



Perspectives on the Global Past

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Introduction Nomadic Culture

Michal Biran

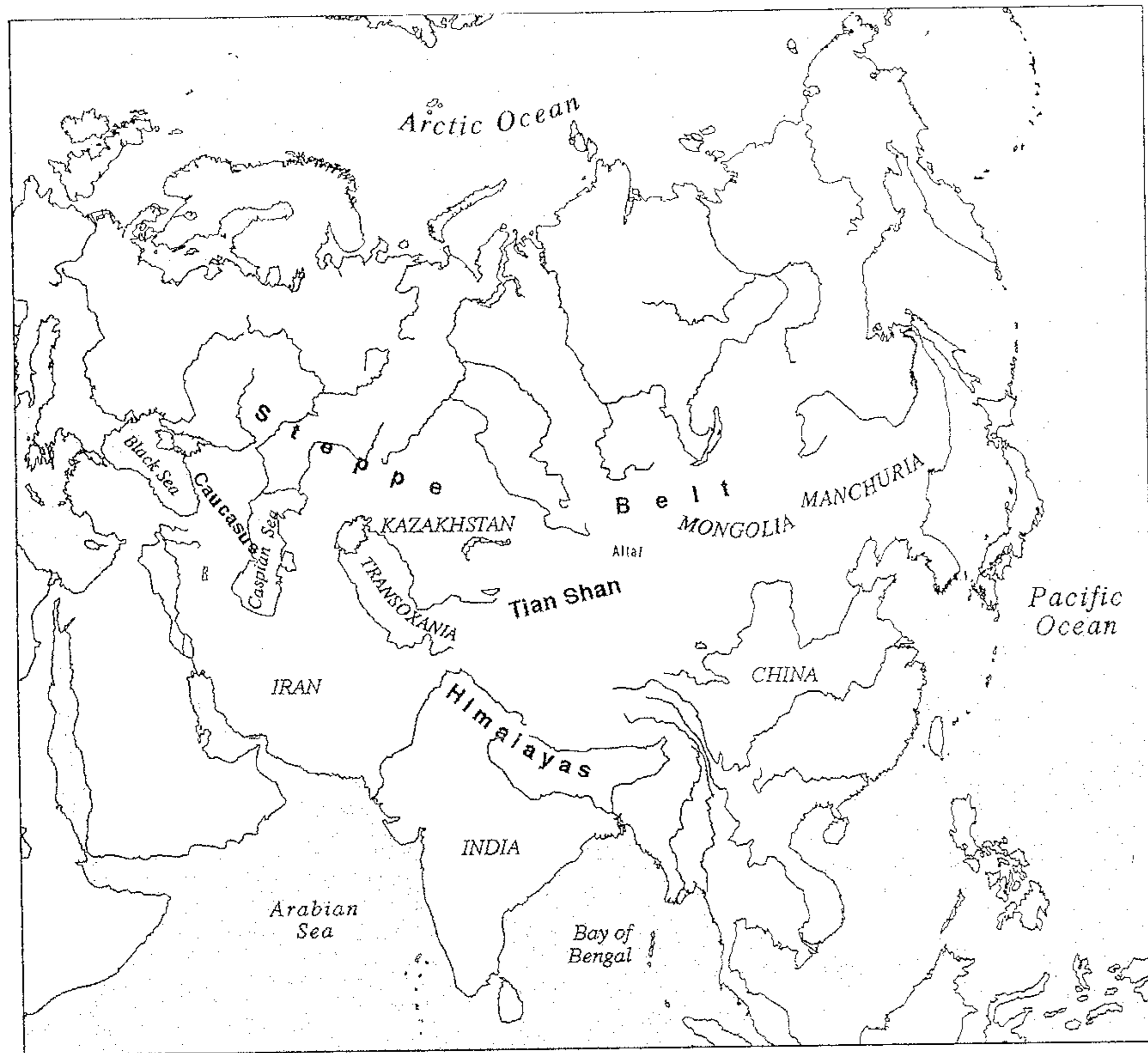


Figure 1.1. Eurasia. Adapted from R. Amitai and M. Biran (eds.), *Mongols, Turks and Others: Eurasian Nomads and the Outside World* (Leiden, 2005).

