Anecdota*, he vents his outrage over Justinian and the empress Theodora. He provides invaluable information on the nomadic peoples of the western and central Eurasian steppes and the Sassanid Empire.

**Ptolemy (Claudius Ptolemeus)** (90–168): Mathematician, scientist, and geographer of Alexandria. He composed the *Geographica*, which included a map of the known world to Romans, in the mid-2nd century. He also measured the circumference of the earth and wrote treatises on optics, astronomy, and music.
Qapaghan (694–716): Khagan of the eastern Turks. Restored Turkish power on the eastern Eurasian steppes. He was acknowledged overlord by the western Turks of the Onoq confederacy. He battled both Tang armies and Tibetans for control of the Tarim Basin, and he clashed with Qutaybah ibn Muslim, Umayyad governor of Khurasan, for control of Transoxania.

Qilij Arslan I (1092–1107): Seljuk sultan of Konya (Rûm). Suffered serious defeats at the hands of the First Crusade in 1097. In 1097–1098, the Byzantine emperor Alexius I thus recovered the western third of Asia Minor.

Qilij Arslan II (1156–1192): Seljuk sultan of Konya (Rûm). Defeated the Byzantine emperor Manuel I (1143–1180) at the Battle of Myriocephalon on September 17, 1176. The victory checked the revival of Byzantine power in Asia Minor.

Qutaybah ibn Muslim (b. 699; r. 705–715): Umayyad governor of Khurasan; waged a destructive war against the cities of Transoxania, looting Manichaean, Zoroastrian, and Buddhist sanctuaries. He took Bukhara in 709 and Samarkand in 712. His ruthless efforts to impose Islam galvanized the Sogdian populations to invite Suluk, yabgu of the western Turks, to intervene. Qutaybah was executed on grounds of treason on the orders of Caliph Sulayman.

Qutb ud-Din Aybak (1206–1210): Sultan of Delhi; was the leading general of Muhammad Ghuri (1202–1206), who entrusted Aybak with the conquest of the Ganges. In 1206, he made himself sultan of the Turkish slave soldiers and, thus, founded the slave sultanate of Delhi.

Qutlugh Bilge Köl Khagan (744–747): Khagan of the Uighurs; ended the Gök Turk khaganate. He was acclaimed khagan by the kurultai of the Uighurs and entered into alliance with Tang China.

Qutuz, al-Muaaffar Sayf al-Din (1259–1260): Mamluk sultan. He refused to submit to Hulagu and planned the campaign of Ain Jalut. He was overthrown and murdered by his leading general, Baybars.
Rashid al-Din (1247–1318): Persian polymath and scholar; was a Jewish convert to Islam and native of Hamadan. At the ilkhanate court, he wrote an encyclopedic history of the Islamic world, *Jami’ al-tawarikh*, in which he made extensive use of Chinese sources and the *Secret History of the Mongols*. He also translated Buddhist texts and Chinese works on statecraft into Persian.

Radiyya Begum (b. 1205; r. 1236–1240): Daughter of Iltutmish; was the first Muslim woman to rule in her own right as sultana of Delhi. She failed to win over the Turkish military elite, who were scandalized by her manners and liaisons. Her murder in 1240 marked the end of effective rule by the slave sultans of Delhi.

Romanus IV Diogenes (b. c. 1030; r. 1068–1072): Byzantine emperor; candidate of the officers of the eastern army. He married the empress Eudocia, widow of Constantine X Ducas (1059–1067). Romanus was decisively defeated and captured by the Seljuk sultan Alp-Arslan at the Battle of Manzikert in 1071. In 1072, Romanus was released by Alp-Arslan, but Michael VII ordered him deposed and blinded. Romanus died in exile.


Rugila (r. c. 420–434): King of the Huns; ruled over the eastern tribes of the Huns between the lower Danube and the lower Volga. His brother Octar (r. c. 420–430) ruled over the western Huns on the Pannonian grasslands. He was succeeded by his nephews Attila and Bleda.

Salam ibn Ziyad (681–683): First Umayyad governor of Khurasan; conducted raids into Transoxania and settled Arab military colonists on the Oxus River.

