History

Central Asia is perhaps the best place on earth to explore the reality of the phrase ‘the sweep of history’. Populations, conquerors, cultures and ideas have traversed the region’s steppes, deserts and mountains for millennia. Central Asia’s role as a conduit between cultures is symbolised by the Silk Road, through which the great civilisations of the East and the West first made contact. But Central Asia was, and is, more than just a middle ground, and its cultural history is far more than the sum of the influences brought from the East and the West.

Here in the heart of the largest landmass on earth, vast steppes provided the one natural resource – grass – required to build one of this planet’s most formidable and successful forms of statehood, the nomadic empire. The grass-fed horses by the millions and mounted archers remained the unstoppable acme of open-ground warfare for more than 2500 years. How the settled civilisations on the periphery of Eurasia interacted with successive waves of mounted nomadic hordes is the main theme of the story of Central Asia.

PREHISTORY & EARLY HISTORY

In the Middle Palaeolithic period, from 100,000 to 35,000 years ago, people in Central Asia were isolated from Europe and elsewhere by ice sheets, seas and swamps.

Cultural continuity begins in the late 3rd millennium BC with the Indo-Iranians, speakers of an unrecorded Indo-European dialect related distantly to English. The Indo-Iranians are believed to have passed through Central Asia on their way from the Indo-European homeland in southern Russia. From Central Asia, groups headed southeast for India and southwest for Iran. These peoples herded cattle, went to battle in chariots, and probably buried their dead nobles in burial mounds (kurgans). The Tajiks are linguistic descendants of these ancient migrants. One of these subsequent Indo-European groups was the Sakas (also known as Scythians), who have left kurgans, rock carvings and other remains across Central Asia. For more

UNEARTHING THE AMAZONS

As early as the 5th century BC the Greek historian Herodotus knew of an army of women warriors, known as the Amazons, who were so dedicated to warfare that they allegedly cut off their own right breast in order to improve their shot with bows and arrows. Recent excavations of Saka (Scythian) burial mounds (kurgans), on the Kazakh border with Russia, are unearthing some intriguing links to these perhaps not-so-mythical warrior women.

Archaeologists have discovered skeletons of women, bow-legged from a life in the saddle, buried with swords, daggers and bronze-tipped arrows, indicating warrior status. Others appear to be priestesses, buried with cultic implements, bronze mirrors and elaborate headdresses.

The finds indicate that women of these early steppe civilisations were trained from the outset to be warriors, fighting alongside men, perhaps even forming an elite social group. The status of these steppe women seems far higher than that of sedentary civilisations of the same time, challenging the stereotypical macho image of the Central Asian nomad.

For more on the Silk Road, including recommended books, see p53.

See www.orientarch.uni-halle.de/ca/bud/bud.htm for more on the archaeology of southeastern Central Asia.

TIMELINE

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<th>100,000–40,000 years ago</th>
<th>2nd millennium BC</th>
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<td>Remains of Neanderthal man found at Aman-Kutan cave near Samarkand</td>
<td>Saka/Scythian tombs in the Pamirs and the tomb of Sarazm (western Tajikistan) date from this period</td>
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on Kazakhstan’s famous ‘Golden Man’ find, dating from a 5th-century Saka (Scythian) kurgan outside Almaty, see p119.

Central Asia’s recorded history begins in the 6th century BC, when the large Achaemenid empire of Persia (modern Iran) created client kingdoms or satrapies (provinces), in Central Asia: Sogdiana (Sogdia), Khorezm (later Khiva), Bactria (Afghan Turkestan), Margiana (Merv), Aria (Herat), Saka (Scythia) and Arachosia (Ghazni and Kandahar). Sogdiana was the land between the Amu-Darya and Syr-Darya, called Transoxiana by the Romans and Mawarannahr by the Arabs (both names mean ‘Beyond the Oxus’). Here Bukhara and Samarkand later flourished. Khorezm lay on the lower reaches of the Amu-Darya, south of the Aral Sea, where one day the 19th-century khans of Khorezm would lord it from the walled city of Khiva. Saka (also

329–327 BC
Alexander the Great in Central Asia

250 BC–AD 226
Kushan empire