

Anatoly M. Khazanov

University of Wisconsin-Madison

Steppe Nomads in the Eurasian Trade.

(A preliminary draft)

I would like to start with one peculiar characteristic of pastoral nomadic societies. Intercultural contacts, including exchange, had existed in the steppe zone of Eurasia already in the Bronze Age, and even earlier (Franchetti, 2008; Kuzmina, 2008; Parzinger, 2008). However, the Bronze Age pastoralists in many respects had been different from the historical nomads, who, in my opinion, appeared not earlier than in the 9th century BCE. Because of a specialized and non-autarchic character of their economy the nomads always experienced a need in agricultural and handicraft products (Khazanov, 1994). No wonder that in contrast to many sedentary societies, trade and related professions enjoyed a high prestige amongst them.

There were different kinds of trade and exchange in ancient, medieval, and early modern Eurasia. As in other parts of the world, the most common one was a trade within particular regions. Another kind of trade was an interregional trade, especially between neighboring regions. There was also a long-distance and even transcontinental trade. A role of the

nomads of the Eurasian steppes, semi-deserts, and deserts, in those various kinds of trade was also different. (For the sake of brevity I will further address them as the steppe nomads, since the majority of those nomads lived in the steppe zone, a great belt that stretches from Hungary to North China.)

Regional Trade.

The most important to the nomads was a regional trade with neighboring sedentary societies. The main merchandise that nomads offered their sedentary counterparts was livestock and its secondary products: wool, hides, and others. Horses were especially important in such trade. The horse is a riding animal best suited for military actions. The camel is inferior to the horse in this regard. However, many sedentary states, like China, or the states of the Indian peninsula, always experienced a shortage of military horses and keeping them was quite expensive.

Although nomads and sedentary populations most often occupied separate ecological zones, spatial difficulties for such trading or exchanges were far from being insurmountable. Livestock could be driven and carried over great distances.

Sometimes merchants from sedentary countries penetrated deep into the steppes. Thus, Ibn Fadlan, a secretary of the embassy sent by the Abbasid caliph al-Muqtadir to Volga Bulgaria testified that in the tenth century, Muslim merchants

from Central Asia traded with the Oghuz nomads on their own territory, in the European steppes. However, much more often the nomads themselves moved their herds to centers of frontier trade on the borders of China, the Central Asian and other states, and later of Russia. Moreover, some nomadic migrations, and even conquests, could be explained by the desire to be closer to their much needed markets. Thus, when in the tenth century, during the rule the Sung dynasty, the economic center of China shifted to the south, the Khitan and Jürchen nomads also moved to its borders.

In principle, the trade between nomads and sedentary peoples was beneficial for both sides. In agricultural and urban societies the livestock and its products were always much more expensive than in nomadic ones. The Muslim authors of the tenth century, al-Maqdisi and al-Istakhri specially mentioned that, due to this trade the prices for meat on the northern borders of Maveraunnahr (mainly sedentary territories between the Amy-Darya and Syr-Darya rivers, also known as Transoksiana) were low, and that Khwarazm (a region in the lower Amy Darya river, in western Central Asia) had become a wealth country exclusively because of its trade with nomads. Later on, in the twelfth century, the Saljuk sultan Sanjar noticed that an increase in prosperity and profits of settled people was derived from the goods provided by nomads.

However, in many cases the trade between nomads and sedentary countries was not a pure commercial business. It also implied a political factor. In quite different historical periods, many sedentary states, especially China, but sometimes Central Asia states as well, considered the trade with nomads as a way of applying a political pressure on them.

In China, during the whole ancient and medieval periods, the same situation recurred time and again. Its governments required that in order to trade nomads had to admit their political dependence on China, and nomads resorted to arms to acquire the right to trade. Thus, in piece-treaties that China had to conclude with the Hsiung-nu, the ancient nomads of Inner Asia, the latter always insisted that the Chinese government should pledge to open markets at the centers of frontier traffic.