Sargon II (722–705 B.C.): Assyrian king; seized the throne in a brief civil war and claimed to be the son of Tiglath-Pileser III (745–727 B.C.). He campaigned against the neo-Hittite and Aramaic kingdoms of the Levant and Babylon.
fell fighting an invasion by the Cimmerians, Iran-speaking nomads from the Pontic-Caspian steppes who had crossed the Caucasus Mountains.

Satuk Bughra Khan (b. 922; r. 934–955): Karakhanid Black Camel khan; ruled the Yaghma Turks in the valley of the Talas River. He had converted to Islam in 934. In 940, he seized power over the Karakhanid khaganate and promoted Islam among the Turkish tribes of the central Eurasian steppes.

Sebüktigin (b. 942; r. 977–997): Ghaznavid emir and sultan; known as the Lion of Ghazni. He was the Turkish commander and son-in-law of Alp Tigin. In 977, he was declared emir by his Turkish soldiers. He forged the Ghaznavid emirate into a Muslim state and conquered the Kabul valley. In 994–999, he secured the Samanid lands south of the Oxus River, while the Karakhanids occupied Transoxania.

Seleucus I Nicator (b. 358 B.C.; r. 312–281 B.C.): Macedonian noble and general. A minor figure in the initial succession wars after the death of Alexander the Great in 323–321 B.C. In 320 B.C., he obtained the satrapy of Babylonia, and between 312 and 281 B.C., he fell heir to the Asia domains of Alexander’s empire.

Septimius Severus (b. 145; 193–211): Roman emperor; member of a senatorial family from Leptis Magna in North Africa. He seized the throne in the civil war of 193–195 and founded the Severan Dynasty (193–235). He waged two successful Parthian wars (195–196; 198–201) and organized the Roman province of Mesopotamia in northern Iraq.

Shapur I (240–270): Sassanid shah; waged three major wars against the Roman Empire, in 242–244, 253, and 254–260. In the third war, he took the Roman Valerian captive. His victories are celebrated on the rock reliefs at Naqsh-e Rostam. Shapur failed to conquer Roman territory, and in 262, he faced a counterinvasion by Odenathus, merchant prince of Palmyra and ally of Rome.

Shapur II (309–379): Sassanid shah; waged two wars against the Roman Empire, in 335–350 and 358–363. He repelled the Roman invasion of lower
Mesopotamia led by the emperor Julian II. The retreat and death of Julian enabled Shapur II to conclude a favorable treaty from the new emperor, Jovian, who relinquished the strategic fortresses of upper Mesopotamia.


Shihuangdi (b. 259 B.C.; r. 246–210 B.C.): Founded the Qin Dynasty and united the warring states of China. He took strong measures against the Xiongnu and ordered the construction of the Great Wall.

Shulu Ping (879–953): Khitan empress of the Liao Dynasty; wife of Abaoji (907–926). She manipulated the court to place on the throne her younger son, Yelü Deguang, who assumed the Chinese throne name Taizong (927–947). She again intrigued in the succession war following the death of Yelü Deguang in 947–950.

Sima Qian (c. 140–86 B.C.): Historian of Han China; wrote a dynastic history in Shiji (Historical Records). A meticulous scholar, Sima Qian incorporated a number of earlier sources, notably, the account of Zhang Qian about his travels among the Xiongnu and Yuezh (Tocharians).

Simeon (893–927): Tsar of Bulgaria; second son of Tsar Boris. He had been destined for a religious career, studying at Constantinople. In two wars (894–899; 912–924), he challenged the Macedonian emperors for domination of the Balkans. In 895–896, he courted the Pechenegs as allies against the Magyars, who were allied to the Byzantine emperor Leo VI (886–912). The Pechenegs drove the Magyars, ancestors of the Hungarians, into the Pannonian grasslands.

Sorghaghtani Beki (1204–1252): Kereyid princess and wife of Tolui, son of Genghis Khan, and the niece of Wang Khan. She was the mother of Möngke, Kublai Khan, Hulagu, and Arigh Böke. A Nestorian Christian, she favored her co-religionists at court. In 1248–1251, after the death of Khan Güyük (1246–1248), she secured the support of Batu and the majority in the kurultai to elect her son Möngke as Great Khan.

