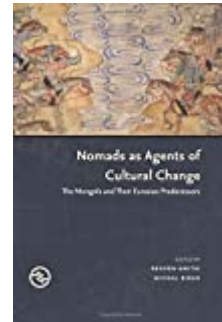




Reuven Amitai, Michal Biran, eds. *Nomads as Agents of Cultural Change: The Mongols and Their Eurasian Predecessors*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2014. ix + 345 pp. \$54.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8248-3978-9.



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Nomads in History

This volume has grown out of a conference on Asian nomads held at the Hebrew University, Jerusalem, in 2006. Broadly, it questions a long-standing and pervasive scholarly and popular stereotype of Asian nomads, namely that they were mainly warriors and had little culture of their own but received and incorporated ideas, images, and practices from the more "civilized" sedentary kingdoms they conquered, extracted tribute from, or traded with. With reference to Asian nomads the book's essays not only critique this assumed one-way movement, but also question the very terms "Sinicized," "Persianized," and "Islamicized," common in the literature. Perhaps most importantly several of the authors reject the utility of the term "tribe" for our understanding of the actual polities and processes of Asian nomads.

The twelve essays vary widely in geographic concentration, from Mongolia and China to the far western steppe, and cover various periods from the first millennium BCE to the sixteenth century CE. Nevertheless, the shared viewpoint of rethinking pervasive stereotypes of Asian nomads gives the book a coherence and focus rare

in edited volumes.

The centerpiece of the book is a magisterial essay by Thomas Allsen on population movements generated by Mongol threats, conquests, and policies. Since these processes recur throughout the volume it is perhaps worth listing them here. Firstly, Mongols recruited and deployed conquered armies to distant locations. Russian soldiers from the western borders of the Mongol empire served in China, while Han Chinese siege specialists were moved to the west. Secondly, the successful Mongol campaigns displaced massive numbers of people. Ordinary peasants and townsmen fled the Mongol onslaught to whatever refuge seemed safe. Elite townsmen, courtiers, and professionals had more options. Thousands upon thousands in this class made strategic choices, either to negotiate a position in the expanding Mongol polity or to take their wealth and skills to kingdoms beyond the Mongol reach. Thirdly, the Mongols, by conscious policy, forced migration of whole populations to new locations far from their original homes. Muslims from the west were forced to the

east. Han Chinese moved to towns and farms in the west. Communities of Saxon miners from Transylvania were moved more than 2,600 miles east to mine gold and make weapons. Allsen also lays out the consequences of large-scale population movements on, for example, demography both within and outside the empire, the internal politics of the Mongol state, transfer of technology, military slavery in kingdoms beyond the margins of the empire, and shifting notions of ethnicity.

The Mongols were, indeed, "herders of people" (p. 143), but their flocks were heterogeneous, differently valued, and much changed by being transported. Allsen's steady focus on praxis rather than ideology leaves the reader with a sense of an empire always in flux, by policy moving whole populations to new places, skimming technical knowledge and administrative expertise across vast regions, and fundamentally altering ethnicities.

Several of the essays in the volume can be read as case studies of the various themes Allsen has laid out, such as Gregory Lane's detailed consideration of the movement of elite Persian families into the Ilkhanate, Reuven Amitai's essay on the effects on Syria of the flight of refugees from Mongol invasions, and Michal Biran's chapter on the political and sociological stresses on Kitan identity from their long-term encounter with the Mongols. Anatoly Khazanov's chapter on the Scythians suggests that Mongol pattern of warfare and displacement had deep roots in the steppe history.

Several essays directly address the question of give and take in culture between nomads and sedentary states, such as Gideon Shelach-Levi's "Steppe Land Interactions and Their Effects on Chinese Cultures during the Second and First Millennia BCE," Morris Rossabi's "The Mongol Empire and Its Impact on the Arts of China," and William Honeychurch's analysis of the history of trade and exchange of what would grow into the Silk Roads,

"From Steppe Roads to Silk roads: Inner Asian Nomads and Early Interregional Exchange."

In the context of recent studies of Mongols, trans-Asian and steppe studies, and Silk Roads research this volume develops what might be termed the "cultural turn." The magnificent Burlington House exhibition "The Legacy of Genghis Khan" (2002) forced attendees and scholars to see the Mongols not only as conquerors but also as sophisticated patrons influencing style and creation across a vast swath of Asia. The decade that followed saw publication of Peter Jackson's *Mongols and the West 1221-1410*, with important chapters on culture and cultural exchange, and, most centrally, Thomas Allsen's *Culture and Conquest in Mongol Eurasia* (2002), *Commodity Exchange in the Mongol Empire* (2004), and *The Royal Hunt in Eurasian History* (2006). These are exciting times for our understanding of steppe nomads and the many and varied creations and exchanges of material culture, administrative forms, cuisine, and ideas across Asia. The emerging picture considers eastern and western Mongol polities together, and treats old sedentary cultures such as Persia, India, and China as part of the dynamic mix that steppe nomads were creating.

My only, minor quibble with the book is that it is written by specialists for specialists. There are no maps to assist nonspecialist readers in locating obscure places, many of which no longer exist. The chapters generally assume familiarity with groups, kingdoms, families, and individuals not widely known outside the field. The developing picture of the interactions between the peoples of the steppe and their neighbors is too important to be confined to specialist studies. With mainstream history still following national boundaries (in China and India, for example), many specialties and regions need the bracing viewpoint of the sort of trans-Asian studies showcased in this important volume.

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