In the late medieval period, Shaybani Khan (1451-1510), at that time a ruler of Maverannahr, issued a special edict that forbade merchants from Samarkand, Bukhara and Khwarazm to trade with the Kazakhs.

But a situation was opposite in other cases. Thus, in the eighth century, the Uyghur imposed upon China a forced trade, which was of much greater value to them than to the Chinese government and actually resembled an extortion. The Chinese had to pay forty pieces of silk for one horse, although these horses were of very low quality (Mackerras, 1972: 338).

Intermediate trade

The father of history, Herodotus was the first, who noticed the nomads' involvement into this trade. He mentioned that in the fifth century BCE the Scythians, who lived in the East European steppes and founded the earliest nomadic state in history, brought wares made in the Greek cities on the Northern Black Sea shores to the foothills of the Urals (Herod., IV, 24). They conducted their business in seven languages with an assistance of seven interpreters. His claim is confirmed by archaeological materials. Bronze mirrors made in Olbia (a Greek city on the Southern Bug estuary, on the territory of contemporary Ukraine) were found in the Urals. However, we do not know who the merchants were: the nomadic Scythians, or rather their sedentary subjects. The same reservation should be made about a later remark by Strabo (XI, V, 8), who noted that the Arsines, one of the Sarmatian tribes, grew rich by transporting goods on camels and trading with Indian and Babylonian goods.

Usually the intermediate trade was conducted by merchants from sedentary countries. In this regard, the Khazar state can serve as a good example (Kovalev, 2005). In the eighth to the tenth centuries it was a dominant political force in the East European and Caspian steppes, and in the North Caucasus. Khazaria was an important channel of Abbasid and Samanid trade with East European countries. More than one

million Samanid silver coins have been discovered in Eastern Europe. By contrast, no Samanid coin has been found in China.

Pax Chazarica facilitated the development of the Dnepr - Black Sea - the Volga - Caspian trading networks. Contemporary scholars are competing with each other for providing special names for different parts of these networks. Thus, we already have the Fur route, the Silver route, and I would not be surprised if their number continues to grow.

The Khazar nomads have but few goods for export. But their rulers benefited very much from the international trade because they collected tolls. So, they were doing everything to provide safety for the traders in their realm.

Long-distance interregional trade.

The long-distance interregional trade was already practiced by the earliest nomadic states in Eurasia. However, their direct involvement into this trade seems to be quite dubious. There is no unambiguous evidence of the existence of indigenous professional traders in any nomadic society. The first professional traders appeared in the Kazakh nomadic society only at the end of the nineteenth and in the beginning of the twentieth century. The *powinda* of Afghanistan were to some extent an exception but even they combined trading activities with pastoralist ones.

Usually the professional merchants in the nomadic societies came from sedentary populations. Not infrequently, members of specific ethnic groups acted like closed guilds monopolizing the long-distance trade. However, nomadic rulers profited from their activities and actually encouraged and protected them.

Thus, from the fifth to the eighth centuries, the long-distance trade was run by the Sogdian merchants, whose homeland was located in Central Asia. Their role was especially significant in the Turkic states (de la Vaissière, 2004).

In the Khazar period, interregional trading routes were run by merchants from Khwarazm, the countries of the Caliphate, and also by the Scandinavians (called Rus'), and the Jews, many of whom, apparently, were members of the international Radhanya corporation.

In the united Mongol Empire, the Silk Road was run on by the Nestorians and especially by the Muslims from Central Asia. In the Golden Horde, the trade with Central Asia, Russia, and China to a large extent was controlled by the Muslim merchants; especially by the Khwarazmians. There were also the Indian merchants, who used the routes through Iran and Afghanistan. In addition, there were Italian, Greek, Armenian, and Jewish merchants. But there were no merchants from the nomadic population (Калан, 2012).

However, nomads were involved in the long distance trade in many other capacities. Sometimes, their embassies to different sedentary states were accompanied by merchants. No caravan could cross their territories without their consent and protection. But with their consent caravans' camels and horses could be pastured along the way on natural pastures. In addition, nomads were sometimes involved in transportation of loads and selling or renting out transport animals.