Stilicho, Flavius (d. 408): Magister militum of the western army (395–408); directed the policy of the western court. In 395–397 and in 402–408, Stilicho used the threat posed by Arcadius to secure control over Honorius. Stilicho’s policies led to the loss of the northwestern provinces in 406. In 408, he was arrested and executed on grounds of treason.

Strabo of Amaseia (63 B.C.–A.D. 24): Geographer; wrote the definitive account of the geography of the Roman Empire and the surrounding lands. His account includes invaluable information on the trade in the Erythaean Sea and the western routes of the Silk Road.

Stroganov, Anika (1488–1570): Russian merchant prince. A native of Novgorod, who received the right from Ivan the Terrible to develop the fur trade from Solvychegodsk (on the Vychegda River). These rights were confirmed in 1552, 1555, and 1560. The Stroganov family undertook the colonization of Siberia—tundra, taiga, and steppe—establishing trading posts and exacting tribute in furs.

Subutai (1175–1248): Mongol general and early companion of Temujin (the future Genghis Khan); commanded 20 campaigns. He was an expert in strategy and siege warfare. In 1221–1223, he and Jebe conducted a brilliant western campaign that climaxed at the Battle of the Kalka River on May 31, 1223. He distinguished himself in the western campaigns of Batu in 1237–1241 and in the campaign against Song China in 1246–1247.

Suluk (717–738): Yabgu of the Turgesh, a leading tribe of the western Turkish khaganate. He waged a brilliant war of attrition against the Umayyad governor in Transoxania.
Sviatoslav (b. c. 942; r. 964–972): Rus prince; son of Prince Igor (914–945) and Queen Olga (Helga), who had embraced Orthodox Christianity in 957. He defeated the Khazars circa 965, but he suffered defeat at the hands of Byzantine armies in Bulgaria (967–971). On his retreat to Kiev, he was defeated and slain by the Pechenegs.

Tacitus, Publius Cornelius (56–117): Roman historian and senator. He wrote two narrative histories, Annals and Historiae, covering the reigns of Tiberius (14–37) through Domitian (81–96), and the treatises Germania, Agricola, and Dialogus.

Tahir ibn al-Husayn (d. 821): Persian general and emir. Won the civil war of 812–813 for al-Mamun (813–833). He was rewarded with the governorship of Khurasan, which his heirs, the Tahirids, turned into a hereditary emirate.

Taiwudi (b. 408; r. 424–452): Emperor of the northern Wei Dynasty; secured northern China from Avar attacks. A devoted Buddhist, he constructed the five colossal statues of Buddha at Yungang.

Taizong (b. 598; r. 626–649): Tang emperor of China. Defeated the Gök Turks in 629–630 and brought the eastern Eurasian steppe under Chinese rule. His generals Li Jing and Li Shiji subjected the Tarim Basin, defeated the Tibetans, and advanced Chinese influence to the Jaxartes River.

Taizong (b. 939; r. 976–997): Song emperor of China; succeeded his brother Taizu. He is credited with the foundation of the Neo-Confucian bureaucratic state based on the examination system.

Taizu (b. 927; r. 960–976): Song emperor of China; the accomplished general Zhao Kuangyin, who founded the Song Dynasty. In 960, he ended the regional Zhou Dynasty at Kaifeng and then imposed order over the southern Chinese kingdoms. He ruled as the political heir of the earlier Han and Tang dynasties.

Tamerlane (b. 1336; r. 1370–1405): “Prince of Destruction”; regarded as the third greatest conqueror of the steppes (after Genghis Khan and Attila). He was the heir to the Mongol military tradition, recruiting professional
regiments of cavalry based on loyalty and rewards. Tamerlane, emir of the Turko-Mongol Barlas tribe, emerged as the leading emir in the tribal wars in Transoxania in 1360–1370. In 1370, Chagatai khan Suurgatmish (1370–1384) named Tamerlane grand emir. Tamerlane also married Saray Mulk Khanum, a descendent of Genghis Khan. From his capital, he waged six campaigns of conquest between 1381 and 1401, in which he conquered most of the western half of the Mongol Empire. In 1391–1392 and 1393–1396, he defeated Tokhtamysh and broke the power of the Golden Horde. He won his greatest victories near Delhi over the Tughluq army in 1398 and at Angora over the Ottoman army of Bayezid Yildirim in 1402. Yet neither campaign resulted in territorial expansion. In February 1405, he died en route to his seventh campaign against Ming China. His exploits inspired legends; he is credited he with writing the flattering Memoirs of Temur.

