

## *Introduction*

### NATURAL SETTING

Inner Asia is marked by three distinct features: (1) a belt of steppes and, to a lesser degree, deserts, which extend in a general latitudinal direction. This belt is delimited on the north by the Eurasian forest zone (the “taiga” of Siberia); on the south the limits are a variety of features, chiefly mountain chains but also transition to different climatic zones (notably in China) and bodies of water such as the Caspian and Black Seas; (2) several of these mostly latitudinal mountain chains that separate the steppe belt from South Asia, besides demarcating important segments within the area; and (3) a number of rivers, many of which drain into interior lakes or seas or disappear in the deserts through evaporation. All these features have affected the type and history of human presence, but some have in turn been modified by man’s intervention, since the dawn of sedentary civilization but especially in recent decades.

The steppe belt, an immense swath of landlocked grassland, made possible the appearance of a unique historical phenomenon: the horse-breeding, highly mobile Eurasian nomad. To be sure, nomads have also existed in other parts of the world, but the scale of the habitat, the role of the horse, and the relative and paradoxical proximity of great agricultural or urban civilizations made it possible for the Inner Asian nomad to play a historical role as unique and often as grandiose as was his homeland. In historical times, these nomads have been Turks and Mongols: these peoples had earlier seized primacy from the Indo-Europeans, some of whom they absorbed and some of whom migrated to India, the Middle East, or Europe.

Despite or perhaps partly because of their vastness, the Eurasian steppes and deserts have not been known by any comprehensive name. Those portions which have received generally accepted and well-known appellations owe them to historical circumstances or to special geographical features. Leading this roster are the Orkhon valley in Central

Mongolia, the Jungarian plain in northern Sinkiang, the Ili valley and Semireche in northwestern Sinkiang and southeastern Kazakhstan, and various deserts – the Gobi of southern Mongolia and eastern Sinkiang, Taklamakan in western Sinkiang, Betpak Dala (“Plain of Misfortune”) in southern Kazakhstan, Kyzyl Kum (“Red Sand”) in Uzbekistan, and Kara Kum (“Black Sand”) in Turkmenistan. The great expanse of the steppe of Kazakhstan, southern Russia and southern Ukraine, known to medieval Muslim authors as Dasht-i Kipchak (“The Steppe of the Kipchak [Turks]”), has since the political and demographic transformations of recent centuries become nameless, or has come to be known by the names of new administrative apportionments.

In contrast, the mountains and rivers of Inner Asia more easily catch our eye and retain evocative names: the Altai, Tianshan, and Pamirs are the most prominent ranges from among a number of lesser but still impressive systems; their location makes them central to our story, but the Kunlun, Karakoram, and Himalayas of Tibet, and the Urals of northern Eurasia also deserve mention. The Kunlun, Karakoram, and Himalayas, the highest mountain complexes in the world, allowed trade and religion to circulate through their passes between India and Inner Asia, but they impeded the southward expansion of the nomads’ steppe empires. The Urals attract our attention with the contrast they offer to the centrally located latitudinal Tianshan, for example: this extended longitudinal chain divides the Eurasian continent’s forest zone into its European and Asian parts, or, expressed in political terms, into European and Siberian Russia. Its southern outcroppings protrude into the northernmost part of the Kipchak Steppe, dividing it too into two approximate halves, a task then taken over by the Ural river, which rises in the Urals and eventually flows into the Caspian Sea.

Both rivers and mountains affected the nomads’ lives. Mountains played a role whose importance was second only to that of the steppes. First of all, the positive role: such ranges as the Tianshan encouraged through the pastures on their northern slopes and in their valleys a seasonal, vertical migration of the transhumant type that is a counterpart to the equally seasonal but horizontal (often south–north) migration in the steppes. Thus the Kyrgyz became almost exclusively mountain nomads, in contrast to their closest kinsmen the Kazakhs who were steppe nomads, or to the Mongols. The mountains also often functioned as places of refuge and starting points for the nomads’ political regrouping: the Altai, Hangai, and Hentei ranges of Mongolia have all played such roles in the history of the Turks and Mongols. Certain peaks even

acquired a magic aura where rituals and burials were performed or where a leader would go into seclusion in order to communicate with *tengri*, the nomads' celestial deity, at such crucial moments as the eve of an important battle. To this should be added the likelihood that such mineral-rich ranges as the Altai facilitated the early Turks' metallurgy and weapon production. As for their negative role: mountains, we have suggested, could not but act as barriers to vaster movements of nomads in search of new habitats or empires to build; indeed, when they built empires, the latter were steppe empires, to use a term made classic by René Grousset.