I would also like to mention a specific characteristic of nomadic states and polities that was connected to their political economy. Rare and luxury items, usually of foreign origins, served in them as symbols of power and prestigious markers of a high political and social status. Their redistribution and political gift-giving were aimed at recruiting and retaining followers, and alliance building. This long-distance political exchange was reciprocal and multi-dimensional.

A role of nomads in long-distance international trade is best summarized by Thomas Allsen (1997; see also 2001). He noted that nomadic states were not only stimulating long-distance exchange through the creation of a *pax* that provided security and transportation facilities. In fact, the process of state formation among the nomads in and of itself stimulated trade through increased demand for precious metals, gems, and most particularly, fine cloth. I would only add to this list

wine that was also in high demand by the nomadic rulers and aristocracy.

No wonder that the burial tombs of the Scythian kings and aristocracy, in the fifth to the early third centuries BCE, contain numerous luxury objects made of precious metals, including highly refined artworks, as well as pottery of the finest quality made by the Greek artisans. Likewise, the burials of Hsiung-nu, who founded the first nomadic state in Inner Asia, contain numerous artifacts made in China (silk, lacquer ware, and bronze mirrors), and in addition also products associated with the artworks of Greco-Bactria, Parthia, and even of the Mediterranean region.

Still, this is only one side of the coin. Not only the interregional political exchange, but also the long-distance commercial trade with an assistance of professional merchants from sedentary countries was a characteristic feature of successful nomadic states. Nomads not only created demand for the long-distance international trade. Not infrequently, they also provided supplies for this trade. Successful nomadic states and polities always got much more goods, as gifts, tribute, revenues, and by other means, from dependent sedentary populations and states, than they could utilize themselves.

This state of affairs existed since the ancient times. To provide but one of many possible examples I would like to turn to the Scythians again. They subjugated the cultivators living in the forest-steppe and managed to put under their control the trade with the Greek cities founded on the northern seaboard of the Pontus (the Black Sea). The Scythian aristocracy realized tribute in kind paid by the dependant cultivators, such as grain, as well as slaves, on the Greek markets and in return received luxury items – refined artwork, jewelry metalwork, and pottery of the highest quality, as well as wine much loved by them (Khazanov, 2015).

Not infrequently, the nomadic rulers in Inner Asia were receiving from China thousands, or even hundreds of thousands of silk rolls on a yearly basis. Thus, in the 560's and 570's, the Zhou and the Qi, the two competing dynasties in Northern China, each annually paid the Türk rulers 100 000 silk rolls.

It is clear that domestic consumption could not absorb them. But turned into merchandise and traded across many regions and far beyond political spheres of individual nomadic states such goods provided a significant income for the nomadic rulers and aristocracy.

Moreover, they not only provided the merchandise. Sometimes, their role in the long distance trade was more active. Thus, the Mongol princes and officials established

special relationship with merchants called *ortaq* (*ortoq, route*). Actually, the *ortaq* traders were partners or agents of the Mongol ruling elite. These traders were provided with goods that they used as capital to earn interests (Endicott-West, 1989).

No wonder that nomadic aristocracy benefited from and encouraged long distance international trade. The commercial fees collected by the Golden Horde rulers from trading colonies of Genoa and Venice were fixed at a low rate of 3-5 percent of the merchandise value (Di Cosmo, 2005: 396).

Transcontinental trade.

I will turn now to the transcontinental overland trade that recently has received a lot of attention. In my view, its importance should not be overestimated. Contrary to the currently rather widespread opinion, in the pre-modern times, there was no, nor could there be the world economic systems based on systematic exchange of basic commodities and daily necessities. The transcontinental trade before the advent of capitalism was mainly confined to luxury commodities and prestige goods, spices, and sometimes also to slaves. In this regard, I will dwell a little on the Silk Road and its myths.

The Silk Road and its myths.