When looking at the global past, one of the reoccurring phenomena from the late second millennium BCE and up to the eighteenth century CE is the political and military power of pastoral nomads on the fringes of the Eurasian civilizations, and—notably under the Mongol empire (thirteenth–fourteenth centuries)—at their hearts as well. The nomads' impact in the cultural field, however, is much less apparent. Representatives of the sedentary civilizations bordering the steppe—whether Chinese, ancient Iranian, Muslim, medieval Slavs, or other Europeans—often portrayed them either as a violent force that left no mark on their culture or as a source of negative influence that was responsible for “all that went wrong” with their civilizations.¹ If the nomads received some credit, it was for the *pax* that was created when they ruled over vast lands, allegedly enabling the sedentary civilizations to exchange goods, ideas, and technologies from one end of Eurasia to the other.² Some of these approaches arose as early as the mid-nineteenth century, after the final demise of the nomads' political power, and coincided with the rise of colonialism and nationalism, which often portrayed the nomads as either an empire's primitive subjects or as the past enemies of a certain nation-state.³

Recent research, first and foremost due to the works of our colleague and contributor Tom Allsen, has presented a much more complex picture of the relations between nomads and the societies over which they ruled or to which they were contemporaries. Concentrating on the Mongols, the largest and most documented nomadic empire—with which a large part of the chapters included in this volume also deals—Allsen showed that the nomads significantly contributed to cross-cultural exchange, not only as a passive medium who transferred elements from one sedentary civilization to another, but as active participants, who initiated much of the intercultural exchange and whose norms and priorities had been the filter and

catalyst that determined which cultural elements would be transmitted along Eurasia. Moreover, Allsen demonstrated that the nomads played a dominant role not only with regard to practical domains, such as trade and military technology, but also in spheres connected with high culture (e.g., science, art, historiography).⁴ This argument is the point of departure for this volume.

Despite the barbarian image often created by sedentary peoples, and the almost total lack of nomadic literary production, it can be argued that a sophisticated nomadic culture exists, which has had an impressive continuity over both time and space.⁵ This culture was mainly political, since political interests (sometimes backed by real or mostly fictitious kinship and ethnic ties) had been the main glue that held the nomads together, whether in the framework of tribes or in larger political units.⁶ Nomadic political culture had both religious-ideological components and practical organizational means. Its main aim was to win the subjects' acceptance of a single legitimate political authority. This was especially required for legitimizing the formation and the continued existence of a supratribal unit such as a nomadic empire. Overall, the tribal level sufficed for conducting most aspects of the nomads' everyday life, including small-scale raiding into their neighbors' realms. A supratribal unit, therefore, usually developed as a result of a crisis—ecological, natural, or political (among the nomads or their sedentary neighbors)—and was thus temporary in nature. Its utility was therefore questioned on nearly a daily basis, and for its successful maintenance its ruler had to be able to assure his followers that it was worthwhile for them to stay with him, especially since they could easily decamp to greener pastures.⁷

The salient components of this Inner Asian political culture from the time of the Scythians and the Xiongnu onward included both religious-ideological aspects and practical means for governing an empire: the notion of the divine mandate to rule bestowed upon a chosen clan by the sky-heaven, or even of the divine origin of the clan; the notion of charisma—the Iranian *farnah*, the Turkic *gut*, and the Mongolian *suu*, the heavenly ordained good fortune and the aura connected with this fortune; a highly developed system of royal and administrative titles; royal symbolism, including color; elaborate status and rank distinctions and practices associated with dressing and decoration; special investiture and funeral ceremonies; sacred territories and cult centers; the notion of collective or joint sovereignty, according to which a state and its populace belong not to an individual ruler but to all members of a ruling clan, or an extended family, as their corporate property; and convocations composed of members of the ruling clan and other nobles and worthies. On the administrative side, nomadic political culture included a patrimonial mode of governance that im-

plied the practice of redistribution; that is, the sharing out of the booty, tribute, and cultural wares extracted from subject populations, which was both a means of rewarding followers and, at the same time, a mechanism of cultural exchange; a partial overlapping of the administrative system with the military organization; the importance of the aristocracy as a political system; and the significance of laws.⁸

