



CENTRAL ASIA III. IN PRE-ISLAMIC TIMES

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iii. In Pre-Islamic Times

The sources. The main evidence for the history of Central Asia before the coming of Islam comes from archeological excavations, while written sources contain little information. Historical texts include the Old Persian inscriptions by Darius I and Xerxes I (6th-5th cents. b.c.e.), the Chinese dynastic histories (covering events from the 2nd cent. b.c.e. onward; for a summary see Samolin) and accounts of Chinese Buddhist pilgrims (the earliest was Fa-xian/Fa-hsien ca. 400 c.e.; see [buddhism i](#)), fragmentary Greek writings of travelers or geographies (such as Ptolemy and Strabo), early Arabic histories and geographies, plus indigenous inscriptions and documents such as the early Sogdian [Ancient Letters](#) from the Dunhuang times and the later Sogdian letters from Mt. Mug east of Samarkand. Scattered Sogdian, Bactrian, Choresmian, Parthian, and Middle Persian, as well as Indian inscriptions on wall paintings, ostraca, or on boulders or coin legends give some assistance in reconstructing history (for a Sogdian inscription on a wall painting from [Afrāsīāb](#), old Samarkand, see Frye, 1967, p. 35; for the Parthian inscriptions from Nisa see Dyakonov and Livshits; for Bactrian, Middle Persian, and Prakrit in Kharoṣṭhī script see Staviskiĭ; numerous inscriptions in Sogdian, Bactrian, Middle Persian, Chinese, and Indian Prakrits in both Brahmi and Kharoṣṭhī scripts



were found on boulders in the upper Indus valley, Sims-Williams, 1989). Most of the inscriptions contain almost exclusively names of merchants, however, although coin legends in Choresmian and Sogdian also provide names of rulers and towns (Vamberg and Smirnova). The literary texts, that is, the Avesta and the Pahlavi texts, contain only little information. For the Avesta see [avestan geography](#) (with further refs.), and for the Pahlavi texts see in particular the geographical chapters of the *Bundahišn* (chaps. 9 on the mountains, 10 on the seas, 11 on the rivers, 12 on the lakes) and the Pahlavi version of *Vidēvdād*, chap. 1, with Christensen's commentary.

The earliest times. From excavations much information has been obtained about the daily life of both rulers and ruled. The discovery of Neanderthal remains in a cave at Teshik-Tash, Uzbekistan, indicates an early human settlement in Central Asia (cf. Okladnikov). Although subsequent finds are few, one may suppose a continuous occupation through the migration of the Indo-Iranian peoples into the area from the northwest at the beginning of the second millennium. Several questions about these migrations are difficult, if at all possible, to answer. First of them is the question about the identity of the aboriginal population in Central Asia at the time of the migrations, and second is the time of the split between Iranians and Indians and the duration of Indian occupation of the area. A generally accepted belief is that the Indians split from the Iranians sometime during the first half of the second millennium b.c.e. and preceded the Iranians, who moved onto the Iranian plateau at the beginning of the first millennium b.c.e. (for references to this theory see Ghirshman). Differing opinions have been expressed by M. Mayrhofer and I. M. Dyakonov. It is uncertain whether ancestors of the Dravidians, such as the [Brahui](#) in present Baluchistan, or of the [Burusho](#) (see [burushaski](#)) in Hunza, inhabited large parts of Central Asia in early times before the expansion of the Indo-Iranians. As we have no records of identifiable pre-Aryan peoples in Central Asia or in Northwest India the suggestion above is nothing more than a plausible guess.

The coming of the Iranian tribes. In any case, neither the aborigines nor the Indians remained in Central Asia; either they were absorbed or were pushed out by the Iranians, who settled in the area by tribes. Archaeology is our only source for this pre-literate period of the history of Central Asia. For a survey of early sites in Soviet Central Asia see Kohl, ed., and, for a more comprehensive survey of sites in Central Asia after the early Bronze Age, Koshelenko (1985). Masson, 1966 (1981) contains useful bibliographical surveys of the main



archeological sites (pp. 225-30). A. Koshelenko makes the following divisions for this early period: 1. Early Iron Age in the areas of the Marv oasis, northern Parthia, the Sarakhs oasis, northern Bactria, Fergana, the Tashkent oasis, Ustrushana; 2. the Ancient era, in which Choresmia, Fergana, and Sogdiana are added to the Iron Age areas. The Bactrians settle in present northern Afghanistan and Tajikistan, while the Sogdians occupy the Zarafshan river and Fergana valleys.

