



STEPPE NOMADS IN THE EURASIAN TRADE¹

NÓMADAS DE LA ESTEPA EN EL COMERCIO EURASIÁTICO

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The nomads of the Eurasian steppes, semi-deserts, and deserts played an important and multifarious role in regional, interregional transit, and long-distance trade across Eurasia. In ancient and medieval times their role far exceeded their number and economic potential. The specialized and non-autarchic character of their economy, provoked that the nomads always experienced a need for external agricultural and handicraft products. Besides, successful nomadic states and polities created demand for the international trade in high value foreign goods, and even provided supplies, especially silk, for this trade. Because of undeveloped social division of labor, however, there were no professional traders in any nomadic society. Thus, specialized foreign traders enjoyed a high prestige amongst them. It is, finally, argued that the real importance of the overland Silk Road, that currently has become a quite popular historical adventure, has been greatly exaggerated.

Key words: Steppe nomads, Eurasian trade, the Silk Road, caravans.

Los nómadas de las estepas, semidesiertos y desiertos euroasiáticos desempeñaron un papel importante y múltiple en el tránsito regional e interregional y en el comercio de larga distancia en Eurasia. En tiempos antiguos y medievales, su papel superó con creces su número de habitantes y su potencial económico. El carácter especializado y no autárquico de su economía provocó que los nómadas siempre experimentarían la necesidad de contar con productos externos agrícolas y artesanales. Además, exitosos Estados y comunidades nómadas crearon una demanda por el comercio internacional de bienes exóticos de alto valor, e incluso proporcionaron suministros, especialmente seda, para este comercio. Sin embargo, debido a una subdivisión social del trabajo no desarrollada, no hubo comerciantes profesionales en ninguna de estas sociedades nómadas. Así, los comerciantes extranjeros especializados gozaron de un alto prestigio entre ellos. Finalmente, se argumenta que la importancia real de la ruta de la seda por tierra, que actualmente se ha convertido en una aventura histórica bastante popular, se ha exagerado enormemente.

Palabras claves: nómadas de la estepa, comercio euroasiático, ruta de la seda, caravanas.

I would like to start with one peculiar characteristic of pastoral nomadic societies. Intercultural contacts, including exchange, had existed in the steppe zone of Eurasia already in the Bronze Age, and, perhaps, even earlier (Frachetti 2008; Kuzmina 2008; Parzinger 2008). However, the Bronze Age pastoralists in many respects had been different from the historical pastoral nomads, who, in my current opinion, appeared not earlier than in the ninth century BC. Because of a specialized and non-autarchic character of their economy the nomads always experienced a need for agricultural and handicraft products (Khazanov 1994). No wonder that in contrast to many sedentary societies, trade and related

professions always enjoyed a high prestige amongst them.

There were different kinds of trade and exchange in ancient, medieval, and early modern Eurasia. As in other parts of the world, the most common one was a trade within particular regions. Another kind of trade was an interregional trade, especially between neighboring regions. There were also transit, long-distance and even transcontinental trade. A role of the nomads of the Eurasian steppes, semi-deserts, and deserts, in those various kinds of trade was also different. For the sake of brevity, I will further address them as the steppe nomads, since the majority of those nomads lived in the

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steppe zone, a great belt that stretches from Hungary to north China.

Regional and Interregional Trade

The most important trade to the nomads was the regional trade with neighboring sedentary societies (Figure 1). The main merchandise that nomads offered their sedentary counterparts was livestock and its secondary products: wool, hides, and others. Horses were especially important in such trade. The horse is a

riding animal best suited for military actions. The camel is inferior to the horse in this regard. Many sedentary states, like China, or the states of the Indian subcontinent, however, always experienced a shortage of military horses and keeping them was quite expensive. Even Russia was interested in regularly purchasing horses from the nomads. Thus, in the sixteenth century, the Russians annually purchased from the Nogai, one of many nomadic groups, 20,000 to 80,000 horses, and the limits were set not by a demand but by a supply (Zimin 1972:221).



