

Étienne DE LA VAISSIÈRE
*Asie centrale 300-850. Des routes
 et des royaumes*

Paris, Les Belles Lettres
 2024, 638 p.
 ISBN : 9782251455211

Mots clés : Türks, Uyghurs, Bactria, Sogdians, commerce

Keywords: Türks, Uyghurs, Bactria, Sogdians, Trade

É. De la Vaissière's outstanding, erudite study is divided into eighteen chapters that provide a comprehensive historical account of Central Asia from the 4th to the mid-9th century, with occasional forays into periods before 300 or beyond 850. Such forays are often necessary for periods in which there is insufficient documentation and reconstructions of what occurred must, perforce, be based on analogies drawn from earlier and later times (e.g. the Xiongnu realm, the Mongol Empire). The author discusses, often in detail, the region's empires, nomadic groups, cultural interactions, religious influences, Trans-Eurasian and local economies, demography, social structure ("tribe, bone and clan" and the use of the vocabulary of kinship by outsiders, and insiders to describe the political structure), and environmental aspects (climate change, desertification, shifting river courses) that impacted the region. The author has spent time *in situ* and has been involved in some significant archeological expeditions in Mongolia. This has enhanced his appreciation of geographical factors in the region's history.

Asie centrale pays considerable attention to the rise and fall of the Türk, Uyghur, and Tibetan realms, the various nomad migration waves, some touched off by the rise and fall of these states, the political structures, military organizations, cultural exchanges, and religious transformations in the region, and how populations adapted to these challenges, highlighting the interplay between nomadic and sedentary societies. An ongoing theme is the rise, expansion, and decline of east-west commerce. Another major theme is the spread of proselytizing religions (following the trade routes): Buddhism, Manichaeism, Christianity (the Church of the East), and Islam. Additionally, the author sheds light on the forces that shaped Central Asian commerce and the cultural and political history of the region. The "Silk Road" (silk was far from the only commodity and "Silk Roads" is, perhaps the more accurate term) figures prominently in this work.

With these prefatory remarks, we may examine more closely some of the author's specific comments.

É. De la Vaissière introduces the region and some of the principal themes with one of the "Sogdian Ancient Letters," that of Nanai-vandak, a merchant from Samarkand, written in 313, tracing his trail through Central Asia. Among his comments is mention of the recent sacking of the Chinese capital cities, Luoyang and Chang'an by the Xwn (Huns), the Xiongnu (匈奴 Old Chin. *hoŋ-nâ*, Late Han **huoŋ-na*, rendering **hona* or *huna*) of the Chinese sources. In the ongoing debate over the relationship of the European Huns to the Xiongnu, this is an important piece of evidence pointing to a connection of the Xiongnu-Xwn-Huns, one also supported by archaeological (ceramic) finds. Ultimately *Hun* became a political denomination, a generic term for steppe-dwellers. The European Huns, "distant heirs" of the Xiongnu, were the result of migrations of elements of the latter from northwest Mongolia in the mid-4th century. "This identity," the author avers, "is not just nominal." The literature, at times contentious, on the Xiongnu-Hun relationship is extensive and de la Vaissière is thoroughly aware of it (and has made significant contributions to it). Nanai-vandak's letter also introduces the reader to the series of oasis city-states that constituted "Sogdiana" (the Iranophone Sogdians inhabited the regions between the Amu Darya and the Syr Darya, in modern Uzbekistan, as well as extensive trading colonies across Eurasia), which was part of a realm termed Kangju (康居) in Chinese sources with its capital at Kanka. The Sogdians became the major figures in the Trans-Eurasian trade. It is unclear if Nanai-vandak's travels took him to Khorezm (Khwarezm) to the west of Sogdiana in the Amu Darya delta and Aral Sea region, where a language related to Sogdian was spoken. Khorezm became a major player in the north-south trade and an important regional political power. The author examines all the available (albeit sparse) information regarding them. Another important state of this and the preceding period was that of Bactria (in Afghanistan), whose populace, stemming in part from Yuezhi (月氏, 月支) nomadic invaders, used an Eastern Iranian language written in Greek letters as their official language. Like the Sogdians, they practiced irrigation-based agriculture in an area that was richer and more populous than Sogdiana. As elsewhere in Eurasia, it too attracted the ubiquitous Sogdian merchants. Bactria was the heart of the Kushan Empire, starting in the 1st century CE. It was able to expand to northeastern India and perhaps part of the Tarim basin, unifying a large area in which people and goods circulated. Here, a rich

urban culture developed, and Buddhism first spread outside of India, ultimately reaching China. Kushan power faded in Bactria after the mid-3rd century CE when it was conquered by the Sasanids. Nonetheless, Bactria retained its cultural particularism. Nanai-vandak may well have reached the Tarim basin and the confines of China via Bactria.