In Bactria sites along the rivers have provided information about the material culture of the early Iranians who settled there. Along the Surkhan Dar'ya numerous larger and smaller sites have been explored; such as old Termez, [Dal'verzin Tepe](#), Zar Tepe, Airtam (q.v.), and Khalchayan. Numerous sites are also located in the Hissar valley, on the lower Kafirnigan valley, on the right (west) bank of the Vakhsh river, on the lower left bank of the Vakhsh (Lagman, Kafyr Kala, etc.), on the valley between the Tair Su and Kyzyl Su (for references and complete lists of these sites see Koshelenko, pp. 250-72). Among the sites in Sogdiana the following may be mentioned: Kashka Dar'ya with centers Karshi and Shakhriyab Kitab (Kalyandar Tepe) and Kurgan Tepe; other sites are located in the vicinity of Samarkand (other than Afrāsīāb) and in the Bukharan oasis (see Koshelenko, pp. 273-92). Numerous sites have been explored in the Fergana valley (Koshelenko, pp. 304-316) and in the Tashkent oasis sites (e.g., [Dal'verzin Tepe](#); Koshelenko, pp. 297-303). The Choresmians settled throughout the region to the south of the Aral Sea around the Oxus River, although they originally may also have roamed south of that region. Among the principal sites of Choresmia are Gyaur Kala, Toprak Kala, Kzyl Kala, and Koï-Krylgan Kala. It is noteworthy that the pattern of settlement in Choresmia, unlike in other areas, was the fortified castle or *kala*. The archeological work in this area was led for many years by S. P. Tolstov and has been described in the reports on the excavations of the Choresmian expeditions, as well as in other publications (e.g., Tolstov), in which a detailed picture of the material culture of that region is drawn. To the north of the oases in the steppes were the nomads called Scythians by the Greeks and Sakas in the Old Persian inscriptions (Herodotus, bk. 1; Pyankov; Kent, *Old Persian*; see also, e.g., Bongard-Levin and Grantoskij; Litvinskiĭ; Akishev, 1984).

Central Asia in the Avesta. Names of countries in northeastern Iran are listed in several passages in the Avesta. Among the oldest is the one in *Mihr yašt* (Yt. 10. 14), where "Parutian Iškata, Haraivian Margu, Sogdian Gava, and Choresmia" are mentioned (Gershevitch, 1967, p. 81) as parts of the Aryan



lands that Miθra surveys when he approaches over Mount Harā in front of the rising sun. In the *Vidēvdād* (Vd. 1.4-7) we are told that among the best places created by Ahura Mazdā were Gava, inhabited by Sogdians, Mouru (Margiana), the strong and truthful, Bāxδī (Bactria), the beautiful with upraised banners, and Nisāya, which lies between Mouru and Baxδī. Not much can be concluded from these brief mentions, however, other than that the Iranians knew and inhabited these areas in pre-Achaemenid times.

Achaemenid times. History really begins in this area with echoes of the conquests in Central Asia by Cyrus founder of the Achaemenid empire. Herodotus (1.205-14) tells us that Cyrus lost his life fighting against the Massagetai, presumably a group of the Sakas, in 530 b.c.e., and the existence of a town in the Fergana valley called [Cyropolis](#) or Cyreschata in Arrian (4.3.1) and in Curtius' (7.6.16) Latin history of Alexander (medieval Kurkath) suggests that the conquests of Cyrus extended at least that far into Central Asia (Benveniste).