Figure 1. Key locations linked to the steppe nomads interregional transit, and their long-distance trade across Eurasia.

Lugares claves vinculados al tránsito interregional de los nómadas de la estepa y su comercio a larga distancia a través de Eurasia.

Although nomads and sedentary populations usually occupied separate ecological zones, spatial difficulties for such trading or exchange were far from insurmountable. Livestock could be driven and carried over great distances. Sometimes merchants from sedentary countries penetrated deep into the steppes. For example, Ibn Fadlan, a secretary of the embassy sent by the Abbasid caliph al-Muqtadir to Volga Bulgaria, testified that in the tenth century Muslim merchants from Central Asia traded with the Oghuz nomads in their own territory, in the European steppes.

In the seventeenth and the early eighteenth centuries, merchants from Bukhara were welcomed to trade on the territory of the Kazakh khanate (Holwarth 2005:185).

However, much more often the nomads themselves moved their herds to centers of frontier trade on the borders of China, the Central Asian states, and later of Russia. Moreover, some nomadic migrations, and even conquests, could be explained by the desire to be closer to much needed markets. Thus, when in the tenth century, during the rule the Sung dynasty, the economic center of China shifted to the south, the Khitan and

Jürchen nomads also moved to its borders. Barthold (1963:467-468) even claimed that the Mongol conquest of Central Asia was accelerated by the shortsighted actions of Muhammed, a ruler of Khwarazm (a region in the lower Amy Darya river, in western Central Asia) and most of Central Asia, who had closed the trade routes from Maverannahr (mainly sedentary territories between the Amy-Darya and Syr-Darya rivers, also known as Transoxiana) into the steppes.

In principle, the trade between nomads and sedentary peoples was beneficial for both sides. In agricultural and urban societies, the livestock and its products were always much more expensive than in nomadic ones. The Muslim authors of the tenth century, al-Maqdisi and al-Istakhri specially mentioned that, due to this trade the prices for meat on the northern borders of Maverannahr were low, and that Khwarazm had become a wealthy country exclusively because of its trade with nomads. Later on, in the twelfth century, the Seljuk sultan Sanjar noticed that an increase in prosperity and profits of settled people was derived from the goods provided by nomads. In many cases, however, the trade between nomads and sedentary countries was not a pure commercial business. It also implied a political factor. In quite different historical periods, many sedentary states, especially China, but sometimes Central Asia states as well, considered the trade with nomads as a way of applying a political pressure on them.

In China, during the whole ancient and medieval periods, the same situation recurred time and again. In accordance with the political philosophy that dominated in the country, its governments required that in order to trade nomads had to admit their political dependence on China, and nomads resorted to arms to acquire the right to trade. Thus, in peace treaties that China time and again had to agree upon with the Xiongnu, the ancient nomads of Inner Asia, the latter always insisted that the Chinese government should pledge to open markets at its frontier centers.

In the late medieval period, Shaybani Khan (1451-1510), at that time a ruler of Maverannahr, issued a special edict that forbade merchants from Samarkand, Bukhara and Khwarazm to trade with his enemies, the Kazakhs. The situation was opposite in other cases. In the eighth century, for instance, the Uyghur imposed upon China a forced trade, which was of much greater value to them than to the Chinese government and actually resembled extortion. The Chinese had to pay forty pieces of silk for one horse, although these horses were of a very low quality (Mackerras 1972:338).