Such political culture supported different political entities established by people with similar economies, from the centralistic Yeke Monggol Ulus under Chinggis Khan and his immediate successors (1206–1260), through more decentralized empires such as the Turks (sixth–eighth centuries CE) or the Xiongnu (third century BCE–third century CE) and up to the much looser framework of several tribal confederations or “headless states” typical to Mongolia in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries or to the Qipchaq tribes in the pre-Chinggisid period.⁹

This political culture had a significant religious component, since Heaven (the Turkic and Mongol “Tenggeri”), the supreme sky god of the steppe, was the one conferring the right to rule on earth on a single clan, and thereby became the focus of steppe ideology and the primary source of supratribal unity in the steppe world. Unlike the Chinese case, Tenggeri did not bestow his mandate on every generation; that is, the steppe world was often left without a unifying ruler, but even during the periods of disunion the notion of the mandate remained as “an ideology in reserve,” ready to be revived if the creation of a supratribal empire were to be attempted again.¹⁰

The possession of the mandate from Tenggeri was confirmed by the ruler's success in battle on the one hand and by shamanic ceremonies on the other, and was reinforced by the ruler's control of the sacred territory (in the case of the Turks, Uighurs, and Mongols the Otügen Mountains near the Orkhon River in central Mongolia). The rulers, many of whom also enjoyed prestige due to an animal ancestor (wolf, deer, etc.) or even the virginal conception of an ancestor,¹¹ also had certain shamanic functions of their own, which enabled them to dismiss or eliminate shamans whenever they threatened their authority, though more often they used their services. The shamans' ability to foretell the future, cure illness, and chart the power of nature, using various kinds of divination and spiritual journeys, was highly important for nomadic rulers and commoners alike. The nomads' attitude toward religion, however, was inclusive; that is, practicing shamanism did not prevent them from adopting other religions (mainly Islam and Buddhism, but there were cases of Manichaeism, Judaism, and Christianity). Nomadic conversion was initiated either for spiritual reasons—especially since shamanism was mainly directed to specific goals and was not concerned with the afterlife—or for a variety of practical, largely political, ones, mainly as a

unifying force or as a source for legitimation. These new religions did not necessarily replace shamanism (at least not in the short run), but merely supplemented it.¹²

The nomads also had a distinctive material culture, comprised especially of small, light, and precious artifacts that could be worn or carried along by themselves or on their horses. Gold, the color of the sun that stands for durability and authority, played a major role in this material culture, and golden objects, such as belt plaques, daggers, knives, horse equipment, often decorated with zoomorphic designs (known as the "animal style"), were among its most typical artifacts throughout history. Textile was another major component of the nomads' material culture. In the Mongol period gold-embroidered silk, used for prestigious clothes and royal tents and known in Europe as "Tatar cloth," gained in popularity from the Adriatic to the Pacific.¹³ Certain artifacts characteristic of nomadic taste displayed an impressive continuity—thus we find gilded burial masks among the Scythians in eastern Europe in the fifth century BCE, among the Wusun in fifth-century CE Xinjiang, and among the Liao emperors in tenth–twelfth century CE Manchuria; and a cup made of a killed enemy's skull appears in the Scythian world, among the Xiongnu in Mongolia; the medieval Turkic-speaking nomads such as the Pechenegs; the imperial and postimperial Mongols; and even the Safawids in sixteenth-century Iran.¹⁴