The “Silk Road” is a term coined by a famous German scholar, Richthofen in 1877 (Richthofen, 1877). Promoted by his followers, like his student Sven Hedin (1938), and others, it was recently reinvigorated mainly for political and economic reasons. In some countries, especially in China, its importance is greatly exaggerated. The Chinese “One Belt, One Road” initiative and its “heritage diplomacy” are but another example of the country’s soft power strategy (Winter, 2016).

Nowadays, the Silk Road also captures imagination of many amateurs, who attracted by its allegedly exotic character. It figures in many popular and semi-popular publications; it appears in movies, and TV shows. Unfortunately, even some professional scholars, who want to demonstrate their political correctness and opposition to alleged Eurocentrism, have also jumped on the wagon (see, for example, Beckwith, 2009).

However, an image of grandiose caravans that were regularly crossing thousands kilometers of inhospitable environment in order to connect distant parts of the world to a large extent is a myth. The way from the Golden Horde to the capital of the Yuan dynasty, in China, took more than two hundred, or even more than three hundred days (Abu-Lughod, 1983: 183). It took the Polo brothers three and a half years to get with their merchandise from Mongolia to the Mediterranean (Marco Polo, 2001: 8, 11). No wonder that some

scholars are skeptical about an actual importance of the Silk Road and even call it a “romantic deception” (see, for example, Whitfield, 2007; Chin, 2013). The reality, however, was more complicated.

First, the Silk Road was not the only transcontinental trading route. And in some historical periods the other routes were much more important than the silk one. Thus, more than one million Samanid coins have been discovered in Eastern Europe, in the Khazar period. By contrast, no one Samanid coin has been found in China. There is no evidence that there was a direct caravan trade between China and the Middle Eastern, East European, and Mediterranean countries at that time. It is true that silk and silk clothing were found in many graves, from the North Caucasus to Scandinavia. But most of them were made in Byzantine and Central Asia (Vedeler, 2016). Apparently, few Chinese silks were delivered to Eastern Europe not directly but from Central Asian countries. These countries served as intermediaries in gradual, down-the-line trade between China and Europe.

Second, there was not one Silk Road but many, and that was already noticed by Richthofen himself. The Silk Road was almost never a singular route stretching between Asia and Europe. It consisted of many temporal and multidirectional shorter routes that linked up diverse cultural and political zones, both east to west and south to north. These networks of

exchange existed from the first century BCE, if not even earlier (Parzinger, 2008), to the fifteenth century CE. Not only silk but many other goods, as well as technologies, cultural styles, religions, and in addition diseases, were transported along these networks across Eurasia.

Only one of many silk roads, from China and Inner Asia to the Black Sea region, via the Syr Darya river and around the Caspian Sea, directly crossed the territories occupied by the nomads. Up to the third century CE the main international trade route was far away from the steppe zone. It went from China to India through the Pamir and Bactria (a historical region that was located between the Hindukush mountains and the Amu Darya river) because its safety was provided by the Kushan empire, which included northern India and southern Central Asia. Several other routes went through sedentary regions of Central Asia

This situation is well reflected by archaeological materials. For example, the ancient nomads of the Eurasian steppes highly valued the Han bronze mirrors. But hardly more than half a dozen these mirrors were discovered in their tombs, in the East European steppes. Moreover, some of these mirrors could be made not in China but in South Siberia.

The steppe route could function smoothly only when nomadic empires controlled all, or the most of the steppe zone. And this happened only twice in the world history.

The first time the steppe route became important and, perhaps, even dominant in the sixth century, when the Türks created the pan-Eurasian nomadic *imperium*. Their empire extended its power not only over most of the nomads in the Eurasian steppes but also to the sedentary territories to the north of Amu-Darya river. It even temporarily conquered Bosphorus, in the Crimea. This, so far unprecedented expansion had a certain economic motivation, a desire to acquire lucrative control over the transcontinental trade.

This desire, as well as diplomatic activities of the Türk rulers, was encouraged and facilitated by their sedentary subjects, the Sogdians, who were involved in the international silk trade and played an important role in the Türk realm. At the time of Türkic rule, the road from their western domains to Byzantium went from the Aral Sea to the north of the Caspian Sea, and then through the Caucasus, or through the East European steppes to the Crimea.

