

The Nomads of the Steppe

Resources for Teachers

By Gregory Aldous

The nomadic pastoralists of the inner Asian steppe had an impact on history out of all proportion to their small population. The cultures and politics of societies across Asia experienced profound change at their hands.

China presents a good example of this phenomenon. The nomads on the steppe posed a perennial challenge to the Chinese political structure, making management of the nomads always one of the chief concerns of every Chinese dynasty. The Great Wall of China is the most famous demonstration of this imperial concern. The founder of the Qin dynasty, Qin Shi Huang (r. 221–210 BCE), made the construction of a complete wall along the northern border one of his main priorities. This first Great Wall of China later fell into neglect; the one we know today mainly dates to the Ming dynasty of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.

The original Great Wall of China fell into disrepair not because the steppe nomads ceased to pose a threat, but rather because the nomads had taken over the northern part of China and absorbed the territory on both sides of the wall, making it superfluous. In the chaotic centuries following the collapse of the Han dynasty, nomadic groups conquered large sections of China, most notably the Northern Wei dynasty (386–534). The Northern Wei were instrumental in promoting the spread of Buddhism in China. Before that time, most Chinese had dismissed Buddhism as a foreign religion unworthy of their attention. From the Northern Wei Dynasty and afterward, Buddhism became one of the major religions in China. There were a number of Chinese dynasties with ruling families from the steppe, such as the Liao, the Jin, and most famously the Yuan, which was ruled by the descendants of Genghis Khan. These steppe dynasties established the precedent for the Chinese capital to be located in the north (Beijing, or “Northern Capital”), a precedent that subsequent regimes followed for most of China’s history thereafter.

Even when a dynasty was ruled by a native Chinese family, China was still heavily tied to the steppe. This was especially true of the Tang dynasty.



Toda Mongke and His Mongol Horde. Folio from *Chingiznama* (*History of Genghis Khan*).
Source: Wikimedia Commons at <https://tinyurl.com/y6zvcu9f>.

A Tang general of nomadic ancestry, An Lushan, launched a rebellion in 755 and attempted to found a new dynasty. He was assassinated but the rebellion continued, and in desperation, the Tang emperor turned to the nomadic Uighurs for help. The Tang bought Uighur help with a favorable trade arrangement that netted the Uighurs enormous wealth.

The impact of the steppe nomads was felt far beyond China. Turkic nomadic pastoralists migrated into the Islamic Middle East in the eleventh century CE and ruled as the political elite throughout the region for centuries. In addition to the nomadic dynasties like the Seljuks and the Ilkhans, there were also regimes of slave soldiers—the Mamluk regimes of Egypt and the Delhi Sultanate in India—who derived their manpower from the steppe nomads. (The Mamluks of Egypt in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries were Kipchak Turks imported from the Golden Horde.) Then, later, the Mughal dynasty in India descended from warrior elites in Mongol-ruled Central Asia.

The nomads of the steppe were able to have such an outsized impact on their sedentary neighbors because of their lifestyle. The horse was essential to their way of life, making it easier both to manage their flocks of sheep and other livestock and to traverse the vast distances on the

steppe. The steppe nomads learned to ride from a young age and were expert horsemen. They spent a great deal of time on horseback, not only herding their flocks but also hunting wild animals and raiding other tribes. The skills they learned from hunting and raiding easily translated to warfare. In agrarian regions, by contrast, only a small elite regularly trained in the arts of war. Farming, the occupation of the vast majority of sedentary populations, did not develop skills that translated to the battlefield.

But the relationship of the nomads with the agrarian societies was not simply political and military. Many nomadic groups were actively involved with trade. Pastoralism is self-sufficient for only very basic needs. Pastoralists, therefore, exchanged their specialized animal-based products for the variety of products available in farming societies: crops, like grain, and



Modern Mongolians demonstrate their archery skills while riding horseback during the winter Golden Eagle Festival in Ulaanbaatar, Mongolia. Source: © Shutterstock.
Photo by Pises Tungtippokai.

manufactured goods that could only be produced by sedentary people, like iron tools and weapons. Moreover, nomads presided over the Silk Roads, the vast network of trade routes that spanned the Asian continent. In fact, the Silk Roads began in trade between China and the steppe to supply China with horses. Throughout the history of overland trade, the nomads played a key role. We see this most dramatically in the case of the Mongol Empire, when the Mongol khans encouraged a flourishing of long-distance trade and travel across Eurasia.