If nomads occupied the most characteristic place of human presence in Inner Asia, they were by no means its only inhabitants, and agriculture as well as urban life have flourished in many parts of it. Settlements usually owed their existence to mountains, but indirectly: agriculture was mostly of the irrigated and oasis type, dependent on rivers or underground conduits whose sources feed from the rainfall and glaciers of Inner Asian mountains. Dry farming depending on rainfall was not absent, but it in turn occurred chiefly in the higher elevations and foothills of the mountains or, more recently, in the northern latitudes of the steppe belt.

The part of Inner Asia where settled agricultural and urban civilization had appeared in protohistory and soon reached an especially developed and intensive level lay between the Caspian and Aral Seas on the west and the Tianshan and Pamir mountains on the east. This is the core of Central Asia, an area of plains and rivers, with no daunting mountain ranges until faced by the historic range of Hindukush; and it lies at the crossroads between the steppe world of Inner Asia to the north and the different regions of the Middle East and India to the south. The two worlds, the steppes of Inner Asia of the north and the subtropical regions of the south, were too distant to be encompassed by either the steppe empires of Inner Asia or the great monarchies of Iran or India. However, human migration through Central Asia was feasible, and the area became an important gateway through which in protohistory and antiquity peoples of Inner Asia moved south to Iran or India.

#### HISTORICO-GEOGRAPHICAL SURVEY

In the course of our narrative, names of regions, cities, and natural phenomena will appear that may be unfamiliar to the reader. Good maps or atlases – such as *The Times Atlas of the World*, *The Times Atlas of China*,

*An Historical Atlas of Islam* edited by W. C. Brice and published under the patronage of the Encyclopaedia of Islam, *The Historical and Commercial Atlas of China* by K. Herrmann, and *The Times Atlas of World History* – can help, as should, we hope, the accompanying maps throughout this book. A preliminary survey may also be worthwhile.

Let us start with the historical core of Central Asia, a region called Transoxania (or Transoxiana). The scholars who coined this name did so because the area lies beyond the River Oxus as one approaches it from the classical world of Iran, more specifically from its northeastern province of Khurasan. The Oxus, a Latinized form of an ancient Iranian word, was known to the Arabs as Jayhun, and is now called Amu Darya (“the Amu river”; this too may be an originally Iranian name, based on a local variant, Amu, and the Persian word for lake or sea, *darya*, borrowed by Central Asian Turkic with the connotation of river). The name indicates where Transoxania begins on the south, but does not say where it ends on the north, west, or east. There we have to use history’s indirect evidence and its possible interpretations, while admitting that this matter is less relevant than the question of why Transoxania was important, and where its center of gravity lay. The latter can be sought along another river, the Zarafshan (“gold-strewing” in Persian), which like the Amu Darya originates farther east in the Pamir mountains; it then flows west, first in its valley between the protrusions of the Pamirs called here Turkestan and Zarafshan ranges, then through the central lowland of Uzbekistan, and ultimately makes a lunge for the Amu Darya but disappears, exhausted, in the sands of Uzbekistan’s Kyzyl Kum desert. Irrigation derived from the Zarafshan has since antiquity supported dense agricultural and urban settlements, and cities like Panjikent in Tajikistan, or Samarkand and Bukhara in Uzbekistan are only the best remembered or most famous examples. Moreover, the Zarafshan is only the principal among the streams in Transoxania and adjacent areas that have made irrigation possible and through it settled and urban life. One of these, the Kashka Darya, rises in the southern watershed of the Zarafshan range. It then flows southwest and westward, in a manner somewhat parallel to that of the Zarafshan, toward the Bukharan oasis, but disappears before reaching it. Among the settlements it has nourished are such historical places as Shahrisabz, earlier known as Kesh and remembered as the birthplace of Timur (Tamerlane), and Karshi, the former Nasaf which was renamed in the Mongol period after the palace (*karshi*) built there by one of the Mongol rulers. The Zarafshan range is paralleled on the south by the Hisar range (often written Hissar or

Gissar, for no good reason except that this echoes Russian spelling), the last of these chains as we proceed southward. From then on we descend toward the valley of the Amu Darya. If we cross this river and continue, we eventually approach the mighty Hindukush mountains of Afghanistan. These two ranges, the Hisar on the north and Hindukush on the south, bracket the core territory of historical Bactria, the later Tokharistan; today this territory corresponds to northern Afghanistan, southern Tajikistan and southeastern Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan. The delimitation of Bactria on the east and west is less clear-cut, but one feature deserves mention: the “Iron Gate,” a defile about half-way between Balkh and Samarkand that breaks the low mountain range extending from the Hisar range southward toward the Amu Darya. The Iron Gate was a historic passageway between Bactria and Sogdia, used by conquerors, ambassadors, pilgrims and merchant caravans, and its name was more than just a legend: an actual gate reinforced with iron used to exist there.

