



# **Empires of the Silk Road: A History of Central Eurasia from the Bronze Age to the Present**

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The first complete history of Central Eurasia from ancient times to the present day, *Empires of the Silk Road* represents a fundamental rethinking of the origins, history, and significance of this major world region. Christopher Beckwith describes the rise and fall of the great Central Eurasian empires, including those of the Scythians, Attila the Hun, the Turks and Tibetans, and Genghis Khan and the Mongols. In addition, he explains why the heartland of Central Eurasia led the world economically, scientifically, and artistically for many centuries despite invasions by Persians, Greeks, Arabs, Chinese, and others. In retelling the story of the Old World from the perspective of Central Eurasia, Beckwith provides a new understanding of the internal and external dynamics of the Central Eurasian states and shows how their people repeatedly revolutionized Eurasian civilization.

Beckwith recounts the Indo-Europeans' migration out of Central Eurasia, their mixture with local peoples, and the resulting development of the Graeco-Roman, Persian, Indian, and Chinese civilizations; he details the basis for the thriving economy of premodern Central Eurasia, the economy's disintegration following the region's partition by the Chinese and Russians in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and the damaging of Central Eurasian culture by Modernism; and he discusses the significance for world history of the partial reemergence of Central Eurasian nations after the collapse of the Soviet Union.

*Empires of the Silk Road* places Central Eurasia within a world historical framework and demonstrates why the region is central to understanding the history of civilization.

## Empires of the Silk Road: A History of Central Eurasia from the Bronze Age to the Present Details

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# **From Reader Review Empires of the Silk Road: A History of Central Eurasia from the Bronze Age to the Present for online ebook**

## **Edith says**

As a revisionist work, the author seeks to deconstruct the notion of the "barbarian" and extant theories on nomadic versus settled agriculturalist societies relationships that had been passed down to us. We are products of the settled agriculturalist societies, as are most of our written sources about the past, but might it be that it's time to critically examine these biases when it comes to studying pastoralist societies, especially those from Central Eurasia that had so often reshaped the histories of the continent? Beckwith's main argument is that the nomads' perceived aggressions against the settled peripheral peoples could either be due to the expansionist policies of the settled peoples that brought them into contact with pastoralists, as well as attempts to secure trading relations with settled peoples in order to supply luxury goods for their elites in a *comitatus* arrangement with the ruler (their "blood riders", for you GoT fans). Beckwith offers food for thought, such as looking beyond simplistic binaries when it comes to studying Central Eurasians (people are not necessarily ONLY pastoralists OR agriculturalists, nor are nomadic societies entirely lacking the concept of "cities" or settlements of their own, nor are they solely on the route of the Silk Road trade rather than actual participants in the economics of cross-continental trade), which enables us to look beyond early theories of the relationship as one that's mostly parasitic (nomads preying on agriculturalists due to their superior martial abilities like some Dothraki horde), but it's hard to see how thousands of years ingrained instincts might be revised anytime soon when it's continually being reinforced through both our heritage and modern pop culture.

I focused on the first 8 chapters and the epilogue. Sometimes the book contains more details than necessary, so skim at will.

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## **Omar Ali says**

Great Book. I won't bother with a review because Razib wrote a very good one in 2009. See it here: <http://www.gnXP.com/blog/2009/09/whos...>

I learned more new things than I learn in most 500 page books. The writing is occasionally clunky and you have to stop and figure out where you are sometimes, but there is just so much information packed into it! It ends with a long angry screed against modernism. Wow. This man is upset! but the book makes you rethink many lazy assumptions and makes you want to read much more. So definitely worth reading. Razib's review pretty much covers my thoughts (and more).

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## **Larrycarlin says**

This is an excellent history, not just another retelling. The focus is on the history of the peoples of Central Eurasia and their interaction with the "peripheral" countries such as China and France. The story starts far back in early prehistoric times with the proto-Indo-Europeans and comes up to the 21st century. And it's clear that Beckwith sees the large picture.

That said, there is a strange interlude, near the end, trashing Modernism. It's strange for several reasons. First, it's only loosely connected to Central Eurasia and its recent decline. It seems that Modernism is responsible, not the growth of the Littoral System which brought trade routes to coastal regions via international shipping.

Second, it's not clear what, and who, Beckwith considers Modern. And third it barely discusses the impact of commercialism on art and culture.