Nomadic culture also had its own set of organizational tools, the most typical and long-lived among them being decimal military organization, first attested under the Xiongnu. The army was organized in decimal units of ten, one hundred, one thousand, and ten thousand. Since every nomad was a soldier, the military organization was actually an important means of social organization. Although up to the time of Chinggis Khan the decimal units were arranged along roughly tribal lines, their existence was an important mechanism of control that enabled the ruler to bypass and neutralize tribal cohesion and authority. The decimal organization was also useful for incorporating additional nomads (and even nonnomads) into the empire's army. The establishment of a royal guard, also attested from the Xiongnu onward, served the same functions and enabled the ruler to create a new elite, personally loyal to him.¹⁵

Nomadic culture included also a set of social norms and usages, such as the important role of warfare in everyday life, the high position of women, and the practice of hunting as a royal sport. On a more general level, while in the steppe most nomads were generalists, that is, every nomad was versed in variety of skills that allowed him to survive in the steppe, they shared a respect for knowledge and expertise in many different fields (from military technology to religious practice, trade, administration, wrestling, astron-

omy, or cooking). They were thus ready to employ such experts and willing to learn from them when the need arose. Their interest in gathering "second opinions" of such experts often advanced cross-cultural encounters.¹⁶ Moreover, nomads' ability to adjust themselves to changing circumstances, whether due to the natural forces in the steppe or to the changing political circumstances, meant that they were ready to learn from various outsiders and borrow from other cultures, as long as these borrowings were useful for achieving their goals, which were mainly assuring their rule. This often resulted in an amalgamation of different methods of administration, legitimation concepts, religions, and languages, especially while nomads were ruling also over sedentary populations. Such appropriation is often described as "barbarian" assimilation into more elaborated sedentary culture or as a proof of the nonautarkic character of nomadic culture. Instead, this amalgamation could better be described as part and parcel of the Inner Asian mode of governance and is consistent with the multicultural outlook of Inner Asian nomads. They acknowledged the practical political gains of such selective appropriation of cultural elements to the consolidation and legitimation of their rule in their new environments, and it often resulted in institutional changes. Yet the nomads did not necessarily see such appropriation as a threat to their indigenous identity.¹⁷

Indeed, nomadic culture was hardly isolated—the nomads' inherent mobility and the fragility of the nomadic economy resulted in continuous contacts with contemporary sedentary neighbors or subjects. The nomads, especially when they became rulers of certain sedentary population and territories, often borrowed from their subjects' administrative means, technologies, and ideas, thereby creating a unique state culture that combined elements of their own culture and that of their sedentary subjects. In the case of the Mongol empire, the evolving imperial culture included not only Mongol and local components, but also elements from other regions that came under Mongol rule (i.e., Chinese, Muslim, and Mongol elements in both China and Iran). The Mongols' own norms, however, were the main filter that determined which elements of the other cultures would be appropriated. Thus, for example, medicine, astronomy, geography, and cartography were enthusiastically encouraged by Mongol rulers due to their compatibility with Mongol shamanism.¹⁸ As the chapters of Allsen, Lane, and Rossabi in this volume demonstrate, nomadic rule encouraged cross-cultural encounters, and was often accompanied by cultural efflorescence, caused by the nomads and not despite their presence. At the same time, nomadic rule also meant the actual physical movement and mobilization of individuals and groups, and in their aftermath the movement of ideas, texts, and artifacts. Such movements, as seen in the chapters of Allsen, Biran, Amitai, Vásáry, and Honeychurch, were also major channels of cross-cultural ties and influence,

even resulting at times in significant identity changes.¹⁹ Embedded with political and social content, cultural differences or their fading often resulted in noteworthy ethnic changes, as shown by Biran and Allsen.

The impact of nomadic culture on other cultures was proportional to the nomads' political power and was especially apparent when nomads ruled considerable sedentary territories. Their influence on global history, however, went far beyond these periods of nomadic rule, because elements of nomadic culture were preserved not only in nomadic states but also in postnomadic states, of which there are two types. First, states established by nomads or seminomads who gave up nomadism as part of their empire-building project and yet retained many aspects of nomadic political culture (e.g., the Seljuks, Qing China, the Ottomans, Mughal India, Uzbek Central Asia, and—in a way—Mamluk Egypt and Syria). The second type includes states that were once ruled by nomads and retained part of their political culture or administrative devices even though their rulers were those who vanquished the nomads and often saw them as their bitter enemies (e.g., Ming China and Muscovite Russia). These postnomadic polities assured that nomadic forms remained influential in wide swaths of Eurasia up to the nineteenth century, and therefore had an important impact on world history. Since what the nomads transmitted was not their ethnic culture but their imperial one, which was originally composed of different cultural elements (as described above), it was easy for the adopting empires to ignore their debt to the nomads.²⁰