Another major oasis city-state to the south was Khotan, noted for its agricultural products and precious stones (e.g. jade). Their Eastern Iranian language was related to the Scytho-Saka of the steppe. Our knowledge of Khotan largely stems from Chinese sources and documents in Khotanese Saka (beginning in the early 5th century). Periodically under Chinese control in the 1st and early 2nd century CE it was, perhaps, conquered by the Kushans in the 2nd century CE. Culturally, it was heavily influenced by India and used an Indic alphabet (Brāhmī). Buddhist influence was apparent already by the 3rd century and Khotan preserves some of the oldest evidence of Buddhism in the Tarim basin. Further east, Nanai-vandak undoubtedly traversed the kingdom of Kroraina (heavily influenced by India, elements of whose culture it transmitted to China and Central Asia) on the edges of Lake Lob Nor. It dominated all the irrigated areas dependent on the lower course of the Tarim and from rivers that came down from the Tibetan plateau to the east of Khotan. A victim of desertification in the latter half of the 4th century, "its disappearance shaped the history of the east and reorganized the routes of communication, the population and the geopolitical equilibrium of the region." There were also groups that spoke Tokharian in the oasis of Kucha in the Turfan Basin and Hami along the foothills of the Tianshan. De la Vaissière provides a useful and up-to-date analysis of this much-discussed "archaic" Indo-European language: Tokharian A (known only from religious manuscripts from Qarashahr in particular, perhaps already a dead language by the 8th-9th century) and Tokharian B (a living language in Kucha from at least the 5th century to the 9th century), written in an Indic script. Kucha, also strongly influenced by Indian culture, was a major center of translations from Sanskrit and a source of cultural (music, dance) influences at the Tang court. As in other oases, irrigated agriculture dominated. Buddhism was already present by the time of Nanai-vandak.

In the steppes to the north was the confederation of the Xianbei (鮮卑 Old Chin. *sjen.pije* < *s[a]r.pe *Sārbi), heirs of the Xiongnu. They occupied the Altay and Khangai mountain zones, the steppes of Mongolia, and the periphery of the Gobi (the provinces of Ningxia, Gansu and Inner Mongolia). Unlike the Xiongnu, who had an early state or imperial

confederation/ xenocracy, the Xianbei lacked political cohesion and did not expand westwards. The Xianbei appear to have largely consisted of speakers of Serbi-Mongolic languages. The Tuyuhun (吐谷渾 also known as 'Azha, Old Tibetan *tʰugun* // *Thogon*), intermediaries between Bactria and China, to whom the author devotes some attention, also derived from the Xianbei.

The author notes that Central Asia was even then undergoing desiccation, a process much in evidence today. Its vast steppes inhabited by pastoral nomads was a region with many local variations. The steppe zone was fragile, its inhabitants were more adversely affected than sedentary populations by rapid changes in climate, such as the *jut/dzut*, which could take up to 90% of the livestock, which was also subject to epizootics. The "sunless" years of 536 and 626, produced by volcanic eruptions, contributed to the weakening and fall of the Rouran (柔然)/ Asian Avars) and the First Türk Qaghanate. Aridity and a *jut* were significant factors in the fall of the Uyghur state. Regarding the nomads, the author notes, "The wealthiest were those who could migrate the farthest, take advantage of different milieux, limit their losses, arrive first to the good pastures and water, or to the markets with their horses." Much of our reconstruction of the nomadic life during this period is based on what has been observed by modern scholars (19th-20th centuries) in Mongolia and the Kazakh steppe. Interaction, peaceful and hostile, between the nomadic and sedentary populations is a running theme of the work. Nomadic empires/states formed in response to the need to interact commercially with the settled world or react to its encroachments. The author makes the important point that "contrary to the myth of the free nomad, the steppe was no less political and hierarchical than the sedentary world." Military achievements could, however, produce socio-political advancement. New elites could be created. Mugulü (木骨閭, Early Middle Chin. **mawk kwat liä*), the founder of the Rouran was originally a slave. De la Vaissière, among others, would connect this name with the ethnonym *Moŋγol*/ *Moyol*.