In his inscriptions Darius, and after him Xerxes, mentions the following northeastern parts of his empire (the order varies in the inscriptions): Parθava (Parthia), Zra(n)ka (Drangiana), Haraiva (Herāt), Margu (Marv), Uvārazmiy (Choresmia), Bāxtriš (Bactria), Suguda (Sogdia), and two Saka peoples, the *haumavarga* and the *tigraxauda*; on the trilingual golden plates from Persepolis and Hamadān (DPh and DH, Kent, *Old Persian*, pp. 136-37, 147) he boasts that his empire reaches from the Sakas who are beyond Sogdia to Ethiopia and from Sind to Sardis. In the Bīsotūn inscription (DB 5.20-30, Kent, *Old Persian*, pp. 133-34) Darius says: "Afterwards with an army I went to the land of the Sakas after the Sakas who wear a pointed hat. These Sakas went from me. When I arrived at the sea, then I crossed beyond it with all my army. Afterwards I defeated the Sakas exceedingly. Another I took captive who was led bound to me and I slew him." We may presume that the Central Asian provinces of the empire were not uniformly quiet down to the invasion of Alexander the Great, but we have no information about revolts or any events here during the rest of Achaemenid rule, so whether Darius actually fought against the Sakas in Central Asia as well as in south Russia, as suggested by the Bīsotūn inscription, is uncertain. According to the Greek sources (Herodotus, 3.92; Arrian, 3.8.3) Central Asian contingents and officers served in the Achaemenid armies.

It is uncertain how far Iranian tribes, presumably mostly the Sakas, extended into the steppes to the north of the oases of Central Asia, but archeological



finds at such sites as Issyk Kurgan near modern Alma Ata (Akishev, 1978) and Pazyryk in Siberia (Rudenko) suggest that Iranians dominated the steppes as well as the settled regions to the south. From Pazyryk comes the oldest relatively well preserved carpet in the world (late 4th-early 3rd centuries b.c.e.) with Achaemenid motifs but probably manufactured locally (see [carpets vi](#)). In the Issyk kurgan (burial tomb) was a prince with a tall hat and armor of gold, presumably a Saka prince. The movement of various tribes or peoples on the steppes, however, can only be guessed, as we have no written sources. The time of the movement of the “Tokharians,” an Indo-European people speaking a language of the European, rather than Asian, type (Centum language) into Chinese Turkistan is much disputed; estimates range from the third millennium to the second century b.c.e. If the movement took place in the 8th century b.c.e., as has been suggested, then the “Tokharians” would have moved from west to east before the expansion of the Sakas into the steppes from the south as Herodotus tells us (for historical questions connected with the “Tocharians” see Ivanov and Winter).

With the invasion of Alexander and his campaigns in Central Asia in 329-27 b.c.e. the Alexander historians increase our knowledge of the area; some of the meager information in Ptolemy and Strabo comes from the reports of Alexander’s conquests in this part of the world. The resistance of Central Asian peoples to the conqueror was strong and stubborn, necessitating the establishment of garrisons in the conquered areas after heavy fighting. The center of Alexander’s control, and that of his successors, was [Bactria](#), a rich and strategic region for trade routes from all directions (Tarn, pp. 118-121; Narain, pp. 12-13).

Excavations at the Bactrian site of Aī Khanom ([Āy Kānom](#)) on the Kokcha river in northern Afghanistan, as well as other Bactrian sites on the Oxus, have revealed the purely Greek character of the culture of these sites under the Seleucid successors of Alexander (Francfort, Bernard, et al., eds.; the publications of the *Délégation archéologique française en Afghanistan*; also Litvinskiy and Pichikan). Inscriptions of Greek poetry, as well as styles of architecture and town planning, were just as characteristic of Central Asia as of mainland Greece (Bernard, 1975, p. 457; idem, 1978, p. 453). Hellenic art influences, such as Corinthian columns and volutes in architecture, had a great influence on Central Asian art (Bernard in Francfort and Bernard, eds., I, 1973, pp. 211-13) just as the beautiful coinage of the Greco-Bactrian rulers influenced all later coinage in Central Asia, both by the use of the Attic weight



system and by style of obverses and reverses of the money (Mitchener, I, pp. 10-18). Trade with China probably developed more under the Greco-Bactrians in the 3rd-2nd centuries b.c.e. than earlier, as suggested by the presence of Greek words in several languages of Chinese Turkistan (see [china and iran i](#)).