Still, the regional and even more interregional trade required a certain peace and stability in the steppe. In the 1730s, the Kazakh khanate had split into several independent polities (*hordes* in the Russian, *zhuzes* in the Kazakh language). These polities competed with each other and wanted to establish their own trade

routes between Khiva (a town in the Khwarazm region that since the early seventeenth century became a capital of the Khanate of Khiva) and Orenburg (a Russian town founded in 1734 that served as a market for the Kazakh nomads and Central Asian merchants). As a result, caravans traversing the Middle Horde territory were pillaged by the Kazakhs from the Junior Horde and vice versa. When the Kazakhs moved their sheep and horses to Khiva to barter them for cotton fabrics, they were often attacked by their rivals. Moreover, khans of individual hordes were even unable to prevent their followers from raids on caravans moving through their own territories (Holwarth 2005:199-200). In the course of history this situation was repeated in the steppe time and again. No wonder that it affected the trade in a very negative way.

Transit Trade

The father of history, Herodotus, was the first who noticed the nomads' involvement into this kind of trade. He mentioned that in the fifth century BCE the Scythians, who lived in the East European steppes and founded the earliest nomadic state in history, brought merchandise made on the territory of contemporary Ukraine to the foothills of the Urals (Herodotus IV, 24; cf. Olgovsky 2017). They conducted their business in seven languages with the assistance of seven interpreters. His claim is confirmed by archaeological materials. Bronze wares made in the territories to the north from the Black Sea and apparently in Olbia (a Greek city on the Southern Bug estuary) were found in the Volga basin and in the Urals. We do not know, however, who the merchants were, the nomadic Scythians, or more probably, their sedentary subjects.

The same reservation should be made about a later remark by Strabo (XI, V, 8), who noted that the Aorsi, one of the Sarmatian tribes, grew rich by transporting goods on camels and trading with Indian and Babylonian goods that they were receiving from the Armenians and Medians. Apparently, the Aorsi who lived in the North Caucasus just controlled the trading routes from the Near East and Transcaucasia and received custom dues from the merchants. Usually the transit trade was conducted by merchants from sedentary countries. In this regard, the Khazar state can serve as a good example (Kovalev 2005). In the eighth to the tenth centuries it was a dominant political force in the East European and Caspian steppes and forest steppes, and in the North Caucasus. Khazaria was an important channel of Abbasid and Samanid trade with East European countries.

Pax Chazarica facilitated the development of the Dnepr - Black Sea - Volga - Caspian Sea trading networks. Contemporary scholars are competing with

each other for providing special names for different parts of these networks. Thus, we already have the Fur Route, the Silver Route, and I would not be surprised if their number continues to grow. The Khazar nomads have but few goods for export. But their rulers benefited very much from the international trade because they collected tolls. So, they were doing everything to provide safety for the traders in their realm.

Long-distance Trade

Already the earliest nomadic states in Eurasia were involved in such trade. But, there is no unambiguous evidence of the existence of indigenous professional traders in any nomadic society. They always had a rather undeveloped social division of labor. The first professional traders appeared in the Kazakh nomadic society only at the end of the nineteenth and mainly in the beginning of the twentieth centuries. The *powindas* of Afghanistan were to some extent an exception. But even they combined trading activities with pastoralist ones (Gommans 1995:21 ff).

Usually the professional merchants in the nomadic societies came from sedentary populations. Not infrequently, members of specific ethnic and/or religious groups acted like closed guilds monopolizing the long-distance trade. However, nomadic rulers profited from their activities and actually encouraged and protected them. Thus, from the fifth to the eighth centuries, the long-distance trade was run by the Sogdian merchants, whose homeland was located in Central Asia valleys of the Zaravshan and Kashka-Darya rivers. Their role was especially significant in the Türkic states (Vaissière 2004).

In the Khazar period, interregional trading routes were used by merchants from Khwarazm, the countries of the Caliphate, as well as by the Scandinavians (called Rus'), and by the Jews, many of whom, apparently, were members of the international *Radhanites* (*Radanites*, in Hebrew *Radhanim*) corporation. In the fifth to eleventh centuries, its traders actively participated in the long-distance interregional trade. The *Radhanites* were the first merchants who established a trade network, partly maritime and partly overland, that stretched from Western Europe and the Middle East to India and China. Their advantage consisted in their reliance on Jewish communities at various points of this network. Thus, instead of carrying large amount of money, which was a risky business, they could use letters of credit. Mutual trust was very important for this trade, because in all probability, the *Radhanites* did not travel the whole route from Europe to China. They just traveled back and forth from one leg of this route to another, where they handed their merchandise to other members of their corporation (Adler 1983; Gil 1976; Goitein 1974; Naimark 1996:76 ff.).