The second time this happened after the creation of the Mongol empire and the Mongol conquests in the thirteenth century. *Pax Mongolica*, although short lived, stimulated unprecedented trade across Eurasia. From a commercial point of view it was a gigantic reshuffle of previous trading networks. Chinese silk had a price advantage due to its low cost in the country, and the unification of Eurasia allowed it to appear again on the European markets.

But the direct trade road from China to the Black Sea existed only for a short time. After the Mongol empire split up into four successor states, the direct inland trade between the Europe and China became much less significant. There was no integrated market between the Mediterranean and China. It became the domain of few private merchants and adventurers, and its volume should not be exaggerated.

The main center of the long-distance trade with China moved to Tabriz, in Iran, and an access to the Chinese products was mainly controlled by the Muslim intermediaries. Anyway, after the Ming dynasty defeated the Mongol Yuan dynasty in China, in 1368, it virtually closed its borders for international trade (Di Cosmo, 2005: 403).

When the steppe was fragmented between different and competing nomadic polities, and this is how the things were in most historical periods, other routes were much safer. In the second half of the eighth century, with the demise and then collapse of the Türk Empire and then its successor states, the inland transcontinental trade through the steppes was disrupted and came into decay. In the ninth century, under a patronage of the Uighur state, it existed only on a low level. From c.750 to c.1200 the inland silk road lost its previous importance.

Besides, long-distance terrestrial travelling was expensive and not infrequently dangerous. Safety was the first

but far from only concern of the merchant; distance was the second one. In the early medieval period, several Arab authors mentioned difficulties experienced by merchants, who had to pass the territories of those nomads, who lacked a centralized authority. In 922, Ibn Fadlan, joined a huge caravan of the Khwarazmian merchants, who were going to Volga Bulgaria. He reported that the merchants passing through the steppes had to pay to the Oghuz nomads for temporary shelter in tents, fresh mounts and pack animals, and just for a free passage. These payments consisted of food, cloth, coins, and other goods. In the next century, Gardizi described the difficulties experienced by merchants, who travelled through the lands of other nomads of the East European steppes, the Pechenegs.

A daily move of pack animals usually amounted to no more than twenty five kilometers. According to the Arab sources, trade caravans did not cover more than a few farsangs a day (one farsang is approximately six kilometers, see Лурье, 2005). Animals needed rest and water points. But even in sedentary regions of Central Asia the first caravansaries appeared only in the ninth century (Kovalev, 2005).

Third, there were not only inland silk routes, but maritime routes as well. And only in some historical periods, the land routes were more advantageous. Thus, in the middle of the sixth century, Cosmas Indicopleustes noted that loads of silk passing by land through one nation after another, reach

Persia in a comparatively short time, whilst the route by sea is vastly greater. But that was only a temporary situation connected to the Turkic dominance on the silk route.

In all, a role of the steppe nomads in the Eurasian trade was multifarious and far exceeded their number and economic potential. In some historical periods, the nomads created demand on specific luxury goods, stimulated their production in sedentary countries, and facilitated their dissemination across the two continents. Still, their general role in the history of the ancient and medieval Eurasian trade should not be exaggerated. Their role in the political and military history of Eurasia was much greater.

Anyway, everything was changed in the early modern period. The role of the Eurasian steppes and Central Asia in the transcontinental trade between Europe and China rapidly declined. The great geographic discoveries and improvements in seafaring sharply diminished an importance of transcontinental overland trade (Steensgaard 1973; Rossabi 1989). The maritime routes became shorter and easier. Caravels, and later steamboats, defeated caravans in Eurasia. And with these new developments any significant role that the nomads had been playing in the Eurasian trade virtually came to the end.

References

Abu-Lughod, J. 1983. Before European Hegemony. The World system A.D. 1250-1350. New York, Oxford University Press.