Borrowing from the nomads included both practical and ideological components. Thus, for example, the Mongols' successors were quick to acknowledge the usefulness of certain Mongolian institutions, and the Mongol postal system was retained in China, Russia, and the Muslim world long after the Chinggisids lost their political force. As for ideological borrowing, the main example is the Chinggisid principle, according to which only descendants of the Great Khan were eligible for bearing the titles khan or qaghan/khaqan/qa'an, which denote the highest political office. Although manipulations of this principle began quite early, it remained valid in Inner Asia up to the eighteenth century, long after the dissolution of the Mongol empire. It was also adapted in Qing China, where it became one of the many facets of legitimation of the Manchu dynasty, and had certain influence even in Ming China, Muscovy, and among the non-Chinggisid Ottomans.²¹ In fact, while preparing this book for publication, the editors decided that a comparative analysis of postnomadic empires would be a worthy endeavor for a future volume. Such comparison will be another important step for evaluating the nomadic contribution to world history.

The chapters in this volume discuss different cases and facets in which the nomads played a significant role as cultural brokers, namely individuals

who live in a cultural environment that is in some aspects different from their own as well as those who actively or deliberately transfer or cause to transfer cultural contents to a different environment.²² The first three chapters deal with nomads of the ancient world on both sides of the steppe. Shelach-Lavi stresses that nomad-sedentary interaction in the northern zone of China during the second and early first millennia BCE was only one of many complex interregional contacts that influenced both what later came to be known as China and the nomadic polities to its north. Honeychurch, based on recent archaeological findings, highlights the active role of the Xiongnu in the shaping of the famous Silk Road, often described as connecting China and Rome, while ignoring the nomadic middlemen. Khazanov reviews the formative period of nomadic political culture throughout his discussion of the Scythians and their neighbors in the Mediterranean and East European zones. Togan's chapter treats the early medieval Turks, and how they were named in Chinese sources, showing the impact of the Turks on the development of Chinese historiography and terminology.

All the other chapters deal with the Mongols as agents of cultural change. The first five concentrate on the Mongol empire, the age in which the nomads reached their height in terms of their influence on world history. Allsen reviews the Mongol policy of population movements and concludes that Mongol programs of deployment, displacement, and replacement generated substantial changes in population distributions and the primary identities of communities, settled and nomadic, across Eurasia—some intended and others, like the notable expansion of Islam under Mongol rule, completely unintended. Biran's chapter follows this line and analyzes the fate of the Kitans in China in the wake of the Mongol conquest. She shows how, due to Mongol policies, most of the Kitans lost their ethnic identity and were either assimilated in China or reduced into tribal units in the new nomadic polities that rose from the ashes of the Mongol empire, thereby highlighting Mongol influence not only on the sedentary world but also on that of the steppe. Rossabi shows that the arts flourished in Yuan China due to the Mongols' active encouragement and not despite their presence. Lane's intriguing contribution gives an impressive example of how the Mongol *ordu* (camp, mobile court) in Iran became the rearing ground for both Mongols and Persians who were brought up on Mongol imperial culture. Not all will fully agree with this chapter, but it will certainly be a touchstone for future discussion on Mongol-Iranian relations. Amitai treats the Mongol impact—cultural and otherwise—on Mamluk Syria, a region that was not conquered for long by the Mongols, but that bordered the Ilkhanate and was deeply influenced by the ongoing Mongol presence in the region. Vásáry depicts the long-term legacy of Mongol rule on the political culture of Muscovite

Russia, a region ruled by the Mongols for nearly three hundred years, stressing both practical and ideological borrowing. Morgan's contribution wraps up the book by summarizing the rise of cultural history in the historiography of the Mongol empire (and other nomadic groups) in the last decades, with emphasis on the important role that the Mongols played as patrons of the arts in Iran. The chapter highlights the enormous strides that the study of Inner Asian nomads in general and the Mongol empire in particular has made in the last two decades, which is the basis for the studies in this volume. Building on such solid base, it is hoped that this book will shed more light on the nomads' role as cultural brokers and highlight the impact of nomadic culture on Eurasian history.