But the discussion on Modernism is food for thought. And as such, it fits in with this informed discussion of the peoples who were largely responsible for international trade for 3 millennia.

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## **Adam Calhoun says**

Although interesting at times, this book is not quite what it sets itself out to be. Rather than a history of Central Eurasia per se, it is actually a history of ALL of Eurasia, with a slight focus on the central bit, spanning the bronze age to the present. If that seems rather broad, well, it is. Beckwith does a good job laying out the importance of Central Eurasia to world history, and I definitely came away with a better understanding of the region and its connections to the rest of the globe. Instead of a hole in the map, I now think of an important node that not only connects East and West, but a region that has its own distinct cultures and happenings that forced East and West to react to IT.

Unfortunately, the book gets bogged down in its breadth and Beckwith's enemies, which are apparently numerous. Did we really need a huge section on the ills of the Modernist art movement? And how many times do we have to hear about how terrible China is? But its really how far it stretches that does the book in. His definition of Central Eurasian cultures seems a bit broad, especially when he starts encompassing regions as diffuse as Ukraine, Tibet, and India. But perhaps that's the accepted definition; I don't know. Regardless, the book could have used a lot more focus. I came away appreciative of Central Eurasia but hardly knowledgeable.

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## **Adrian says**

Empires of the Silk Road is a scholarly, well researched book on the history of Central Asia, China, Europe and the Far East. As such, this is perhaps the strongest criticism I have of the work, namely that in purchasing it I was expecting a more specialized study of Central Asia, rather than Europe and China, areas I have previously studied.

In defense of this possible inconsistency, the histories of Central Asia, Europe and China are remarkably intertwined, especially when one considers the European invasions of Attila and the Mongol Conquests of the Middle Ages. However, a detailed history of the first and second world wars in the latter part of the book was somewhat unnecessary, and perhaps more attention could have been given to Central Asia.

For it's strengths, though, Empires of the Silk Road does break from conventional history in deconstructing stereotypes of Central Asian nomads, particularly the Mongols, portraying them not as barbarians (a term the author deconstructs at great length toward the conclusion of the book) but rather as traders like all other civilizations, whose main purpose in conquest was to break down the barriers to trade, an objective of most Empire builders throughout history.

Beckwith offers great examples of how traditionally vilified conquerors such as Attila, Genghis Khan, and Tamerlane were no more brutal than the subjects they conquered, and no more uncouth than what are considered the greater civilizations, such as the Chinese.

The main strengths of the book are the focus on the Mongol Conquests, and later Tamerlane, and the conclusion of the book offers a great insight into the cultural destruction of central Asian cultures in the 20th century, namely the Tibetans, and the Central Asian constituents of the former Soviet Union. Within the conclusion, Beckwith demonstrates an adept understanding of modernism and post modernism, and analyzes art and culture with an interesting nostalgic bent, which may be discerned by some to be bias, but nonetheless offers a decent perspective on both art and culture.

On the whole, there is much to be learned within this volume, though those already versed in European and Chinese history may find the focus on these areas a little too familiar. Nonetheless, it is a book worth digesting in its whole and complete form, and the insight into Central Asia is there, even if there are what some may consider to be unnecessary digressions.

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### **Simon Jones says**

A book of two halves this one in terms of both content and quality. The first half is a narrative history of Eurasia, with a focus on central Eurasia, heartland of the Silk Road. This was excellent, in particular the early chapters dealing with the Indo-European migrations. The second half of the book which discusses the rise and fall of the Silk Road empires and the reasons for their demise suffers a little from an excess of bias which presents them largely as victims and on occasion the author labours a particular point ad nauseum. Nevertheless the arguments are interesting even though I remained slightly unconvinced that the likes of the Huns or the Mongols were primarily motivated by a desire for peaceful trade. Well worth reading for an overview of the subject and in order to get a viewpoint which challenges the mainstream.

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### **Steve says**

*A physical map of most of Eurasia*

**This book is simply enormous in scope!** (And so, unhappily, is this damn review. For that reason portions of the review are labeled as "spoiler" to be opened by the really curious.)

