

Christopher I. Beckwith. *Empires of the Silk Road: A History of Central Eurasia from the Bronze Age to the Present Day.*

Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2011.

Reviewed by Constance Wilkinson

Empires of the Silk Road is an ambitious work that fulfills its stated ambitions, fully. Written with boldness and authority, it packs many punches and pulls few. Author Christopher I. Beckwith manages to cover ~5,000-years-worth of Central Eurasian history in this single volume; he sees those events differently than your common or garden-variety Central Eurasian historian/philologist and demonstrates patiently and precisely why he does so in a way that is rich and insightful. Beckwith's work is both complex and concise. It is provocative and persuasive. It is frequently captivating, often surprising, occasionally perplexing, and sometimes slightly weird¹ (not that there's anything wrong with that).

Beckwith begins by presenting a series of First Stories, an intriguing collection of Central Eurasian origin myths. In so doing, he demonstrates themes that persist as the cultural inheritance of descendant peoples of widely separated locations, re-told over time in daughter varieties of Proto-Indo-European languages, from the "Bronze Age Hittites and Chou Chinese; the Classical period Scythians, Romans, Wu-sun, and Koguryo; the medieval Turks and Mongols; and the Junghars and Manchus of the late Renaissance and Enlightenment." (p. 2)

These Central Eurasian origin myths share patterns: a special child is supernaturally conceived; its father, the true king, is overthrown by an evil usurper; child is left out in the wilderness to die but does not die, due to tender care by wilderness animals. The Shang dynasty child is protected by sheep and cattle and birds (p. 3); descendants of Aeneas of Troy, twin babes Romulus and Remus are left out exposed, but are "nursed by a she-wolf and fed by a bird² (p. 4); north of Dunhuang, the Wu-sun prince is left out on the steppe to die, but is suckled by a wolf and fed by a crow and survives (p. 6); in the north, Tumen is cast out to the beasts, but the pigs and the horses and the birds of the wilderness keep him warm, so he grows up to found the city of Ordus (p. 7); the ancestor of the Turk people is left out in the wilderness to die but is saved by a she-wolf (p. 8). In all these origin stories, a special child is born, undergoes trials and dangers but nevertheless survives to become a great warrior whose prowess attracts others with similar prowess; the hero warrior leads this brotherhood of warriors back to their homeland, where the hero and retinue overthrow prior evil tyrant(s) and found a glorious new dynasty. (p. 12)

¹ Dr. Beckwith has a thing about "Modernism," whatever that is. He has a thing about T.S. Eliot and Ezra Pound. Go figure. Everything else about his book was fantastic.

² Specifically, a woodpecker.

The first-story happy ending of the lord and his blood-oath-bound retinue conquering all is at the heart of what Beckwith calls the “Central Eurasian Culture Complex,” a patriarchal comitatus structure that underlies the polities of Central Eurasia — and beyond — from the earliest times up nearly to the present day. The Central Eurasian Culture Complex is reflected in “historical sources on the Hittites, the Achaemenid Persians, the Scythians, the Khwarizmians, the Hsiung-nu, the ancient and early medieval Germanic peoples, the Sassanid Persians, the Huns, the Hephthalites, the Koguryo, the early dynastic Japanese, the Turks” (15) among many others. This is Beckwith’s thesis, and, over the succeeding chapters of his book, he proves his case (to this reader, at least).

Chapter 1, “The Chariot Warriors.” Beckwith uses historical linguistics and archaeology to trace the diaspora of Proto-Indo-European speakers, oath-bound bands of warriors who sweep through neighboring states, spreading their Central Eurasian Culture Complex traditions wherever they go.

Beckwith cites evidence of Central Eurasian Culture Complex traditions transforming the peoples living in Kroraina (p. 35), in Anatolia (p. 37), among the Maryannu (p. 39) and the peoples of the Indus in Northern India, even those of Mycenaean Greece (p. 42). The CECC effect produces change in as far east as the Yellow River Valley (p. 43). Each contact leaves behind traceable traces, through language, actions, and objects.