Tardu (581–602): Succeeded Istami as yabgu of the western Turks (575–581). In 581, he assumed the title khagan and established the western Turkish khaganate.

Temujin: See Genghis Khan.

Theodosius I, the Great (b. c. 346; r. 379–395): The son of Count Theodosius, a leading general of Valentinian I, Flavius Theodosius rose to high command under Gratian. In 379, as Augustus of the east, Theodosius restored order, granting a treaty to the rebellious Goths, who henceforth served as foederati. In 395, he was succeeded by Arcadius and Honorius, his sons by his first wife, Aelia Flacilla.

Theodosius II (b. 401; r. 408–450): Flavius Theodosius, the son of Arcadius and Eudocia (daughter of the Frankish general Bauto); succeeded as a minor. The emperor was directed by his ministers and his older sister, Aelia Pulcheria. Theodosius agreed to humiliating treaties dictated by Attila the Hun in 443 and 447.

Tiridates (r. 53–c. 75): Arsacid king of Armenia and brother of King Vologeses I of Parthia. He was received by the Armenian nobility and refused to acknowledge the suzerainty of Rome. In 38–59, the Roman commander Gnaeus Domitius Corbulo expelled Tiridates from Armenia and
crowned Tigranes V (60–62). Vologeses I intervened on behalf of Tiridates, but he was checked by Corbulo. In 64, a diplomatic settlement was reached whereby Tiridates regained the Armenian throne, but he was required to journey to Rome and receive his crown from Nero in 66.

**Todar Mal** (d. 1589): The Hindu finance minister of Akbar (1556–1605); of the Kshatriya caste. He entered the service of Akbar in 1560 and managed the mint, introduced a census, and reformed the system of taxation.

**Togon-temür** (b.1320; r. 1333–1368): Last Mongol khan and Yuan emperor; ruled China under the throne name of Huizong. He ruled as a figurehead, and in 1358, he fled from Dadu to Mongolia, where he died in exile in 1370.

**Tokhtamysh** (d. 1406; r. 1376–1395): Khan of the Golden Horde. Fled to Tamerlane in 1376 after he failed to unseat his uncle Urus Khan (1361–1375). With the support of Tamerlane, he was received as khan of the Golden Horde. In 1382, he avenged the Mongol defeat at Kulikovo Field by sacking Moscow and forcing Grand Prince Vasily to return to his Mongol allegiance. In 1395, Khan Tokhtamysh blundered into a war with his overlord Tamerlane (1370–1405), who ruthlessly sacked Saray and appointed as his vassal a new khan, Temür Kutlugh (1395–1401). Tokhtamysh died in exile in 1406.

**Tong Yabgu** (618–630): Khagan of the western Turkish khaganate. Ended civil war and reorganized the tribes into the Confederacy of the Ten Arrows. In 626, he allied with the Byzantine emperor Heraclius against the Sassanid shah Khosrow II and, thus, regained the cities of Transoxania.

**Tonyukuk** (646–726): A *yabgu* of the eastern Turkish khaganate and advisor to Bilge Khan (717–734). He restored the power of the khaganate after the end of the Tang overlordship in 681. In 716, he erected a memorial inscription of his deeds and his advice in the Old Turkic language at Bayn Tsokto in the Orkhon Valley (today Mongolia).

**Töregene** (c. 1185–1248): Naiman princess; married Ögödei in 1204. In 1241, upon the death of her husband, she assumed the role of Great Khatun (regent) and arranged for the election of her son Güyük as Great Khan in 1246. She directed imperial affairs and appointed ministers at court and
generals. She retired from the regency in 1246 and died out of favor with her son.