Central Asia and its eastern neighbors. It is probable that the Silk Route to China first came into prominence in the time of Greek rule in Bactria, and the three main routes from China to the west continued to be used. The first was the northern route from the present steppes of Kazakhstan through the Ili valley and Jungaria to Dunhuang and the Gansu corridor into central China. The second went from the Fergana valley to Kashgar and along the northern oasis route through Aqsu, Kucha, Turfan, and Komul (Hami) to Dunhuang. The third went from the Indus valley over the Karakorum range to Kashgar or Yarkand, then through Khotan, Cherchen, and Lop Nor to Dunhuang (Klimkeit, 1988, pp. 68-69; Haussig, pp. 6-7).

In the second half of the 2nd century b.c.e. Central Asia was the scene of nomadic invasions from the north and east (see, e.g., Bivar, 1966, pp. 51-52). The Sakas moved south into the land which bears their name, Sīstān (from Proto-Iranian *Sakastāna), and into India where small Saka (Śaka) kingdoms were created. Probably at this time they also established a kingdom in [Khotan](#) (see also [aśoka iv](#)). The Greco-Bactrian state collapsed under this invasion but other rulers maintained power in the Hindu Kush mountains and in India (cf. Narain, pp. 145-47). After a period of confusion one of the invading peoples, called Yue-zhi (Yueh-chih) in Chinese sources, established a state north of the Oxus River and then in the first century c.e. spread to the south under one of the tribes, which gave its name to the new Kushan empire (Gafurov, ed., esp., I, pp. 182-98, and II, pp. 42-46; Samolin, see index). North of Sogdiana it seems a confederation of settlements and nomadic tribes came into existence called Kang-qu (K'ang-chü) in Chinese sources (Litvinskij, 1972, 1976; Samolin, see index). It is uncertain how much control the Kushans exerted on the settled folk of Central Asia, but because of the scarcity of Kushan coins in Choresmia, as well as the striking of their own coins, we may infer that the Choresmians were independent or in a loose vassal relationship with the Kushans (see Vainberg for a history of the land as well as a catalogue of coins). The Sogdians too probably were in a vassal relationship with the Kushans, who directed most of their efforts of expansion in the Indian subcontinent (Gafurov, ed., II, pp. 9-15).

Sasanian times. In the third century c.e. the Kushan empire seems to have split



into two or more parts, and Central Asia was invaded from the Sasanian empire. The data and the extent of Sasanian expansion in the east, however, is uncertain, but probably both Bactrians and Sogdians acknowledged some sort of submission to the western power. The history of Ṭabarī tells us that under the first Sasanian ruler Ardašīr, the Kushans submitted to him (Nöldeke, *Geschichte der Perser*, pp. 4-6), and in the inscription of Šāpūr on the Ka'ba-ye Zardošt at Naqš-e Rostam it is said that the empire of Iran included the Kushan domains (Kušanšahr) as far as Kāš (Kashgar ?) and Sogdiana (ed. Back, pp. 288-89). In the inscriptions of Šāpūr I and his successors the following northeastern provinces of the Sasanian empire are listed: Marw, Harēw, Abaršahr, Kušan, Kāš, Sugd, Čāč, Xwārazm (inscriptions of Šāpūr on the Ka'ba-ye Zardošt at Naqš-e Rostam and of Narseh I at Paikuli, see, e.g., Maricq, pp. 336-37 [78-79], Humbach and Skjærvø, III/2, pp. 122-24). Later conquests by the Sasanians north of the Oxus are unknown, but trade and cultural influences were strong (for trade relations cf. Pigulevskaya, pp. 1-12). The Choresmians maintained their own dynasty, and relations with the Sasanians are unclear for early periods, but after the fourth century their land was independent, if not in some vassal relationship with the [Hephthalites](#) or later the Turks (Vaĭnberg, pp. 89-93; Muninova, pp. 40-50). To the north of the oasis states we have no information, but with the continuing expansion of nomads to the south we may presume the end of any confederation and rather the rule of local dynasts. This is confirmed by coins, the main source of information for the period before the Arab conquests (cf. Zeimal, pp. 233-51).