In the united Mongol Empire, the Silk Road was run by the Nestorians and especially by the Muslims from Central Asia. In the Golden Horde, the trade with Central Asia, Russia, and China to a large extent was controlled by the Muslim merchants, especially by the Khwarazmians. There were also the Indian merchants, who used the routes through Iran and Afghanistan. In addition, there were Italian, Greek, Armenian, and Jewish merchants. But there were no merchants from the nomadic population (Kalan 2012). The Bukharan merchants served as middlemen of the Kazak and Uzbek nomadic elites in the caravan trade with Inner Asia. They brought them high-value prestigious goods and in addition paid tolls for safe traversing their territories (Holwarth 2005:190).

Nomads, however, were involved in the long-distance trade in many other ways. Sometimes, their embassies to different sedentary states were accompanied by merchants. In the seventeenth and the early eighteenth centuries, envoys of the Kazakh khanate to other countries were usually accompanied by merchants from Bukhara, who used this opportunity for their trading activities (Ibragimov 1958). No caravan could cross territories controlled by the nomads without their consent and protection. But when this consent was given, caravans' camels and horses could be grazed along the way on natural pastures. In addition, nomads were sometimes involved in transportation of loads and selling or renting out transport animals.

It is important to note a specific characteristic of nomadic states and polities that was connected to their political economy. Rare and luxury items, usually of foreign origin, served in them as symbols of power and prestigious markers of a high political and social status. Their redistribution and gift-giving were aimed at recruiting and retaining followers and alliance building. This long-distance political exchange was reciprocal and multi-dimensional. A role of nomads in long-distance trade is best summarized by the seminal works of Thomas Allsen (1997, 2001). He noted that nomadic states were not only stimulating long-distance trade and exchange through the creation of a *pax* that provided security and transportation facilities. In fact, the process of state formation among the nomads in and of itself stimulated trade through increased demand for precious metals, gems, and most particularly, fine cloth. I would only add to this list wine that was also in high demand by the nomadic rulers and aristocracy. The burial tombs of the Scythian kings and aristocracy, in the fifth to the early third centuries BC, contain numerous luxury objects made of precious metals, including highly refined artworks, as well as pottery of the finest quality made by Greek artisans. Likewise, the burials of the Xiongnu, who founded the first nomadic state in Inner Asia, contain numerous artifacts made in China (silk,

lacquer ware, and bronze mirrors), and in addition also products associated with the artworks of Greco-Bactrian, Parthia, and even of the Mediterranean region.

Still, this is only one side of the coin. Not only the interregional political exchange, but also the long-distance commercial trade with the assistance and active participation of professional merchants from sedentary countries was a characteristic feature of successful nomadic states. Nomads not only created the demand for the long-distance international trade. Not infrequently, they also provided supplies for this trade. Successful nomadic states and polities always got much more goods, as gifts, tribute, revenues, and by other means, from dependent sedentary populations and states, than they could utilize themselves. This state of affairs existed since ancient times. To provide but one of many possible examples I would like to turn to the Scythians again. They subjugated the cultivators living in the forest-steppe and managed to put under their control the trade with the Greek cities founded on the northern seaboard of the Pontus (the Black Sea). The Scythian aristocracy recolected tribute such as grain, as well as slaves paid by the dependent cultivators on the Greek markets and in return received luxury items – refined artwork, jewelry metalwork, and pottery of the highest quality, as well as wine much loved by them (Khazanov 2015).