In particular, the Proto-Indo-European mastery over the technology of warfare brought these freewheeling nomad chariot warriors victory and power: they knew how to engineer, build, and operate war chariots; they knew how to breed, train, and ride war horses; they invented the light but powerful compound bow and trained expert archers in their use. They seemed invincible.

Chapter 2, “The Royal Scythians,” explains the rise of the mounted nomad warriors of the great grasslands as they coalesced into empires. A mounted nomad people, the Scythians “migrated into the Western Steppe and established themselves as a major power” (p. 58) while “at the eastern end of the steppe zone, in what is now Mongolia, former Inner Mongolia and the eastern Tarim Basin, the nomadic-dominant form of the Central Eurasian Culture Complex became an established life-style between the eighth and seventh centuries B.C.” (p. 70) Both empires depended on the trading system which would become known as the Silk Road to accumulate wealth and power. Polities which refused trade made themselves liable to invasion and defeat (if not outright destruction).

Chapter 3, “Between Roman and Chinese Legions,” concerns the era of expansion by Rome, the peripheral empire to the west of the Central Asian Steppe, as it came into conflict with peoples to its east: the Sarmatians, the Alans, the Parthians, the Tokharians, and the Kushan Empire of northern India.

At roughly the same time, central plains China, a peripheral empire to the east of the Central Asian Steppe, sought to expand into the Hsiung-nu empire to acquire its wealth (and eventually succeeded). However, the aggressive expansionism into Central Asia from east and west, eventually became a disaster for both invading empires: Silk Road commerce declined, both empires collapsed, and with the collapse of trade came “the end of Classical civilization.” (p. 92)

In Chapter 4, "The Age of Attila the Hun," Beckwith references the migration known as the Great Wandering of Peoples from Central Eurasia to its west and to its south. Of interest is that, although the fact of the migration is well-known, the specific reason for this migration remains a mystery. (p. 107) What is not at issue is that the Great Wandering of Peoples "re-established nearly all of Western Europe as part of the Central Eurasian Culture Complex" (p. 94) and included “previously non-Romanized Northern, Central and Eastern Europe . . . the formerly Romanized parts of North Africa, the Iberian Peninsula, England, France, Belgium, Switzerland, northern Italy, Germania, and most of the Balkans.” (p. 110)

Chapter 5, "The Turk Empire," begins on the Eastern Steppe, in which,

following the dynamics of the Central Eurasian Culture Complex, the Turk people overthrew their overlords, the Avars, and chased their remnants to the ends of Eurasia. In so doing, they linked up all the peripheral civilizations of Eurasia via its urbanized core, Central Asia, which quickly became the commercial-cultural heart of not only Central Asia, but of the Eurasian world as a whole. (p. 112)

Beckwith here makes note of the detailed attention paid to Central Asia in historical sources on the Early Middle Ages — particularly Chinese, Tibetan, Arab sources — and to a lesser extent, as provided in Greek and Latin sources — demonstrating the importance of this central region to all the realms on its periphery.

Beckwith states:

The reason for all this attention is clearly not modern historians' imaginary threat of a nomad warrior invasion, which is virtually unmentioned in the sources. The reason for the attention seems rather to be the prosperous Silk Road economy and the existence of a shared political ideology across Eurasia that ensured nearly constant warfare. . . [as] each nation believed its own emperor to be the sole rightful ruler of "all under Heaven," and everyone else should be his subjects.³(p. 137)

³ But of course! How could it be otherwise?

Interestingly, though the region experienced almost constant warfare during this period, trade on the Silk Road "flourished as never before," (p. 112) at least until a Chinese-Arab alliance was victorious over the Central Asians (p. 113) in the mid-eighth century.

