Chapter 4: Central Asia and India's Beginnings: 4-2 Early Civilizations of Central Asia

Book Title: World Civilizations

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# 4-2 Early Civilizations of Central Asia

Throughout history and in many places around the world, pastoral nomads existed on marginal desert and **steppe land** (In physical geography, steppes and steppe lands generally are flat and are characterized by relatively low levels of rainfall and growth of short grasses, usually suitable only for livestock.) (prairie grasslands) that was unsuitable for agriculture. So, rather than depending on seasonal crops as farmers did, they adapted to the more restrictive environments in which they lived by learning to breed and raise livestock such as camels, goats, sheep, horses, and yaks to satisfy their primary needs. These animals furnished milk, meat, and even blood for the food and fermented beverages on which these nomads depended, as well as hides and hair from which they created clothing, carpets, and shelter. In general, pastoralists enjoyed secure ways of life and cultures that were as rich as those of their more settled neighbors. However, constant resource shortages obliged them to be continuously on the move in search of water and suitable grazing lands for their flocks.

Because of their different ways of life, pastoralists' and farming peoples' dealings with each other were often tense and warlike. They depended on each other for products each of them needed: farmers on the meat and livestock that pastoralists could provide, and pastoralists on cultivators for the products of field and farm. Trade was the predominant form of intercourse between herding and agriculturally based civilizations, but when severe want or shifts in the balance of power followed peaceful conditions, episodes of raiding or outright conquest typically occurred. Peoples such as Africa's Berber tribes, Arabs, Turco-Mongolian peoples, and nomadic Indo-Europeans were organized to be constantly prepared for raiding and warfare; their wanderings along the borders of the ancient civilizations of western and eastern Asia were constant threats to the peaceful existence that farming peoples' settled ways of life demanded.

## Family of Qashkai Nomads.

Nomads, like these from Central Asia, typically make their tents and clothing from the hair of their livestock, rather than from plant fibers.



Robert Harding World Imagery/Getty Images

One such region was a vast space encircled in the south by India's Hindu Kush and Himalayan mountains, in the west by Persia, in the north by the Siberian tundra, and by China in the east (see Map. 4.2). Called Central Asia, it included a highly varied terrain of steppes, mountains, the Aral and Caspian Seas, river valleys, and the Tarim desert basin in the east. The domestication of the horse and the Bactrian (two humped) camel around 4500 B.C.E. began the transition to the Neolithic Era in this region. Later, the invention of the horse-drawn chariot somewhere in the region revolutionized warfare, making nomadic livestock breeders the terrors of neighboring, agriculturally based civilizations in China, India, and Persia. It was here, too, that the bridle and bit were developed around 1500 B.C.E., making mounted warfare, combined with the ability of warriors to shoot bows and arrows from the backs of their horses, extremely difficult to defeat with infantry-based armies.

#### Map 4.2

#### **Central Asia**

To the northwest and north of India and the Hindu Kush, the river valleys around the Aral Sea and the dry steppe lands gave rise to numerous Central Asian pastoral peoples such as the Scythes.

### Thinking About This Map

What parts of Central Asia would have been the easiest for nomadic peoples and traders to traverse? Why do you think the horse and the Bactrian camel played such important roles in the history of this region?



Though landlocked, Central Asia historically has been a region where many migrant peoples met and mixed; it also served as a crossroads of trade and religious ideas between the more agriculturally suited regions that border it. Historically, two major ethnic groups dominated life in this region: Indo-Iranian nomads who originated from the region's far northwest and Turco-Mongolians who migrated from the east. Among the earliest arrivals were the Iranians and the so-called Aryans, whom we discuss in this chapter; later still came the Greeks, Huns, Turks, and Mongols.

In the better-watered river valleys of the southwestern portion of this region, which includes today's Afghanistan and Pakistan, a few significant cities appeared, and with these came trade, conquest, and Central Asia's first empires. Three cities played pivotal roles in the history of the region and of India: Taxila (Central Asian city, along with Balkh and Peshawar, that was a western linchpin of the famed Silk Road trade routes connecting Iran, India, and China.), Balkh, and Peshawar (peh-SHA-war). Together they comprised a region known as Bactria ((also Gandhara) Ancient Central Asian region comprising parts of eastern Iran and modern Afghanistan and Pakistan. After the Islamic conquest in the seventh century c.E., it was known as Transoxiana.) (or Gandhara), which achieved fame as a commercial center that linked caravan routes from India, Iran, and distant China, and formed the western end of what came to be called the Silk Road (One of the two most important trade routes of the premodern world. It and the Indian Ocean sea trade were the commercial backbones that brought together the trade of the Old World Eurasian and African continents. Actually comprising several major routes, the so-called Silk Road connected the ancient Mediterranean world with Iran, India, and China.) (see Map 4.2). In later centuries Taxila gained additional fame as a key center of Buddhist scholarship, and it was from there and

other cities of Bactria that Buddhism eventually traveled eastward along the caravan routes to China and other eastern lands.

Given its highly advantageous position astride the trade routes, Bactria was a natural target of migrants and conquerors throughout its long history. In the centuries when the Indus Valley civilization was flourishing and later, Bactria attracted the attention of horse-breeding and warlike Indo-European groups (specifically its Indo-Iranian branch) like the Kushan (or Chinese Yuezhi), the Sogdians, and the Aryans, close cousins to the Iranians. The Aryans occupied the Indus and Ganges River valleys. About 1000 years later, around 500 B.C.E., it attracted the Kushans, whom we encounter again in Chapter 12.

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