The people who inhabited the area along the Zarafshan river as well as adjacent regions at the time of the Arab conquest were the Sogdians, hence the historical name for this central part of Transoxania, Sogdia or Sogdiana. They spoke an Iranian tongue, for Sogdia, like much of Central Asia, was then an Iranian-speaking area. One trace of that is toponymy, which includes many towns whose names end in *-kent*, *-kand*, *-kat* or other variants of this Iranian word meaning “town”: Panjikent, Uzgend, Samarkand, Numijkat (the original name of Bukhara), Tashkent, Yarkand, or simply Kat for example. Another vestige is the fact that a sizable component of the population is still Iranian-speaking or bilingual Iranian–Turkic (although some time after the Islamic conquest a shift occurred from Sogdian to Farsi, the language of Fars, a province in southern Persia, which developed into modern Persian). Muslim geographers of the tenth century (remarkable for the florescence of Islamic geography written in Arabic) called the country Bilad al-Sughd, Land of the Sogdians, and the Zarafshan, Wadi al-Sughd, Sogd river.

Historical Sogdia was thus the core of Transoxania, as it is today of modern Uzbekistan. For Transoxania the Arabs used the term Mawarannahr, “That which is beyond the river [Jayhun],” thus following the same psycholinguistic process. By contrast, the name Uzbekistan, “country of the Uzbeks,” came into official usage only in 1924 with the creation of the republic of that name. The second part of this compound, the Indo-European *-stan* (place of abode, sojourn, camp, tent;

cognate of the English verb to stand), met with prodigious fortunes in the entire Orient that was either Iranian or Iranian-inspired, whether Turco-Mongol or Indian: the ubiquitous suffix appeared in the Arabs' Turkistan and in a myriad other names of regions from Kazakhstan to Hindustan and Pakistan, besides existing independently as the term for each of the provinces of modern Iran, *ustan* (and even as a suffix forming associative rather than geographical concepts: thus *Gulistan*, "Place of Roses" and *Bustan*, "Place of Fragrance," titles of two famous collections of poems composed by the fourteenth-century Persian poet Sadi).

Khurasan, Mawarannahr, and Tokharistan were thus the standard terms for Central Asia to the south and north of the Jayhun river (Oxus, Amu Darya) in early Islamic civilization as formulated through its principal medium, the Arabic language. Once the Iranian element of the Islamic empire reasserted its identity, however, two other terms appeared that harkened back to the times of rivalry between the sedentary inhabitants of pre-Islamic Persia and the nomadic ones of Inner Asia: Iran and Turan. These concepts were more symbolic and political than expressions of ethnic difference, for the population on both sides of the Oxus was at that time Iranian; to the north of this river, however, suzerainty belonged ever more to the nomadic Turks of the steppe, so that pre-Islamic Persians thought of it as Turan, a place or abode (*an*) of the Turks (*Tur*; this interpretation, however, is very dubious), in contrast to Iran. This usage remained limited to classical Persian poetry, but the awareness of the Oxus as the great demarcation line between two different worlds – that of the Middle East, and that of Inner Asia – remained pervasive throughout the Middle Ages.

To the northwest of Transoxania lay Khwarazm (also spelled Khwarizm, Khawarazm, Kharazm, Khorazm and Latinized as Chorasnia), a region which, like the former, can be better defined by its core than by its limits, besides the fact that its northeastern portion was technically also Transoxania. The core is the lowermost course of the Amu Darya and its sprawling delta estuary fringing the southern shore of the Aral Sea. Here too it was the river, this time the Amu itself, that made possible a flourishing agricultural and urban civilization which was, since protohistory, Iranian. In pre-Islamic and early Islamic times two kingdoms tended to divide up Khwarazm: one in the southeast, with the city of Kat by the right, northern bank of the Amu Darya, as its capital; the other in the northwest, with the city of Urgench as the ruler's residence. Both are archaeological sites today, with the qualification that another town called Urgench arose in the seventeenth century farther