Not infrequently, the nomadic rulers in inner Asia were receiving from China thousands, or even hundreds of thousands of silk rolls on a yearly basis. For example, the rulers of Xiongnu annually received from China 10,000 silk rolls, each 9.24 meters long (Kradin 2002:189). Later, in the 560's and 570's, the Zhou and the Qi, the two competing dynasties in northern China, each annually paid the Türk rulers 100,000 silk rolls. It is clear that domestic consumption could not absorb such quantities of silk. But turned into merchandise and traded across many regions and far beyond political spheres of individual nomadic states, such goods provided a significant income for the nomadic rulers and aristocracy. Sometimes, their role in the long-distance trade was more active. Thus, the Mongol princes and officials established special relationships with merchants called *ortaq* (*ortoq*) (mainly Muslim merchants from Central Asia), who were partners or agents of the Mongol ruling elite. These traders were provided with goods that they used as capital to earn interest (Allsen 1989; Endicott-West 1989). No wonder that nomadic aristocracy benefited from and encouraged long distance international trade. The commercial fees collected by the Golden Horde rulers from trading colonies of Genoa and Venice were fixed at a low rate of 3-5% of the merchandise value (Di Cosmo 2005:396).

Transcontinental Overland Trade

The importance of transcontinental overland trade in general, and especially the role of the steppe nomads

in its maintenance should not be overestimated. Contrary to the currently rather widespread estimation that in pre-modern times, there was no, nor could there be, world economic system based on a systematic exchange of basic commodities and daily necessities; I guess that there were not only transcontinental overland routes, but maritime routes as well, and not infrequently, the transcontinental maritime trade was more important than overland one. The Romans became acquainted with silk at the turn of the eras, and for a time being Parthia and then the Kushan Empire profited from its transit through their territories (Dmitriev and Kantor 2011:197). For that reason the Romans were very interested in exploring the maritime routes to India. According to Plinius the Elder (*Naturalis History* VI, 84) in the first century CE, or even at the end of the first century BC, they discovered the monsoon navigation and began to import silk from India to where it was delivered from China. The overland transcontinental trade before the advent of capitalism was mainly confined to luxury commodities and prestige goods, and sometimes also to slaves. In this regard, I will dwell a little on the Silk Road and its myths.

The Silk Road and its Myths

The “Silk Road” is a term coined by a famous German scholar, Richthofen in 1877 (Richthofen 1877). Promoted by his followers, like his student Sven Hedin (1938) and others, it was recently reinvigorated mainly for political and economic reasons. In some countries, especially in China, its importance is greatly exaggerated. The Chinese “One Belt, One Road” initiative and its “heritage diplomacy” are but another example of the country’s soft power strategy (Rezakhani 2011; Winter 2016). Nowadays, the Silk Road also captures imagination of many amateurs attracted by its allegedly exotic character. It figures in many popular and semi-popular publications. It appears also in movies, and TV shows. Unfortunately, even some professional scholars, who want to demonstrate their political correctness and opposition to alleged Eurocentrism, have also jumped on the wagon (e.g., Beckwith 2009).

The image of grandiose caravans that regularly crossed thousands of kilometers of inhospitable environment to connect distant parts of the world to a large extent is a myth. It took the Polo brothers three and a half years to get from Mongolia to the Mediterranean with their merchandise (Marco Polo 2001:8, 11). From early medieval times to the eighteenth century, a daily move of pack animals usually amounted to no more than 25 km. Thus, according to the Arab sources, trade caravans did not cover more than a few *farsang* a day (one *farsang* is approximately 6 km, see Lurie 2005). The Russian observers noticed that the situation remained the same even in the eighteenth and in the early nineteenth centuries (Tairov 2013:69). Besides, animals, especially packed ones,

needed periodic rest. Conversely, some scholars are skeptical about the importance of the Silk Road and even call it a “romantic deception” (e.g., Chin 2013; Whitfield 2007). The reality, however, was more complicated.