The Mongols conquered an empire that spanned Eurasia from the Pacific Ocean to Eastern Europe and the Middle East, bringing all these cultures into close contact. Persian artists under Mongol rule took new inspiration from Chinese art, adopting a lighter and more delicate style

and utilizing Chinese techniques for giving the illusion of depth. Additionally, Persian workshops in the fourteenth century produced large quantities of imitation Chinese porcelain to supply the growing Persian demand for this expensive import. The nomads also left linguistic traces among the peoples they conquered. In the Russian language, for example, such common words as *loshad'* (horse), *chugun* (cast iron), *den'gi* (money), and *kazna* (treasury) derive from the Turkic languages of Inner Asia.

In the short space available here, such examples of nomadic influence must be cursory. Suffice it to say that the nomads were major catalysts of political and cultural change throughout Eurasia. But in spite of their significant impact, they have been overshadowed in the modern imagination by large sedentary civilizations such as China and India. Not only did the

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Scythians with horses under a tree. Gold belt plaque. Siberia, fourth to third century BC. © The State Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg, Russia, 2017. Source: *The British Museum Blog* at <https://tinyurl.com/y363k29e>. Photo by V. Terebenin.

sedentary societies have far larger populations, but they also produced virtually all our historical sources. This has contributed to a negative image of the pastoral nomads that persists even today—that they were simply barbaric, violent, and devoid of culture. Almost no historical sources survive that give the nomads’ perspective, so by relying so heavily on the written accounts of sedentary cultures, we risk inheriting their biases.

Despite the importance of including the nomads in a world history or Asian history curriculum, it can be difficult to find good resources that are suitable either for presenting the nomads to students or for instructors to become more knowledgeable about them. The following is a selection of recommended resources on the World Wide Web for students and teachers.

RECOMMENDED RESOURCES

The Scythians

<https://tinyurl.com/yxzj6g8m>

This is the website accompanying a 2017 exhibition at a British museum. While its subject is the Scythians, much of the information on the site is relevant to steppe nomadic cultures in general. Most of the blog entries include text, pictures, and embedded short videos posted on YouTube. Some highlights include a picture of a piece of tattooed human skin, a video showing the archeological evidence of the Scythians’ drinking and drug use, and a blog post comparing the Scythians (and nomads in general) to the Dothraki from *Game of Thrones*. There is also an eight-minute audio introduction to the Scythians, complete with sound effects. Here is a direct link to the audio: <https://tinyurl.com/y3yo3pej>.

The Mongols in World History

<http://afe.easia.columbia.edu/mongols/>

This is an exceedingly useful website for learning about the Mongol Empire. It provides several dozen short articles on various aspects of the Mongols’ conquests, their way of life, and the impact they had on other cultures. Part of the *Asia for Educators* website, sponsored by Columbia University, is specifically designed as a resource for world history instructors. PDFs are provided of readings that can be assigned in the classroom, including selections from Marco Polo’s account and discussion questions. Images, links to maps, and suggestions for further reading are also provided.

Storm from the East

Storm from the East is an excellent four-part PBS documentary that first aired in 1993 about the Mongol conquests. Although occasionally aired on other networks since then, the documentary was never released on home video in any format and is not available on the PBS website. It can be found on YouTube and Dailymotion. The full series can be found at <https://tinyurl.com/yy25ludh>.

The Legacy of Genghis Khan

The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York held an exhibition on Genghis Khan and the Mongol Empire in 2002. The companion website is available at <https://tinyurl.com/yxmddmb8>. It has examples of period art, accompanied by short snippets of text by art historians. The Met also published an exhibition book that is now out of print, but can be read for free online on Google Books and is downloadable as a free PDF. The collection of articles by eminent historians in the field has an ample supply of photos of Asian art in the Mongol period. The links for the book are available on this page: <https://tinyurl.com/y2as2ntr>.