upstream, while the original site came to be known as Kunya Urgench, “Old Urgench” (from the Persian *kuhna*, “old”). Even the name Khwarazm has disappeared from current usage except in the rather artificial administrative parlance introduced after the upheavals of the Russian Revolution and establishment of the Soviet regime (the short-lived “Republic of Khorazmia,” and then the Khorazmian Region of the Uzbek SSR and now of Uzbekistan; the Region, whose administrative center is the aforementioned “new” Urgench, is only a fraction of historical Khwarazm, whose greater part corresponds to the present Karakalpak Autonomous Republic and the Dashhovuz Region of Turkmenistan). Other cities, names, and formations have developed in Khwarazm through the centuries; from among these Khiva, on the southern side of the delta’s apex, rose to prominence in the seventeenth century, and gave its name to a khanate that survived until 1919. A peculiar feature of the Amu Darya is the fact that all of its water did not always flow into the Aral Sea. At certain periods one branch swerved, shortly after having reached the apex of the delta, northwest and then southwest, passing by medieval Urgench. Called Uzboy, this branch then pursued the southwesterly course all the way to the Caspian Sea, which it entered through a wide coastal plain south of Krasnovodsk (Turkmenbashi). Before entering this plain, this arm of the Amu Darya flowed through a valley between two low mountain ranges, Greater Balkhan on the northwest and Lesser Balkhan on the southeast; a noteworthy feature of the foothills of the Greater Balkhan is the town of Nebit Dag with the now famous deposits of natural gas in its vicinity. In 1576 the river swerved back toward the Aral Sea, and the definitive decline of Old Urgench, thus deprived of its water supply, is by some historians attributed more to this natural cause than to devastations wrought by the armies of Genghis Khan and Timur.

The damages done to irrigation by warfare, especially at the time of the Mongol invasion, are painful episodes in Central Asia’s past. An incalculably more terrible devastation – destruction of the environment and people’s health – was visited on the region in the heyday of Russian rule, and grew in intensity right down to the collapse of the Soviet empire. This devastation was brought about by irrigation undertaken by the Russian masters to suit the imperial metropolis at the expense of Central Asia. We shall return to this theme in the final chapters of our book. Here the case of the Amu Darya changing its course and thus causing the definitive demise of Old Urgench is an opportunity for mentioning a paradox characteristic of the Soviet period: the catas-

trophic destruction of Central Asia's environment caused by *excessive* irrigation. Irrigation, we have seen, was not a novelty here; in antiquity and the Middle Ages it enabled man to turn this part of the world into a flourishing region of gardens, orchards, fields growing varieties of cereals, and of prosperous towns. The Soviet government, however, turned this earthly paradise into a monster megafarm by ordering it to deliver cotton for Russia's textile industry, and in addition to turning grainfields and orchards into water-thirsty cottonfields it undertook the construction of supercanals to irrigate vast tracts of steppe or even desert land in order to produce still more of that raw material. One such project was the 1,266 kilometer long Karakum canal, which traverses almost the whole length of Turkmenistan. It starts in the republic's east by tapping the Amu Darya a few kilometers after this river has left Afghan territory, and proceeds all the way to the town of Kazanjik not far from the Caspian Sea. The Karakum canal, proudly boasting the epithet "Imeni V. I. Lenina" ("In the name of V. I. Lenin," a favorite Soviet mark of distinction), was inaugurated in 1959, but its construction, begun before the war, still went on in the 1970s beyond Kazanjik. The Amu Darya is the lifeblood of man, beast, and plant that live and grow downstream, and it used to be the chief provider of water that kept the Aral Sea alive. The Karakum canal became a leech sucking this lifeblood from the beneficial river. The canal is of course only the most dramatic example of the violence perpetrated against man and nature in Soviet Central Asia; the Amu Darya – like its sister river the Syr Darya and other streams – was being tapped in many other parts of its course, and for the same principal purpose: ever more cotton for Russia's textile industry. The dwindling – we might almost say desertification – of the Aral Sea, and the catastrophic consequences of excessive irrigation, seem to have escaped the notice of most observers, Soviet and foreign alike, before *glasnost*. Since the late 1980s, by contrast, a flood of articles and books on this crisis has drawn the attention of both the domestic and international audience, and generated a search for a solution which, the Central Asians hope, will be facilitated through massive international technical and financial aid. One aspect seldom given attention by either expert or journalistic observers is the destruction of a once-flourishing wildlife. The Amu Darya delta as well as other riparian regions of Central Asia used to shelter such animals as tigers, besides their principal prey, Bukhara deer and wild boar, and a multitude of waterfowl, while the Aral Sea teemed with fish supporting a lively fishing industry. All that is gone, the Aral has since 1965 dwindled

by more than a half, and some predict its complete disappearance by 2005.

