Beatrice Forbes Manz
*Nomads in the Middle East*

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Nomadic herders of various shades have long been recognised for their contribution to Middle Eastern culture and are as ubiquitous in the Western imagination of the region as camels and caravanserais. These popular tropes bely many centuries of history in which nomads have shaped the linguistic, economic and political history of the region. This contribution is grudgingly acknowledged in the written histories, composed almost entirely by sedentary observers who often have biases and prejudices against pastoralists. Whether as exemplars of modesty and frugality or as covetous raiders and violent conquerors, these histories portray the Kurds, Arab Bedouin and Turko-Mongolian nomads as enigmatic groups, often closer to a force of nature than organised civilisations with their own rational ordering. Beatrice Manz's, *Nomads in the Middle East* confronts this ambivalence head-on to provide a dedicated treatment of the nomadic contribution to the history of the region. Indeed, she argues that the nomads were not merely bit-part players or difficult neighbours to be kept on the periphery of the agrarian world, rather, they were an essential component in the rise of the region's largest empires, its greatest cultural movements and its most prosperous economic systems.

Manz draws upon a career of knowledge and experience to provide a truly comprehensive overview of how nomads interacted with states, cities, and the natural environment. Her work eschews a focus on any single ethno-linguistic group and instead covers a wide range of Iranian, Arab, and Turko-Mongolian nomads, with a particular focus on the Islamic period up to recent times (610-1945). This inclusive approach invites the reader to compare and contrast different nomadic lifeways and organisational structures, making it clear that transhumance produces a diverse array of cultural and social communities. There is, for example, a very clear distinction drawn between the types of gender relations, political hierarchies, and economic communities to be found among Eurasian horse-breeders and Arabian camel herders (Bedouin), based upon the types of landscapes and animals that sustain them (p. 5-8). Although the focus of this study is on Islamic societies, the introductory chapter provides the necessary historical context, establishing the presence of large nomadic populations in the Middle East from the appearance of the first civilisations. Thereafter, Manz moves to discuss the contribution of Arab and then Iranian nomads to the conquest of the Islamic Empire and the birth of the Umayyad (662-750) and 'Abbasid caliphates (750-1258, Chapters 2 & 3). The following chapters shift to the arrival of Eurasian nomadic communities, from the Seljuks (1037-1194, Chapter 4), to the Mongols (1220-1335, Chapter 5) and then the Timurids and Ottomans (1335-1500, Chapter 6). These largely Turko-Mongolian populations comfortably integrated themselves into the Middle East, converting to Islam and even patronising regional artists, writers, and builders. The resulting syncretic culture produced a series of domestic nomadic dynasties during the Gunpowder Age (1500-1800, Chapter 7) before the rise of the modern state and the introduction of new technologies undermined the economic and military powerbase of the nomads at the start of the twentieth century (Chapter 8). This extended timeline allows Manz to fully elucidate the central argument of the book, namely, that pastoralists and farmers have cooperated to shape the history of the Middle East. Pushing back on the common stereotype that agricultural and nomadic civilisations are predisposed to conflict, she shows that both groups were necessary for the formation of strong, prosperous empires.

Manz is broadly successful in demonstrating that nomads and farmers contributed equally to the formation of pre-modern and early modern states by deconstructing many commonly held assumptions about how nomadic societies were organised. Tribalism is one of the key targets of Manz's analysis, as she convincingly shows that nomads were no less likely to organise on the basis of shared kinship than sedentary populations. In a novel and rather revealing approach, she suggests that tribes were a means of linking nomadic and sedentary populations, first in the Arabian Peninsula and then in other parts of the Middle East. Taking the example of early Islamic Arabia, she highlights the fact that tribes had both urban and nomadic branches, facilitating cooperative political and commercial relationships (p. 12, 29-31, 201). The leadership of the tribe often occupied a rather fluid position in relation to these two branches, especially in the modern age when they became almost entirely detached from their membership (p. 206). Indeed, she notes that the growth of tribal power was not at all contingent on a


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commensurate rise in nomadism, observing that the nomadic Turko-Mongolian dynasties of Eurasia were perhaps the most successful at checking the power of tribes prior to the twentieth century (p. 111, 153, 167). By moving beyond the conventional juxtaposition of nomadic tribes and state-based sedentary societies, Manz conceives of pastoralists and farmers occupying parallel and complimentary positions within most of the empires that ruled the Middle East.

This bold yet sensible distinction between modes of subsistence and social regimes ties together a great deal of recent scholarship into the Global Middle Ages and allows Manz to highlight some of the important contributions made by nomads to everyday life in the Middle East. One key example is in the field of economic and commercial history, where the role of pastoralists has been oversimplified to simple exchanges of animal products for supposedly more valuable agrarian and artisan goods. Manz acknowledges this exchange but also expands her focus to include the contribution made by nomads as seasonal labourers. Their mobility and versatility meant that rulers as well as their settled subjects often welcomed the seasonal migration of nomadic workers to help in digging canals, harvesting crops, and even fertilising farming land (p. 193, 201, 238). She goes on to elucidate the important role that nomads played in facilitating communications across the Middle East, which is dispersed by mountains, deserts and steppe-land. Prior to the rise of steamships, rail networks, and automobiles, nomads facilitated the travel of messages, traders, and pilgrims to bind the Middle East together, making it hard to imagine any large state functioning without them (p. 192, 200). Far from a disruptive force, Manz posits that the support of nomads was just as necessary as that of the farmers for an aspiring ruler.

Manz's situation of the nomads within the political history of the Middle East has broader implications for theories about Islamic state formation during the Middle Ages and the early modern period. Her ideas are shaped heavily by her earlier work on the Timurids, who oversaw one of the most salient periods of integration between the steppe and the sown. The Timurid state and its cities were spaces where these two realms intersected in co-dependent relationships under a political leadership that was detached from both groups (p. 149-150). The state controlled its population through alliances with a network of shaykhs, religious leaders, and guilds, bringing about an imperial culture that was necessarily syncretic, reconciling the interests of both pastoralists and agriculturalists. This realisation should, and already has in several quarters, precipitate a reappraisal of processes like religious conversion and Islamisation, artistic exchange and adaptation, and even military mobilisation and organisation. In each case, Manz shows that the most vibrant and resilient Middle Eastern states were those who managed to utilise both nomads and farmers (p. 236).

Manz draws upon a broad expertise and a wealth of secondary sources to provide a highly accessible synthesis of some of the most recent scholarship on the political and social history of the Middle East. Some primary sources are cited throughout, most heavily in the chapters on the Mongol and Timurid periods, but her expansive periodisation does not allow her to get bogged down in the finer points of historiography. This big picture approach makes her book imminently readable and highly suitable for both undergraduates and general readers alike, who will find it an eye-opening and thorough introduction to the history of the Arabs, Turks, Kurds and Mongols. Experts will likewise derive enormous benefit from seeing the patterns and trends that emerge from such an expansive study. One can only hope that Manz's reappraisal of the nomads' role in the history of the Middle East will be followed by scholars working in other regional studies clusters.

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