

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 mountain passes for millennia. Nothing symbolises Central Asia's role as a conduit between cultures better than 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.

EARLY HISTORY

Cultural continuity in Central Asia 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 and Afghanistan 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, forged iron, invented the wheeled chariot, and buried their dead nobles in burial mounds (*kurgans*). The Tajik people are linguistic descendants of these ancient migrants. One of these subsequent Indo-European groups was the Sakas (part of a people known as Scythians), who have left *kurgans*, rock carvings and other remains across Central Asia. The most spectacular Saka-era remnant is Kazakhstan's famous 'Golden Man' find, dating from a 5th-century *kurgan* outside Almaty (see p132).

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), Arachosia (Ghazni and Kandahar) and Gandhara (Kabul Valley). Sogdiana was the land between the Amu-Darya and Syr-Darya, called Transoxiana (Beyond the Oxus) by the Romans, where Bukhara and Samarkand would later flourish. Khorezm lay on the lower reaches of the Amu-Darya, south of the Aral Sea, where one day the 19th-century khans

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

Central Asia is strewn with ancient petroglyphs, some of the best of which can be visited at Saim-aluu Tash in Kyrgyzstan (p344) and Tamgaly in southeastern Kazakhstan (p148).

TIMELINE

100,000–40,000 BC

Remains of Neanderthal man found at Aman-Kutan cave near Samarkand.

2nd millennium BC

Saka/Scythian tombs in the Pamirs and the tomb of Sarazm (western Tajikistan) date from this period.

6th century BC

The Central Asian prophet Zoroaster (also known as Zar-tosht or Zarathustra) is murdered in Balkh, after founding one of the great monotheistic religions, Zoroastrianism.

of Khorezm would lord it from the walled city of Khiva. Saka, the steppe and desert extending north of the Tian Shan and Syr-Darya, was the home of nomadic warriors until their way of life ended in the early 20th century.

ALEXANDER THE GREAT

In 330 BC this former pupil of Aristotle, from Macedonia, led his army to a key victory over the last Achaemenid emperor, Darius III, in Mesopotamia. With the defeat of his Persian nemesis, Alexander (356–323 BC) developed a taste for conquest. By 329 BC, aged 28, he had reached modern-day Herat, Kandahar and Kabul. Ascending the Panjshir Valley and crossing the Hindu Kush in winter he pressed northward to Bactria, crossed the Oxus (Amu-Darya) on inflated hides and proceeded via Cyropol/Cyropolis (Istaravshan) and Marakanda (Samarkand) towards the Jaxartes (Syr-Darya), which he crossed in order to crush Saka defenders. Perhaps in celebration he founded his ninth city, Alexandria Eskhate (Farthest Alexandria), on the banks of the Jaxartes, where today's Khojand stands.

Alexander met the most stubborn resistance of his career in the Sogdians, who in concert with the Massagetes, a Scythian clan, revolted and under the leadership of Spitamenes held the mountains of Zerafshan (Zeravshan) until 328 BC. After an 18-month guerrilla war, the rebels' fall was a poignant one: attacked and defeated after Greek troops scaled the cliffs of their last redoubt, the 'Rock of Sogdiana' (its location today in the Hissar Mountains remains a mystery). Their leader eventually yielded both the fortress and the beautiful Bactrian princess Roxana (Roshanak), whom Alexander married in Balkh in 327 BC.

The brilliant Macedonian generalissimo's three-year sojourn in Central Asia was marked by a growing megalomania. It was at Marakanda (modern Samarkand) that Alexander murdered his right-hand general, Cleitus. He tried to adopt the dress and autocratic court ritual of an Oriental despot, until his Greek and Macedonian followers finally refused to prostrate themselves before him.

When he died in Babylon in 323 BC, Alexander had no named heir (despite siring a son with Roxana). But his legacy included nothing less than the West's perennial romance with exploration and expansion.

EAST MEETS WEST

The aftermath of Alexander's short-lived Macedonian empire in Central Asia saw an explosion of East–West cultural exchange and a chain reaction of nomadic migrations. The Hellenistic successor states of the Seleucid empire in Bactria disseminated the aesthetic values of the classical world deep into Asia. Hellenistic cities and Buddhist monasteries of the 2nd century BC, such as Ai-Khanoum, Takht-i-Sangin and Kobadiyan on the borders of Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Afghanistan (former Bactria), reveal a fascinating fusion of Greek, Persian and local art forms. Ai-Khanoum, known to Alexander as

Alexander the Great (Iskander or Sikander) is a popular figure, after whom several lakes and mountains are named. His troops are blamed for the occasional blond-haired blue-eyed Tajik or Nuristani, although this is more the result of Aryan influence.

Balkh, the 'Mother of All Cities', is the oldest recorded city in Afghanistan. It's served as the birthplace of Zoroaster, campaign headquarters of Alexander the Great, a rest stop for Marco Polo and Timur's coronation site.

The Sogdians (from modern Tajikistan and Uzbekistan) were the consummate Silk Road traders, so much so that their language became the lingua franca of the Silk Road.

6th century BC

The Buddhas of Bamiyan (Afghanistan) carved from cliffside.

329–327 BC

Alexander the Great campaigns in Central Asia and Afghanistan from a base in Balkh.

138–119 BC

First Chinese diplomatic mission to Central Asia under Zhang Qian visits the Pamir Alai and Fergana Valley and brings back reports of Central Asia's 'heavenly horses' and a far-off kingdom called Daqin (Rome).