Medieval Khwarazm also functioned as an important commercial link between the Middle East and Russia, for it was through it that the most important trade routes between these two worlds passed. The trade was further stimulated by the Islamization of the Middle East, and the rise of Urgench as the chief Khwarazmian city from the tenth century onwards was partly due to this conjuncture. The caravans struck out across the broad plateau between the Aral and Caspian Seas known as Ūst-yurt (“elevated ground” in Turkic), and headed toward the Volga river. Some of the traffic may also have headed for the broad Mangyshlak peninsula on the Caspian coast, where they boarded ships for the presumably less arduous maritime voyage toward the Volga. At the time of the Islamic conquests in the seventh–eighth centuries, the lower region of the Volga was the home of the Turkic qaghanate of the Khazars, with Itil situated in the river’s delta as its principal city. By the tenth century the Khazar qaghanate was in definitive decline, and some of its commercial function was being assumed by another Turkic kingdom, that of the Bulgars on the middle course of the Volga with Bulghar, not far from modern Kazan, as their capital. Whereas the Khazar elite was partly judaicized, the Bulgars eventually converted to Islam. History has fortunately preserved a vivid testimony of the inception of this process. It is an account of a mission sent in 922 by the Abbasid caliph Muqtadir (908–29) to the “King of the Bulgars” written by one of the participants, the Baghdad scholar Ibn Fadlan.

To the east of Transoxania lies Fergana (also spelled Ferghana, Fargana, and Farghana; for the sake of consistency, we shall always use the form Fergana), a large elliptical valley enclosed by the Tianshan and Pamir mountains on the north, east, and south. The valley is crossed by a river called Naryn along its upper course in Kyrgyzstan and then, after it has crossed the Uzbek border and received the Kara Darya, Syr Darya. Fergana could also be included in Transoxania, since it lies to the north of the Amu Darya. Like Sogdia, Khwarazm, and several other regions of Central Asia, Fergana is a land of an ancient agricultural civilization nourished by streams descending from the surrounding mountains with the Syr Darya and Kara Darya playing the leading role. Again, its name, still current in the sixteenth century, was for some time overshadowed by that of one of its cities when the Khanate of Khoqand (also spelled Kokand; Quqon in modern Uzbek) became the easternmost of the three kingdoms of Central Asia prior to the nineteenth-century Russian conquest, the

Emirate of Bukhara and Khanate of Khiva being the other two. The greater part of Fergana lies today within Uzbekistan as the republic's easternmost province, except for fringes shared by Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan; for example the historic cities of Uzgend and Osh are on the Kyrgyz side of the border, that of Khujand is on the Tajik side.

To the south of Transoxania lay the aforementioned province of Khurasan (“[Land of] the Rising Sun” or “Orient” in Iranian), a name which still exists today but is restricted to the original territory's southwestern segment as Iran's province of Khurasan (Ustan-i Khurasan, with Meshed as the capital). In pre-Islamic and early Islamic times the name covered a much larger area that also comprised central Turkmenistan and northwestern Afghanistan and included such cities as Nisa, Merv, Nishapur, and Herat. Ashgabad, the capital of modern Turkmenistan, lies not far from the site of the ancient Parthian capital Nisa (second–first centuries BC) in the foothills of Kopet Dagh, a range that runs along the Turkmen–Iranian border. It is the streams flowing into this northern, Turkmen part of historical Khurasan that have supported agriculture and urban life there; most originate in the Kopet Dagh range, but two rivers, the Tejen and the Murghab, have their sources farther southeast in Afghanistan's Kuh-i Baba (the classical Paropamissus; it is sometimes identified with the Hindukush, or more correctly with its western segment), and Firuzkuh ranges. The Tejen, whose upper course is called Heri Rud (Herat river), for a short distance forms the border between Afghanistan and Iran, and then between Iran and Turkmenistan before it forges its way into the latter republic's Kara Kum desert. It meets its death there, but only after its sprawling desert delta has nourished a fertile network of agricultural settlements around the city of Tejen. The same can be said of the Murghab some 150 kilometers to the east, where an even larger oasis complex was marked by the famous medieval city of Merv. The Murghab, a short distance after it has entered Turkmenistan, is reinforced by the Kushk, a river originating in Afghanistan's Safed Koh range. The town of Kushka grew up near the border post in the period of Russian domination, and became memorable as the southernmost point of the Tsarist and Soviet empire and as the terminus of a railway branch extended there from Merv. The main line ran from the Caspian port of Krasnovodsk through Merv to Bukhara, Samarkand and Tashkent, where it linked up with lines connecting Central Asia with Russia and Siberia. The railroad's position and function reflected both ancient and recent long-distance routes going through Merv. In the early Middle Ages Merv lay on one of the