**Touman** (c. 220–209 B.C.): First known *chanyu* of the Xiongnu; organized the first nomadic confederation on the eastern Eurasian steppe. He warred with the Qin emperor Shihuangdi and with the rival Yuezhi (Tocharians) for control of the Gansu Corridor.

**Trajan** (b. 53; r. 98–117): Roman emperor; hailed the best of emperors (*optimus princeps*). He conquered Dacia (101–106) and waged a successful Parthian war (114–117). Trajan briefly occupied Mesopotamia and appointed his own Arsacid king, Parthamaspates (116–118). His successor, Hadrian (117–138), withdrew from Trajan’s conquests.

**Trajan Decius** (b. 201; r. 249–251): Roman emperor; seized the imperial throne with support of the legions of the Danube frontier. He and his son Herennius Etruscus were defeated and slain by the Goths at the Battle of Abrittus. He also initiated the first empire-wide persecution of Christians in 250–251.

**Tughluq, Ghiyas-ud-Din** (1320–1325): Sultan of Delhi; a leading Khalji general of mixed Turkish and Jat descent. He seized power and established the third line of Muslim sultans at Delhi, the Tughluqs (1320–1412).

**Tughril Bey** (b. 999; r. 1037–1063): Seljuk sultan; restored the power of the Sunni Abbasid caliphate at Baghdad. In 1025, Tughril Beg and his brother Chaghri had settled their Ghuzz Turks in Khurasan as vassals of Sultan Mahmud of Ghazna. In 1030–1037, Tughril Beg conquered Transoxania and took the title sultan. In 1040, he defeated the Ghaznavid sultan Masud (1031–1041) and conquered the former Ghaznavid domains in northern Iran. In 1055, he entered Baghdad and was received as great sultan by Caliph al-Kasim (1031–1075).

**Uldin** (r. c. 395–412): King of the Huns. Directed attacks of the Huns into the Balkans to extort subsidies and trading privileges from the eastern Roman emperor Arcadius. He commanded Hun contingents sent on request of the western Roman emperor Honorius in 406.
**Umar I** (b. 584; r. 634–644): Second of the Rashidun caliphs; was elected in preference to Ali. He directed the conquests of Byzantine Syria, Egypt, and Libya and the Sassanid Empire of Persia.

**Uthman** (b. 577; r. 644–656): Third of the Rashidun caliphs; was elected in preference to Ali. He headed the powerful Umayyad clan but personally lacked the will to govern effectively from Medina. He was slain by mutinous soldiers of the Egyptian army, who then offered the caliphate to Ali.

**Valentinian III (Flavius Placidius Valentinianus)** (b. 419; r. 425–455): Son of Galla Placidia and Constantius III. As western Roman emperor, Valentinian lost the remaining provinces in Spain and North Africa. His mother, who directed affairs of state, clashed with the powerful *magister militum* Aetius. Valentinian III, murdered by a clique of senators, left no heirs; thus, the western Roman Empire disappeared within 20 years of his death.

**Valerian** (b. c. 193; r. 253–260): Roman emperor; waged two Persian wars. He was captured by Shah Shapur I and died ignominiously in captivity. As a result of Valerian’s defeat and capture, Shah Shapur ravaged Roman provinces in eastern Asia Minor and northern Syria in 260. He ordered the second empire-wide persecution of Christians in 258–260.

**Vasily I Dmitriyevich** (b. 1371; r. 1389–1425): Grand prince of Moscow; the grandson of Ivan I. He defeated a Mongol army of 35,000 on Kulikovo Field on September 8, 1380. In 1382, Khan Tokhtamysh invaded and stormed Moscow and sacked the city, forcing Grand Prince Vasily to return to his Mongol allegiance.

**Vasudeva I** (190–225): The last effective Kushan emperor; witnessed the fragmenting of the Kushan state. His heirs ruled as vassals of the Sassanid shahs of Iran.

**Vespasian** (b. 23; r. 69–79): Roman emperor; established the Flavian Dynasty of Rome. He proved a practical emperor who corrected a fiscal crisis and secured imperial frontiers. Vespasian commenced the construction of the *limes* (highways and fortifications) on the upper Euphrates.
Vima Kadphises (105–127): Kushan emperor; received envoys from the Roman emperor Trajan. He extended Kushan domains in India and introduced gold coinage.