Allsen, T. T. 1997. Commodity and Exchange in the Mongol Empire: A Cultural History of Islamic Textiles. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press. 1997.

Allsen, T. T. 2001. Culture and Conquest in Mongol Eurasia. Cambridge University Press. .

Beckwith, C. 2009. Empires of the Silk Road. A History of Central Eurasia from the Bronze Age to the Present. Princeton, Princeton University Press.

Chin, T. 2013. The Invention of the Silk Road. *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 40, no. 1.

Di Cosmo, N. Mongols and Merchants on the Black Sea Frontier in the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Centuries: Convergences and Conflicts. In R. Amitai and M. Biran (eds.). *Mongols, Turks, and Others. Eurasian nomads and the Sedentary World*. Leiden-Boston. Brill, 2005.

Endicott-West, E. 1989. *Mongol Rule in China: Local Administration in the Yuan Dynasty*. Cambridge, Mass., Harvard University Press.

Franchetti, M. 2008. *Pastoralist Landscapes and Social Interaction in Bronze Age Eurasia*. Berkeley, University of California Press.

Hedin, S. 1938. *The Silk Road*, trans. by F. H. Lyon. London.

Khazanov, A. M. 1994. *Nomads and the Outside World*. 2nd ed. Madison, WI, The University of Wisconsin Press.

Khazanov, A. M. 2015. *The Scythians and Their Neighbors*. In R. Amitai and M. Biran (eds.). *Nomads as Agents of Cultural Change. The Mongols and Their Eurasian Predecessors*. Honolulu, University of Hawai'i Press.

Kovalev, R. K. 2005. *Commerce and Caravan Routes along the Northern Silk Road (Sixth-Ninth Centuries)*. Pt. I: The Western Sector. *Archivum Eurasiae Medi Aevi*, 14.

Kuzmina, E.E. 2008. *The Prehistory of the Silk Road*. Philadelphia, 2008.

Mackerras, C. 1972. *The Uighur Empire According to the T'ang Dynastic Histories. A Study in Sino-Uighur Relations 744-840*. 2nd ed. Canberra.

Marco Polo. 2001. *The Travels of Marco Polo*, trans. by M. Komroff. New York, Random House.

Parzinger, H. 2008. *The Silk Roads'Concept Reconsidered: About Transfers, Transportation, and Transcontinental Interactions in Prehistory*. *The Silk Road*, vol. 5, no. 2.

Richthofen, F. von. 1877. Ueber die centralasiastischen Seidenstrassen biz zum 2. Jahrhundert n. Chr. Verhandlungen der Gesellschaft für Erdkunde zu Berlin, 4.

Rossabi, M. 1989. The 'Decline' of the Central Asian Caravan Trade. In Seaman, G. (ed.), Ecology and Empire. Nomads in the Cultural Evolution of the Old World Los Angeles: Ethnographics/USC.

Steensgaard, N. 1973. Carracks, Caravans and Companies: The Structural Crisis in the European-Asian Trade in the Early 17th Century. Copenhagen, Scandinavies Institute of Asian Studies.

de la Vaissière; E. 2004. Histoire des marchands sogdiens. Paris, Collège de France.

Vedeler, M. 2016. Silk Trade to Scandinavia in the Viking Age. In A.L. Huang and C. Jahnke (eds.). Textiles and the Medieval Economy. Production, Trade and Consumption of Textiles. 8th-16th Centuries. Oxford, Oxford Books.

Whitfield, S. 2007. Was there a Silk Road? *Asian Medicine*, 3.

Winter, T. 2016. One Belt, One Road, One Heritage: Cultural Diplomacy and the Silk Road. *The Diplomat*, March 29.

Калан, Э. 2012. Улус Джучи (Золотая Орда) и страны Востока: Торгово-экономические взаимоотношения во второй половине XIII-XIV вв. Казань, Bibliotheca Tatarica.

Лурье, И. Б. 2005. Заметки о раннеисламском дорожнике в Китай. В Материалы и исследования по археологии Кыргызстана, вып. 1, Бишкек, Илим.