First, silk was not the only important merchandise in the transcontinental trade. The Chinese monopoly on silk production was not permanent. After all, silk production in different styles existed in Byzantine since the sixth century AD, and in India, Central Asia, and Iran a few centuries earlier (Rezakhani 2011:425). Perhaps, spices were even more important merchandise than silk. From the Roman to the modern times, however, spices from South and South East were transported to the Middle East and Europe only by sea, with India and Sri Lanka serving as focal nodes. Only occasionally spice cargo was transported by land from ports in the Persian Gulf through territory of Syria (Zuchowska and Zukowski 2012).

Second, the Silk Road was not the only transcontinental trading route. In many historical periods other routes were much more important than the Silk one, and they served to transport across Eurasia not only silk and spices but many other goods, as well as technologies, know-how, cultural styles, religions, and diseases, were transported along these routes. Thus, more than one million Samanid coins have been discovered in Eastern Europe, in the Khazar period. By contrast, only a few Samanid coins have been found in China. There is no evidence that there was a direct caravan trade between China and the Middle Eastern, East European, and Mediterranean countries at that time. It is true that silk and silk clothing were found in many graves, from the north Caucasus to Switzerland and Scandinavia. But most of them were made in Byzantine and Central Asia (Vedeler 2016). Apparently, few Chinese silks were delivered to eastern Europe not directly but from central Asian countries. These countries served as intermediaries in gradual, down-the-line trade between China and Europe.

Third, there was not one Silk Road but many, and that was already noticed by Richthofen himself. The Silk Road was almost never a singular route stretching between east Asia and Europe. It consisted of many temporal and multidirectional shorter routes and nodes that linked up diverse cultural and political zones, both east to west and south to north. Some of these routes existed at least from the first century BC (Avanesova 2012:60; Parzinger 2008:62-64) to the fifteenth century AD, and even later. Up to the third century CE the main international trade routes were far away from the steppe zone. In the Han period (206 BCE – 220 AD), one of the most important routes went from China to India through the Pamir and Bactria (a historical region that was located between the Hindukush mountains and the Amu Darya River) because safety was provided

by the Kushan empire, which included northern India and southern central Asia. Several other routes went through sedentary regions of central Asia. One of the most important of those routes went from China through the Hexi corridor in the Gansu province to the oases of the western regions (Xinxiang). The silk fabrics dated by the first century BCE and first century CE were discovered in the Kara-Bulak burials in the southern part of the Fergana valley (Avanesova 2012:65). From central Asia the route followed to Bactria, Iran, and India (Dmitriev and Kantor 2011:196).

The nomads were far away from these routes, and did not benefit from their existence. The only exception was the Xiongnu, who since the beginning of the second century BC controlled the Hexi corridor. In 121 BC and the following years, Han China managed to expel them from that region. By the end of the second century AD, the Kushan Empire replaced China as the power which controlled oases of the western regions. Only one of many silk roads, from China and inner Asia to the Black Sea region, via the Syr Darya River and around the Caspian Sea, crossed the territories occupied by the nomads. Apparently, some contacts between China and north Pontic area along the northern route existed already in the ancient times. However, these contacts were neither direct nor intensive. This situation is well reflected by archaeological materials.

For example, the Sarmatian nomads highly valued the Han bronze mirrors, but very few of those mirrors were discovered in their graves in the east European steppes and in the north Caucasus. Some mirrors were local imitations and continued to be made long after manufacturing of these mirrors ceased in China itself (Guguev et al. 1991). Moreover, some of these mirrors could have been made not in China but in south Siberia.

The steppe route could function smoothly only when nomadic empires controlled all, or most of the steppe zone. And this happened only twice in the world's history. The first time the steppe route became important and, perhaps, even dominant in the sixth century AD, was when the Türks created the first pan-Eurasian nomadic empire. It extended its power not only over most of the nomads in the Eurasian steppes but also over the sedentary territories to the north of Amu-Darya River. It even temporarily conquered Bosphorus, in the Crimea. This, so far unprecedented expansion had a certain economic motivation, a desire to acquire lucrative control over the transcontinental trade.