Vima Taktu (80–105): Kushan emperor; the son and successor of Kujula Kadphises. He is known from the Rabatak inscription and minted an extensive coinage but without the royal name.

Vladimir (b. c. 958; r. 980–1015): Rus prince of Kiev; he embraced Orthodox Christianity around 989 as part of a marriage alliance with the Byzantine emperor Basil II (976–1025). He founded the royal institutions of the Christian Russian state.

Voligeses I (51–78): Arsacid king of Parthia. Supported his brother Tiridates to the throne of Armenia in a war against Rome. In 66, he concluded a peace with the emperor Nero, whereby Tiridates retained the Armenian throne but recognized the hegemony of Rome.

Wang Khan (d. 1203; r. c. 1175–1203): Khan of the Keraits. His personal name was Toghrul; in 1197, he received the Chinese title Wang (“King”) from the Jin (Jurchen) emperor Zhangzong (1189–1208). The sworn brother of Yesugei, the father of Temujin, he received Temujin into his service in 1180. He supported Temujin against Jamukha, but in 1203, he switched his loyalty to Jamukha. Temujin captured the Kerait encampment, and Wang Khan fled and was slain by the Naimans.

Wang Mang (b. 45 B.C.; r. 9–23 A.D.): Usurper who overthrew the Former Han Dynasty and issued sweeping reforms. He failed to maintain the northern frontier against the Xiongnu.

Wanyan Min (b. 1068; 1115–1123): Jurchen emperor of the Jin Dynasty; assumed the Chinese throne name Taizu. He united the Jurchens and overthrew the Khitan Empire. In 1121, he concluded with Song emperor Huizong (1100–1125) the so-called Alliance of the Sea that called for the partition of the Khitan Empire.
Wanyan Sheng (b. 1075; r. 1123–1135): Jurchen emperor of the Jin Dynasty; assumed the Chinese throne name Taizong. He succeeded his brother Wanyan Min and completed the conquest of the Khitan state. In 1127, he captured Kaifeng and the Song court, including the retired emperor Huizong. The new Song emperor Gaozong (1127–1162) agreed to cede northern China to Wanyan Sheng.

Wei Qing (d. 106 B.C.): Han general of imperial descent; the strategic genius behind the victories over the Xiongnu. He and his nephew Huo Qubing captured the Mobei, the tent capital of Ichise Chanyu. Thereafter, he retired from active service and served as strategic advisor to Emperor Wudi.

Wen (b. 541; r. 581–604): Sui emperor; reunited China under the Sui Dynasty (581–618). He promoted Buddhism, secured the northern frontiers by reconstructing the Great Wall, and initiated the Grand Canal.

Wudi (b. 157 B.C., r. 141–87 B.C.): Han emperor; presided over the territorial expansion of China. In 133 B.C., Wudi initiated war against Gunchen, chanyu of the Xiongnu. By campaigning across the Gobi in 127–119 B.C., his general broke the power of the Xiongnu. In 121–115 B.C., Wudi’s armies imposed Han suzerainty over the western regions (Tarim Basin). His wars, however, proved costly and nearly bankrupt the imperial treasury.

Xuanzang (596–664): Buddhist monk and Chinese pilgrim; wrote an account of his travels in the western regions and India in 629–645. He visited the court of Harsha Vardhana (606–647) at Kannauj on the Ganges. He revealed the international network of Buddhist monasteries in central Asia and India on the eve of the Islamic conquests.

Xuanzong (712–756): Tang emperor of China, who had to evacuate the western regions (Tarim Basin) soon after the defeat at the Battle of Talas (751) to face the An Lushan Rebellion (754–763). He was noted for his taste in exotic luxury items and musicians arriving on the Silk Road.

Yangdi (b. 569; r. 604–618): Sui emperor; reorganized the imperial army, recruiting Turkish cavalry. He initiated the conquest of what is now Vietnam, but expeditions against Korea proved costly failures. His assassination
precipitated a brief civil war, whereby the general Li Yuan seized the throne as Gaozu, first emperor of the Tang Dynasty.