NOTES

1. e.g., C. Halperin, "Russia in the Mongol Empire in Comparative Perspective," *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies*, 43 (1983), p. 239; B. Lewis, "The Mongols, the Turks and Muslim Polity," in his *Islam in History* (2nd ed., Chicago, 1993), pp. 189–190; also A. Lewis, *Nomads and Crusades 1000–1368* (Bloomington, IN, 1988), pp. 166–193, who asserts that the rise of Europe was made possible because it had been spared the Mongol conquest.
2. e.g., D. Christian, "Inner Eurasia as a Unit of World History," *Journal of World History*, 5 (1994), pp. 182–183; A. Gunder Frank, *The Centrality of Central Asia* (Amsterdam, 1992), pp. 25–40; W. H. McNeill, *The Rise of the West* (Chicago, 1963), pp. 322–326; R. Tignor et al., *Worlds Together, World Apart: A History of the World from the Beginning of Humankind to the Present* (3rd ed., New York, 2011), pp. 401–407.
3. David Sneath, *The Headless State* (New York, 2007), pp. 65–92.
4. T. T. Allsen, *Culture and Conquest in Mongol Eurasia* (Cambridge, 2001), esp. pp. 189–211; T. T. Allsen, "Ever Closer Encounters: The Appropriation of Culture and the Apportionment of Peoples in the Mongol Empire," *Journal of Early Modern History*, 1 (1997), pp. 2–23; T. T. Allsen, "Mongols as Vectors for Cultural Transmission," in *The Cambridge History of Inner Asia*, vol. 2: *The Chinggisid Age*, ed. N. Di Cosmo, A. J. Frank, and P. B. Golden (Cambridge, 2009), pp. 135–154.
5. See especially Khazanov's chapter in this volume.
6. For political interests as the main bond in tribal society (as opposed to kinship) see R. P. Lindner, "What Was a Nomadic Tribe," *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 24 (1982), pp. 689–711; Sneath, *The Headless State*, passim.
7. J. Fletcher, "The Mongols: Ecological and Social Perspectives," *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies*, 46/1 (1986), pp. 11–50; N. Di Cosmo, *Ancient China and Its Enemies* (Cambridge, 2002), p. 169ff.; R. Amitai and M. Biran, "Introduction," in *Mongols, Turks and Others: Eurasian Nomads and the Sedentary World*, ed. R. Amitai and M. Biran (Leiden, 2005), p. 4.
8. See Khazanov's chapter in this volume; Sneath, *The Headless State*, esp. pp. 176–179, 181–204; P. B. Golden, "Imperial Ideology and the Sources of Political Unity amongst the Pre-Chinggisid Nomads of Western Eurasia," *Archivum Eurasiae Medii Aevi*, 2 (1982), pp. 37–77; T. T. Allsen, "Spiritual Geography and Political Legitimacy in the Eastern Steppe," in *Ideology and the Early State*, ed. H. Claessen and J. Oosten (Leiden, 1996), pp. 116–135. Also, e.g., T. T. Allsen, *Commodity and Exchange in the Mongol Empire: A Cultural*

History of Islamic Textiles (Cambridge, 1997); Di Cosmo, *Ancient China*, p. 189ff.; R. Sela, *Ritual and Authority in Central Asia: The Khan's Inauguration Ceremony* (Papers on Inner Asia, no. 37) (Bloomington, IN, 2003), pp. 1–65.