This desire, as well as diplomatic activities of the Türk rulers, were encouraged and facilitated by their sedentary subjects, the Sogdians, who were involved in the international trade and played an important role in the Türk realm. At the time of the Türk hegemony, the road from their western domains to Byzantium went from the Aral Sea to the north of the Caspian Sea, and

then through the Caucasus to the Middle East, or through the east European steppes to the Crimea. Remarkably, at the same time in the middle of the sixth century, Cosmas Indicopleustes, a Nestorian monk in Egypt, noted that loads of silk passing by land through one nation after another, reached Persia in a comparatively short time, whilst the route by sea is vastly greater. But that was only a temporary situation connected to the Türkic dominance on the transcontinental overland route.

The second time this happened after the creation of the Mongol empire and the Mongol conquests in the thirteenth century. *Pax Mongolica*, although short lived, stimulated unprecedented trade across Eurasia. From a commercial point of view, it was a gigantic reshuffle of previous trading networks. By that time silk was already produced in many countries, but the Chinese silk had a price advantage due to its low cost in the country, and the unification of Eurasia allowed it to reappear on the European markets. This direct trade route from China to the Black Sea, however, existed only for a short time. After the Mongol empire split up into four successor states, the direct inland trade between Europe and China became much less significant. There was no integrated market between the Mediterranean and China. It became the domain of a few private merchants and adventurers, and its volume should not be exaggerated. The main center of the long-distance trade with China moved to Tabriz, in Iran, and an access to the Chinese products was mainly controlled by the Muslim intermediaries. After the Ming dynasty defeated the Mongol Yüan dynasty in China, in 1368, it virtually closed its borders for international trade (Di Cosmo 2005:403).

When the steppe was fragmented between different and competing nomadic polities, condition that was common in most historical periods, other routes were much safer. In the second half of the eighth century with the demise and collapse of the Türk Empire and then its successor states, the inland transcontinental trade through the steppes was disrupted and came into decay. In the ninth century, under a patronage of the Uighur state, it existed only on a low level. From ca. 750 to ca. 1200 the transcontinental overland trade

lost its previous importance. Moreover, long-distance terrestrial travelling was expensive and not infrequently dangerous. Safety was the first but far from being the only concern of the merchants; distance was the second one. In the early medieval period, several Arab authors mentioned difficulties experienced by merchants, who had to pass the territories of those nomads who lacked a centralized authority. In 922, Ibn Fadlan, joined a huge caravan of the Khwarazmian merchants, who were going to Volga Bulgaria. He reported that the merchants passing through the steppes had to pay to the Oghuz nomads for temporary shelter in tents, fresh mounts and pack animals, and just for a free passage. These payments consisted of food, cloth, coins, and other goods. In the next century, Gardizi described the difficulties experienced by merchants, who travelled through the lands of other nomads of the East European steppes, the Pechenegs.

In sum, the role of the steppe nomads in the Eurasian trade was multifarious and far exceeded their number and economic potential. In some historical periods, the nomads created demand on specific luxury goods, stimulated their production in sedentary countries, and facilitated their dissemination across the two continents. Still, their general role in the history of the ancient and medieval Eurasian trade should not be exaggerated. Their role in the political and military history of Eurasia was much greater. At any rate, everything was changed in the early modern period. The role of the Eurasian steppes and central Asia in the transcontinental trade between Europe, the Middle East, and China rapidly declined. The great geographic discoveries and improvements in seafaring sharply diminished the importance of transcontinental overland trade (Rossabi 1989; Steensgaard 1973). The maritime routes became shorter and easier. Caravels, and later steamboats, defeated caravans in Eurasia. And with these new developments any significant role that the nomads had been playing in the Eurasian trade gradually came to the end.

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