Large-scale, sometimes chain migrations are a well-known theme in Central Asian history. The author makes the important point that these did not always involve all the members of a nomad grouping. Some elements remained in their former homelands, often under new rulers. Moreover, descriptions of the migrations, especially in Graeco-Roman sources, frequently follow "classical" literary models, such as Herodotus, rather than the actual events. Considerable light is shed on the formation and history of the "Hunnic" peoples, the Rouran, Kidarites, Hephthalites, as well as the Türks, Uyghurs

and Qarluqs. The author has much to say about the *chākar* system developed by the Sogdians, in some respects a forerunner of the largely Turkic-based “slave-soldier,” *ghulām* and *mamlūk* institutions of the Islamic world. The Sogdians, whose merchants, ranging from peddlers to large-scale traders, traversed Eurasia, also played a variety of roles beyond commerce in China and Central Asia. Noted in the literature from Byzantium to China, they constitute a running theme of the work, building on de la Vaissière’s classic *Histoire des marchands Sogdiens* (2002, 2004, 3rd ed. 2016). É. De la Vaissière introduces the term “Sugdikestan” to denote the region over which ranged Sogdian *ortaqs*, a Turkic term denoting “middleman, intermediary” that is used in the Mongol era, but the institution undoubtedly existed at this time. Commodities, prices, and forms of currency (coins, hides, silk) are discussed in detail. The Sogdian network extended from Crimea to Korea. They built on traditions established by the Bactrians, whose merchants they supplanted and subsumed in the 4th century. Sogdians and Khorezmians served as *ortaqs* of the Khazar Qaghans (ca. mid-7th century to 968/9), whose polyglot realm (Volga-North Caucasus-Pontic steppe) derived from the Western Turks.

Culture-bearers (religions, technology), diplomats, translators (there existed a 7-volume dictionary of Sogdian in Chinese), and servitors of the Turks and China, their Aramaic-based Sogdian script became the basis for Turkic (cf. Uyghur), Mongol, and ultimately Manchu scripts. The author devotes equal attention to the lands to the East of the Pamirs, “the oases of Serindia.” Here, Buddhism played an important role. Unfortunately, local sources (aside from Khotan and Kucha) are even more sparse, aside from the Sinicized regions of Dunhuang and Gaochang (where manuscripts in seventeen languages have been found). Elsewhere, scholars are reliant on brief descriptive texts in Chinese. Indic languages (Sanskrit, Gāndhārī Prakrit) and writing systems (Kharoṣṭhī, Brāhmī) were used as means of administrative communication, as well as of religion and culture.

Much attention is devoted to the ethnogenetic tales, history, socio-political organization, ideology, and culture of the Turks, whose pan-Eurasian empire extended from the Pontic steppes to the borders of China. They were ruled by the Ashinas clan, which emerged from a mixed milieu (their origins and the etymology of their name remain active subjects of discussion – the early Ashinas Qaghans all bear non-Turkic names), intermediaries between nomadic and settled populations, acquainted with Chinese metallurgical technology (hence their position as

blacksmiths for the Rouran in the Altay) and elements of Iranian royal ideology. Chinese accounts, along with inscriptions from the First and Second Türk Qaghanates (552-630, 682-743/4 respectively – the unitary empire had divided into two realms, east and west by 581) allow for the reconstruction of their political history but do not tell us much about internal politics, e.g. the relationship between the imperial clan and the aristocracy, the social differentiation between the latter and the *Qara budun* (commoners). Regarding the Orkhon inscriptions (those of Tonyuquq-ca. 727, Köl Tegin-732, and Bilgä Qağan-735), centered in the Ötüken, considered the heartland of the steppe-based polities of Mongolia, the author makes the important point that they have distorted our conception of the Türk Qaghanates. They are not testimonies to the power of the Turks. Rather, they are manifestations of their “great decline,” lengthy pleadings that tried to hide their retreat from the more profitable Yinshan zone, “the heart of the empire to the north of the Gobi Desert.” Sogdian was the lingua franca of the steppe trade, the language of diplomacy, of the caravanners, and, the author claims, of the Türk chancellery. Rouran Mongolic served as an imperial prestige language of the First Türk Qaghanate, as indicated by the recent studies (to which the author has contributed) of the Bugut (mainly in Sogdian) and Khüis Tolgoi inscriptions (dated to 584 or 587 and sometime between 604 and 620 respectively), which contain texts in Rouran, written in the Brāhmī script (given the paucity of writings from that era this picture may change with future discoveries). The Second Qaghanate wrote in Turkic in a new script system (runic) devised for that purpose. The Uyghurs returned to the use of the Sogdian alphabet, now adapted to writing Turkic, but also had bilingual and trilingual inscriptions (Uyghur, Sogdian, Chinese). Moreover, the author argues that the Selenge, Orkhon, and Tula regions had been Uyghur rather than Türk-dominated until the latter’s center of power was pushed to the north in 708. The rise of the Uyghur Qaghanate (744-840) touched off migrations (of the Qarluqs, Oghuz, and others) westward with repercussions extending to the Pontic steppes. Its fall, resulting from the effects of a *jut* and a Qirghiz attack, produced a flight of tribes from the region, and “Mongolia ceased to be a center of nomad power until the Mongol era.” A good overview of the history of the Uyghur state, its adoption of Manichaeism under Bögü (759-709) as the “state religion” (while remaining mainly the religion of the elite), and its post-840 successor statelets is given in the final chapter. In contrast to the Turks, the Uyghurs had a capital city and built fortified

cities and frontier forts. Indeed, urbanization may have been one of the factors contributing to their fall.