9. Sneath, *The Headless State*, pp. 179–180, 188ff.
10. N. Di Cosmo, "State Formation and Periodization in Inner Asian History," *Journal of World History*, 10 (1999), p. 20; M. Biran, *Chinggis Khan* (Oxford, 2007), p. 13.
11. C. I. Beckwith, *Empires of the Silk Road* (Princeton, 2009), pp. 2–12; M. R. Drompp, "The Lone Wolf in Inner Asia," *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, 131 (2011), pp. 515–526.
12. e.g., W. Heissig, *The Religions of Mongolia* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1980), esp. p. 11; A. Khazanov, "The Spread of World Religions in the Medieval Nomadic Societies of the Eurasian Steppes," in *Nomadic Diplomacy, Destruction and Religion from the Pacific to the Adriatic*, ed. M. Gervers and W. Schleppe, "Toronto Studies in Central and Inner Asia," 1 (Toronto, 1994), pp. 11–33.
13. e.g., Allsen, *Commodity and Exchange*, passim; idem, "Mongols as Vectors," p. 140; Di Cosmo, *Ancient China*, pp. 44–90; and see Shelach-Lavi's chapter in this volume.
14. e.g., D. O. Morgan, *Medieval Persia* (London, 1988), p. 115; for more examples and references see Khazanov's chapter in this volume.
15. Fletcher, "The Mongols," pp. 29–30; Biran, *Chinggis Khan*, p. 13; Beckwith, *Empires of the Silk Road*, pp. 12–28.
16. Allsen, "Ever Closer Encounters," pp. 4–6, 9; Allsen, *Mongol Imperialism*, pp. 116–143; Allsen, *Culture and Conquest*, pp. 83–176; M. Biran, "The Mongol Transformation: From the Steppe to Eurasian Empire," *Medieval Encounters*, 10/1–3 (2004), pp. 338–361; M. Biran, *The Empire of the Qara Khitai in Eurasian History: Between China and the Islamic World* (Cambridge, 2005), pp. 132–170; R. Amitai, "Hülegü and His Wise Men: Topos or Reality?" in *Politics, Patronage, and the Transmission of Knowledge in 13th–15th Century Tabriz*, ed. J. Pfeiffer, (Leiden, 2014), pp. 15–34.
17. See, e.g., M. Biran, "Kitan Migrations in Inner Asia 10th–14th Centuries," *Journal of Central Eurasian Studies*, 3 (2012), pp. 85–108.
18. Allsen, *Culture and Conquest*, pp. 203–204, 208.
19. See also M. Biran, "The Mongols and the Inter-Civilizational Exchange," in *The Cambridge History of the World*, vol. 5, ed. B. Z. Kedar and M. Wiesner-Hanks, forthcoming.
20. Allsen, *Culture and Conquest*, pp. 199–202; Biran, *Chinggis Khan*, pp. 26, 74–75.
21. Biran, *Chinggis Khan*, pp. 104–105; for a general evaluation of the legacy of Mongol statecraft see Biran, "The Mongol Transformation," pp. 358–361; and see e.g., R. D. McChesney, *Central Asia: Foundations of Change* (Princeton, 1996); D. Ostrowski, *Muscovy and the Mongols* (Cambridge, 1998); P. K. Crossley, *A Translucent Mirror: History and Identity in Qing Imperial Ideology* (Berkeley, 1999); B. F. Manz, "Mongol History Rewritten and Relived," *Revue des mondes musulmans et de la méditerranée* (2000), pp. 89–90; D. Robinson (ed.), *Culture, Courtiers and Competition: The Ming Court (1368–1644)* (Cambridge, MA, 2008); L. Balabanillar, *Imperial Identity in the Mughal Empire: Memory and Dynastic Politics in Early Modern South and Central Asia* (London, 2012).
22. For various definitions of cultural brokers see M. von der Höh, N. Jaspert, and J. Oesterle, "Court, Brokers and Brokerages in the Medieval Mediterranean," in *Cultural Brokers at Mediterranean Courts in the Middle Ages*, ed. M. von der Höh, N. Jaspert, and J. Oesterle (Paderborn, 2012), pp. 9–10.