The end of the fourth century saw a change on the steppes of Central Asia with the expansion from the east of the Altaic-speaking peoples, under the pressure of which the Iranian nomads moved south and west, although it seems some were ruled by Altaic nomads or were absorbed by the newcomers (McGovern, pp. 399-419). Sogdiana and Bactria were invaded by [Chionites](#), probably a nomadic group with Altaic rulers but Iranian common folk. It seems that the name Chionite, which appears in Byzantine sources, is related to the word Hun, and the name of the Huṇas, who invaded India in the middle of the fifth century (Moravscik, s.vv. Chionites, Huns). The Chionites were succeeded by the Hephthalites, again probably a mixed horde (Enoki, 1959, 1969). According to Enoki Chinese accounts of the Hephthalites indicate that they were primarily mountaineers from the lands to the west of the Pamirs, but others argue for their steppe origin (Bivar, 1983, pp. 213-15). In spite of these invasions and foreign rulers the local people of Central Asia developed their trading activities, with the Choresmians establishing extensive relations with



the Volga river and eastern European areas, bringing furs, amber, beeswax, and other commodities back, while the Sogdians were the traders of the east, extending their activities and their trading colonies into China and Mongolia (Frye, 1972, pp. 266-68). The trade of the Sogdians was in cloth, precious stones, and spices from India in exchange for silk and various craft objects from China. The Bactrians, of course, were more concerned with trade to the south, but it seems that all of the Central Asians were primarily middlemen in trade in all directions, and the trade was primarily in luxury objects, as the risks of long distance trade in those times required large returns.

Trade, religion, culture. The extensive trading activities of the Central Asians coincided with the expansion of the universalist, missionary religions and the Central Asian were instrumental in spreading those religions. The earliest was [Buddhism](#), which reached Central Asia under the Greco-Bactrians; later Bactria became a center of Buddhism under the Kushans (Klimkeit, 1986, pp. 8-10). Archaeology has revealed numerous Buddhist remains in present northern Afghanistan and Tajikistan, and even though we may not have any Buddhist writings in the Bactrian (q.v.) language (the contents of the so-called Hephthalite fragments have not yet been identified for certain, see [bactrian](#), p. 346b bottom), we may presume that they existed but have not survived. One fragment from Turfan in Manichean script but in the Bactrian language contains a Manichean text (Gershevitch, 1984; [bactrian](#)). Buddhism continued to flourish in Bactria into the Islamic period and only in the ninth century of our era did [Balk](#), the largest city of Bactria, become Muslim in religion (Litvinsky, 1968, p. 121). Buddhism apparently made little progress in Sogdiana and Choresmia, and the greatest success was to the north and east of Central Asia (cf. Rapoport, pp. 119-21). The accounts of Chinese Buddhist travelers to the west such as Xuanzang (Hsüan Tsang) give us welcome details about the presence of Buddhism in various oases of Central Asia.

In Sogdiana a local form of Mazdeism was the dominant religion (cf. Henning), although Manicheism and Nestorian Christianity both had adherents, and we may suppose that it was primarily Sogdians who spread both religions to the east by missionaries in the caravans of merchants (cf. Barthold, 1901, pp. 20-26; Hage, p. 518). In Chinese Turkestan Sogdian became a lingua franca, and even the Turkish states in Mongolia and the Altai mountains used Sogdian as their written language, although later they were to develop their own system of writing of their languages using modified Sogdian script. The Sogdian city states of Bukhara, Samarkand, and Čăč (Tashkent) flourished in



the period of Hephthalite domination, and this did not change with the Turkish conquest of the Hephthalites in the 560s of our era (Smirnova, 1970, esp. pp. 122-55). The ease with which the Sogdians replaced Hephthalite overlordship with Turkish reveals the attitude of the merchant society which sought stability so trade could flourish (for the expansion of the Turks see Barthold, 1945; for the Sogdian culture see Azarpay).