In addition to Buddhism, Manichaeism, and Christianity/the Church of the East, considerable attention is paid to the local variants of Zoroastrianism/Mazdaism (unlike Iran, not a state religion). Also discussed are *Tengri* ("heaven, God)-worship (an imperial cult of heaven since the Xiongnu era, adopted over time by the Ashinas), *Umay*, "a placental goddess," the *yatchi* (rain magic specialist) and various practices (the veneration of air, water, fire, the earth, a deity of roads) associated with the shamanism of the steppe peoples. Given its many variables, the author suggests that one cannot speak of a "religion of the steppe." There were mutual influences (seen in loanwords, adoptions of calendrical systems, names of divinities) and local evolutions of the different belief systems. The scattered references to Jewish communities are also discussed. The advance of Islam is examined in detail and the critical role that Merv, firmly taken by 667, played in the 'Abbāsid revolution is highlighted. Indeed, Merv, with its substantial number of Arab colonists, perhaps some 175,000 (including wives and children), served as a starting point for Arabo-Muslim expansion to Bactria, Sogdiana, and Khorezm. The author provides an interesting discussion of the origins of caravanserais, which may have derived from Indian-Buddhist models and Sogdian and Turkic traditions, now blended in an Islamizing context. The author has much to say about the commodities involved in this Trans-Eurasian trade, the transfer of technology (silk, cotton, glassware, paper, among others), and the question of globalization/a global market (not yet achieved).

The Sino-Arab confrontation in Central Asia in 751, which the Arabs won thanks to the defection of the Qarluqs did not end Chinese interest in the region. Rather, it was the revolt in 755 of An Lushan, a prominent Tang official of Sogdian-Türk origin, that forced China to bring back its troops to deal with the revolt. It was crushed only in 763 with Uyghur aid. Chinese accounts accused An Lushan of relying on this mixed frontier population, but de la Vaissière paints a more complicated and nuanced picture. The Chinese "retreat" allowed the Tibetans to make gains in Qinghai, Gansu, and the Tarim Basin. Tang hopes of holding, much less advancing in Western Central Asia ended. Islamization was relatively rapid, largely completed by the mid-9th century (local elites were often the last to convert) and certainly by the time of al-Muqaddasī (late 10th century), as the author

notes. Non-Muslims faced social, economic, and even familial pressure to convert – as elsewhere in the Muslim world. Although many Islamicists reject the idea of the transmission of Central Asian influences to Islam, É. de la Vaissière, while recognizing that these may have been marginal in comparison with other Islamized regions, nonetheless argues that they cannot be completely dismissed. He traces the careers of some prominent Central Asian figures, e.g. the Barmakids, various Turkic *ghulāms*, such as Āsh(i)nās – whom he connects to the Türk royal family (a view not universally accepted), in the 'Abbāsid court and their role, especially in the military. He connects the *ghulām/mamlūk* system with the Central Asian *chākar* institution, prominent among the pre-Islamic Sogdians, and argues that these Turkic slave-soldiers were rather "mercenaries or prisoners of war," initially "seasoned specialists who were brought or came willingly from distant Central Asia." Several generations later, the *ghulām/mamlūk* "slave supply circuits, now focused on adolescents and no longer on experienced warriors." There are also discussions devoted to the Ṭāhirid and Sāmānid dynasties and the important role of Merv (starting in 670-750) in the shaping of Neo-Persian.

The reorientation of Central Asian trade, perhaps before 870 (or even earlier), which "gave way to other trade routes," is an important topic treated in the last chapter. Khorezmian and re-emerging Bactrian merchants replace the previously ubiquitous Sogdians. The *Rādhāniyya*, a Jewish trading organization that spanned territories from Spain to China, first noted in Ibn Khurdādhbih (mid-9th century), merits a special section in the book's concluding chapter. Their brief rise to prominence may have resulted from their "neutral" religious position as they could pass unhindered between Muslim and Christian lands.

Asie centrale is an outstanding work of scholarship based on a deep knowledge of the written sources and remains of material culture. An excellent introduction to the region, written in a clear, jargon-free language, with helpful maps and illustrations, it has much to offer the specialist as well as those seeking a general knowledge of this "pivot" of the world. It will be required reading for anyone interested in medieval Central Asia.

Peter B. Golden
Rutgers University