William of Rubruck

<https://tinyurl.com/y3hr9zey>

This is a travel account by William of Rubruck, who journeyed across the Mongol Empire at its height. The translation on this website, by the American diplomat W. Woodville Rockhill, first appeared in 1900. William of Rubruck was a Franciscan friar sent on a diplomatic mission by the King of France, Louis IX, in 1253 to meet the great khan of the Mongol Empire. In my undergraduate class on the Mongol Empire, I assign William of Rubruck’s account of his travels. It is readable and fairly short, and includes a number of interesting insights into the daily experience of traveling in the Mongol Empire. Of the two English translations, the 1990 translation by Peter Jackson is more readable and still in print, but some students prefer the Rockhill translation of 1900 because it is in the public domain and therefore free.

Silk Road Seattle

<http://depts.washington.edu/silkroad/>

This website was created by Daniel C. Waugh, retired professor of history and international studies at the University of Washington. Waugh’s site is designed for teachers and travelers, as well as aimed at a general audience. The site contains excellent content on the history, geography, and lifeways of the inner Asian steppe. The site is highly recommended for instructors unfamiliar with the Silk Roads. There is also a large collection of photographs, many taken by Waugh in his travels. He also includes several teaching guides full of pointers to more resources.

The Silk Road Encyclopedia

<http://silkroadencyclopedia.com/>

This resource is authored by Yasemin Dobra-Manço, who holds an MA in Middle East and Asian Languages and Cultures from Columbia University. There are several interesting articles on transregional trade in ancient and medieval Eurasia, but the most valuable resource on the site is a large collection of maps, most of which would be useful in the classroom. They depict a wide variety of subjects, including many maps depicting Eurasian trade routes throughout history.

The Travels of Ibn Battuta

<https://tinyurl.com/y6emu2xf>

Ibn Battuta traveled widely throughout Africa and Asia in the fourteenth century. He is sometimes called a “Muslim Marco Polo,” but the extent of



Thomas Barfield. Source: Screen capture from the video *Importance of Nomads in Eurasian History*.

Battuta's travels far exceeded Polo's. The site was originally written by a middle school teacher for his students, so it is well-suited to a K–12 audience. The pages relating his visits to Persia and the Golden Horde are the most useful concerning the nomads: <https://tinyurl.com/y6rdtmss> and <https://tinyurl.com/y4eapnwd>.

Kate Humble, Living with Nomads: Mongolia

This is a BBC Two documentary, produced in 2015, that does a superb job of showing what daily life is like for nomadic pastoralists, while also portraying them in a sympathetic and approachable way. At one point, a family is shown packing up their camp for a seasonal migration. This documentary is about contemporary nomads, but it is still evocative of what life was like for nomads in the past. Clips are available on the BBC

website (<https://tinyurl.com/yytdgmog>), but not the entire program. The complete program is available on YouTube here: <https://tinyurl.com/y44o7vyz>.

Importance of Nomads in Eurasian History—Thomas Barfield

<https://tinyurl.com/y4g34gyd>

Thomas Barfield is an anthropologist who has written extensively on the nomads of inner Asia. In this thirteen-minute video, Barfield makes several interesting points about the inner Asian nomads and summarizes the argument he made in his book *The Perilous Frontier*: that the nomadic empires expanded in reaction to the expansion of sedentary empires in order to extort wealth from them rather than to conquer them. He also explains two different strategies pursued by nomads to acquire wealth: peacefully taxing trade and violently raiding sedentary populations.

What Siberian Nomads' Houses Are Like

<https://tinyurl.com/y2e8cbkm>

This article is a detailed description of the tents used by various nomadic cultures in northern Asia—the *yurt* of the steppe nomads, the *chum* of the reindeer hunters, and the *yaranga* of the Arctic. Its author discusses the kinds of materials used, the typical items found in the tents, differences between summer and winter use, and how long they take to put up and take down. The author also touches on some of the adaptations that nomads have made in modern times to their dwellings. ■

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