Archeological excavations of Sogdian sites have revealed the richness of local culture and far-flung relations of the Sogdian merchants, who probably introduced the system of training of slaves to protect their land and property while merchants were away, which later in the Islamic world came to be known as the Mamluk system of slave soldiers and administrators, also famous in the Ottoman and Mughal empires (cf. Pipes; Crone; also barda and bardadārj v).

The Choresmians also followed a local form of Mazdaism, although here, as with the Sogdians, universalist religions were active (Rapoport; Livshits). Archeology has revealed the same kind of culture and civilization as in Sogdiana but not as rich or ostentatious. Also the Choresmians were unified under one dynasty unlike the Sogdian city states (Tolstov and the many publications of the Southern Choresmian expedition). Their language (see choresmian) was originally written in a modified Aramaic alphabet, but later, perhaps in the 10th and 11th centuries, the Choresmians began to write their language in Arabic characters, which apparently was not the case with the Sogdians. Missionaries in Choresmian caravans spread Islam to the Volga region beginning in the 9th century, and the Volga Tatars maintained relations with Choresmia in later times (Togan, pp. 217-18, 253-56). One of the articles of trade with the north was silver, especially in the form of bowls, rhytons, and plates (Frye, 1971, pp. 255-62; idem, 1972, p. 266). The Choresmians played the same role in the west as the Sogdians did in the east in the spread of ideas and culture (Yagodin, pp. 128-68).

Although the Sasanians controlled Bactria and some areas to the north of the Oxus River in the late 3rd and 4th centuries through their Kushano-Sasanian governors, who at times were independent rulers, the nomadic invasions eliminated Sasanian rule in Central Asia, and only raids and temporary incursions were made by the Persians in later times (Carter). The raids by **Bahrām IV** (r. 388-99) left a mark on Bukhara, where the coinage of the Sasanian ruler was adopted as a prototype for the local coinage of Bukhara (Frye, 1949). Later the Sasanian general **Bahrām Čōbīn** defeated the Turks and



obtained booty from his campaigns in 589 (Kolesnikov, pp. 51-53). Sasanian cultural influences, however, grew such that Central Asia in the period before the Islamic conquest was considered by Arnold to be a provincial Sasanian outpost in cultural matters (Arnold, pp. 10-11). Thanks to archeology this view has changed, and we know that the Sogdian city states and Choresmia were centers of their own cultures (cf. Belenitzki/Belenitskiĭ for Sogdiana, Tolstov for Choresmia).

For the rulers of Bukhara, Samarkand, and Choresmia, as primarily revealed by coins, see individual articles. As the coins of Bukhara, known as “Bukhar Khudat” coins, were copied from those of the Sasanian ruler Bahrām IV, we may suppose that he made conquests in Central Asia that did not survive him. Some of the coins of Samarkand, on the other hand, have square holes in the middle, like Chinese coins of the Tang dynasty (Smirnova, 1981).

The coming of Islam. Marv became an Arab center in the east, just as it had been for the Sasanians, and raids across the Oxus began in 673 and continued almost yearly after that (Gibb). The Muslim conquest of Central Asia began with Qoṭayba b. Moslem, who became Umayyad governor of Khorasan in 705, and he established Arab rule firmly in lands to the north of the Oxus. Several times the local rulers rebelled against Arab hegemony, and from one of them, called Dīvāstīč, lord of Panjikent, we have twenty letters in Sogdian telling, among other matters, of his attempts to organize resistance against the invaders, although to no avail, as he lost his life by Arab orders in 722 (Livshits, 1962, pp. 90-91). It is true that the Sogdian city states turned to their nominal rulers the western Turks for aid, but also to no avail. Neither their successors, the eastern Turks, nor the Turgesh later were able to dislodge the Muslims. Conversions to Islam turned Central Asia into a great Islamic cultural center, and gradually other religions died out. Central Asia and its cultures, however, played an important role in the development of an Islamic civilization including art, architecture, literature, and thought. By the 4th/10th century under the Samanids Central Asia was fully Islamicized (Negmatov, pp. 23-66). The Samanids were the last Iranian dynasty to rule in Central Asia with their center in Bukhara through the tenth century. Afterwards only Turkic dynasties ruled this part of the world.

See also [art in iran vi](#); [china and iran i](#).



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