**Yazdegerd III** (632–651): Last Sassanid shah and grandson of Khosrow II; lost his empire to the Arab armies. In 636 (or 639), the Arabs occupied his capital Ctesiphon after their victory at the Battle of al-Qadisiyyah. In 642–651, Yazdegerd failed to check the Arab advance into Iran and was murdered near Merv. His son and heir, Peroz, died an exile at the Tang court.

**Yelü Chucai** (1190–1244): Khitan minister; a noted scholar of Buddhist and Confucian classics. He served under the Jin (Jurchen) court, but in 1218, he entered the service of Genghis Khan and, later, of Ögödei. He was credited with admonishing Ögödei that China was won on horseback, but it could not be ruled from horseback.

**Yelü Dashi** (b. 1087; r. 1124–1143): Kara-Khitan khan; a descendant of Abaoji who refused to accept Jurchen rule. In 1130–1131, he led a migration of Khitans into the Tarim Basin; in 1137, he overthrew the Karakhanid khaganate and founded a new Kara-Khitan Empire in central Asia. On September 9, 1141, Yelü Dashi decisively defeated the Seljuk sultan Ahmet Sanjar (1118–1153) at the Battle of Qatwan—the event that gave rise to the legend of Prester John. The victory delivered Transoxania to the Kara-Khitans.

**Yelü Deguang** (b. 902; r. 927–947): Khitan emperor of the Liao Dynasty; assumed the Chinese throne name Taizong. He proved a valiant warrior-emperor who conquered the lower Huang He valley and occupied Kaifeng. His premature death plunged the Khitan Empire into a succession crisis in 947–950.

**Yelü Longxu** (b. 972; r. 982–1031): Khitan emperor of the Liao Dynasty; assumed the Chinese throne name Shengzong. He presided over the transformation of the Khitan Empire into a Chinese bureaucratic state. In 1005, he concluded the Treaty of Chanyuan with the Song emperor Zhenzong (997–1022), who recognized the Khitan Empire and agreed to pay an annual subsidy.
**Yuri II** (b. 1189; r. 1212–1238): Prince of Vladimir-Suzdal; campaigned against the Volga Bulgars and Russian rival princes. In 1238, Batu captured Vladimir. Yuri II escaped, but his capital was sacked and the population slaughtered. On March 8, 1238, he and his army were annihilated by the Mongols at the Battle of Sit River.

**Yusuf Khass Hajib** (1019–1085): Turkish poet and native of Balasagun; composed *Kutadgu Bilig* for the Karakhanid prince of Kashgar. The work is a guide to proper rule, combining Turkish martial traditions with Islamic political and religious ideals.

**Zhang Qian** (200–114 B.C.): Official of the Han court. Sent by emperor Wudi as envoy to the Yuezhi (Tocharians) to form an alliance against the Xiongnu in 137–125 B.C. Zhang Qian failed in this mission; twice he was captured by the Xiongnu. His account of the western regions is an invaluable source on the customs of the Xiongnu and the reigns of the *chanyus* Gunchen (161–126 B.C.) and Ichise (126–114 B.C.). His account was incorporated into the *Shiji* ("Historical Records") by the historian Sima Qian in the 1st century.

**Zhu Xi** (1130–1200): Neo-Confucian philosopher and philologist of the Song Dynasty who edited the Confucian classics and wrote commentaries. He also wrote the *Daxue* (*Great Learning*), a moral guide for the Mandarin scholar class.

**Ziyad ibn Salih** (748–751): Arabic governor of Khurasan who commanded the Arabic-Turkish Karluk army that defeated the Tang army at the Battle of Talas in 751.

**Ziyad ibn Abi Sufyan** (d. 673): Umayyad governor of Basra (664–673) who commanded Arab expeditionary forces in Iran. In 670–673, he ordered the fortification of Merv as a military base on the northeastern frontier.


Bibliography


Bibliography


Polo, Marco. The Travels of Marco Polo, the Venetian. Translated and edited by Thomas Wright. London: George Bell and Sons, 1907.