Chapter 6, "The Silk Road, Revolution, and Collapse," details what the title states, a time when, within a period of 13 years every empire in Eurasia suffered a major rebellion, revolution, or dynastic change (p. 140). Chapter 7, "The Vikings and Cathay" discusses an era of smaller hegemonies, the Khazars, Karakhanids, Ghaznavids, Seljuks, western Hsia, Tanguts, Khitan, Jurchen, among others, as well as advances in education and culture that occurred during this time. Chapter 8 concerns "Chinggis Khan and the Mongol Conquests," as expansive-world-civilization-enthusiast Chinggis Khan and his uber-Central Eurasian Culture Complex comitatus retinue create the first truly global civilization and, as a side effect, birth the Pax Mongolica.

Subsequent chapters track even more traces of the Central Eurasian Culture Complex over time, up to the present day, its adherents romp westward, ever-westward, doing so in times of economic successes and failures, social and political upheavals, all the way up to the bleak final shut-down of the Silk Road in its entirety, as Central Eurasia loses all autonomy, is divvied up between Imperial Russia and Imperial China to be voraciously devoured. In the end, the energy of the region is annihilated — like the once-vibrant and powerful Uighur Empire, the Tibetan Empire, the Sogdians, et al., et al., et al. Like all phenomena, the civilizations of Central Asia are seen to be impermanent, and indeed, are.

I found this book to be a lasting delight. It is lavishly bejeweled with footnotes and endnotes, some so seductive as to make it hard to proceed forward through the main text because its tangents are so alluring. It made me want to know more and more about Central Eurasia in even more detail. It made me want to learn Proto-Indo-European. No, really, it did.

Perhaps my favorite section was an Epilogue, entitled "THE BARBARIANS," in which Beckwith corrects a record that surely merits correction, in which the warriors of Central Eurasia were barbarians. Greedy, poor, backward, uncivilized barbarians picking on the jolly friendly sedentary citizens by engaging in indiscriminate slaughter.

Beckwith suggests that Central Eurasians were not poor compared to the nations on their periphery but were wealthier and more liberal and more cosmopolitan and more tolerant of a variety of cultures and more appreciative of invention, intellect, artistry, and spirituality. They were interested in wealth gained through trade. They engaged in warfare with others when access to trade was denied them.

In war, they were not barbarians — or to the extent that they were barbaric, were no more barbaric than anyone else. In fact, Beckwith makes the case that they were arguably less barbaric, pointing out that:

while the bloody victories of Attila, Chinggis or Tamerlane are still deplored, the equally bloody victories of the Graeco-Roman, Persian, and Chinese emperors are related with enthusiasm by historians past and present. Non-Central Eurasian historians from Antiquity to the present have been blind to the savagery and unrelenting aggression of their own ancestors . . . [Central Eurasians] cannot begin to be compared, *for sheer cruelty and relentless aggression*, to the Romans, the Persians, the Chinese, and their successors, right down to modern times (p. 323). [Emphasis mine.]

Modern historians continue to operate under an aspersion spell cast by some historian propagandists from peripheral nations who find the traumatic memory of having been *vanquished time and again* by un-civilized, un-sedentary, ruthless, couth-less, dirty, smelly victorious Others too painful to acknowledge.

Thus, the victorious Others are to be dismissed, disparaged, their actual glory deleted from official texts and erased from social consciousness. Alternatively, a culture might choose to demonize the victorious Other and thus create a useful larger than life enemy upon which to focus national hatred; one must learn to “Never Forget National Humiliation”⁴ in patriotic perpetuity. So it goes, throughout history, as to all the bad barbarians: the Hsiung-nu hordes, the Scythian hordes, the Tibetan hordes, the Parthian hordes, the Turk hordes, the Mongol hordes, *et alia*.

We are scions of “barbarians.” As Beckwith states: “Central Asians — not the Egyptians, the Sumerians, and so on — are our ancestors. Central Eurasia is our homeland, the place where our civilization started.” (p. 319)

⁴ Zheng Wang: *Never Forget National Humiliation: Historical Memory in Chinese Politics and Foreign Relations*. Columbia University Press: New York: 2012