In *Empires of the Silk Road: A History of Central Eurasia From the Bronze Age to the Present* (2009) Christopher I. Beckwith provides a kind of history of most of the region represented by the above map from the Bronze Age to the present ! This impossible task is made (barely) manageable by his intent to make two main points: 1. what he calls the Central Eurasian Culture Complex (CECC) has informed most of the cultures in that enormous region during that span of time; and 2. the Central Asian and northern steppe peoples blithely called "barbarians" by the peoples of the peripheral empires (Greek, Roman, Chinese, Arab, British, Russian) were anything but barbarians.(\*). For Beckwith, they were the victims of the expansionary and imperialist fervor of the peripheral empires. Indeed, he asserts that modern culture does not derive from the Tigris, Euphrates, Nile, Indus and Yellow River valleys, but from the CECC. So, though this book is stuffed full of historical information (mostly linguistic and textual, but also some archaeological) about the peoples in that great expanse of time and space, the material is generally selected to explain and support Beckwith's primary aims.

What Beckwith calls Central Eurasia is whatever area (at any given moment of time) is under the influence of the CECC. This region has therefore expanded and contracted in time, but at its largest extent, according to Beckwith, it included basically everything in temperate Eurasia from Britain to Japan. The CECC is that complex of cultural traits identified with the carriers of the original Proto-Indo-European languages, which includes such things as a *comitatus*(\*\*) and war chariots (and the associated burials), warfare carried out primarily by archers on chariots (and later on horses), certain types of heroic origin myths, religious beliefs focused on a Sky God and an Earth Goddess (before conversion to one of the "world religions"), and the Indo-European languages themselves. Beckwith clearly holds that the Central Asian and northern steppe peoples were the purest representatives of the CECC in historical times.

Like S. Frederick Starr in his excellent *Lost Enlightenment: Central Asia's Golden Age From the Arab Conquest to Tamerlane* (though with enormously expanded scope), Beckwith's polemical intent is to argue against the pejorative views of Central Asian cultures held by historians of and in the peripheral empires. This point they both make very convincingly, but since Starr is not so temporally and spatially inclusive, he is able to draw a more detailed portrait of the cultural and economic significance of the Central Asian peoples. Unfortunately, since the late 17th century they were squeezed and then swallowed by the Russian, Manchu-Chinese and British Empires and reduced to their current sad state when the latter energetically developed maritime trade and then clamped down their inner-Asian borders, thereby starving out the economies of Central Asia with natural consequences for their high culture. Beckwith expresses the hope that yet another Central Asian revival (there have been quite a few over the millennia) is in the offing.

In the process of setting up his Big Picture of the peoples of the CECC, Beckwith overturns much of accepted Proto-Indo-European theory. Curious to see how his colleagues reacted, I read a review of this book in the *Journal of Indo-European Studies* in which an expert lambasts much of Beckwith's linguistic theory. So, despite his tone of (at times, nearly supercilious) confidence, there is speculation in this text that will be threshed out over time by other specialists, not by me.

Nonetheless, the main points are well made (and accepted in their essentials in the mentioned review), the assertions about facts and quotes are backed up by detailed footnotes and a very extensive bibliography, and the book underwent a searching peer review in order to be published by the Princeton University Press.(\*\*\*) So, despite the gleeful air of overturning the applecart Beckwith sometimes adopts, at least most of this book is solid and impressive scholarship.

(view spoiler)

(view spoiler)

Nine of the twelve chapters are occupied with prehistorical, ancient and medieval times, but Beckwith brings his history to the present, which occasions some fiery polemics against what he calls Modernism (everything new is better than everything old) and against the kind of postmodern historiography that has resulted in a radical relativism of values and truth. Personally, I am quite sympathetic to some of his views in this regard, but these crotchety complaints are, finally, quite irrelevant to the primary content of this book. And to blame modernism for all the ills of the present is more than a little absurd. This reaches a paroxysm in Chapter 11, where the words "Modern" and "Modernism" diffuse to mean little more than "occurred in the 20th century." Every upheaval from Sun Yat-sen's to Mao's, from Lenin's to Ataturk's, from Hitler's to the Ayatollah Khomeini's is termed "Modernist" ! This chapter needs some calm rethinking and serious editing.

Aside from this overly ground axe, the main problem with this book is also its main advantage: its scope. As Beckwith's attention moves forward through time and around and around through space there are potted

histories mostly culled from various series with the title "Cambridge History of ....." (though he also employs books I've never heard of which are now in my impossible TBR list). For the most part, these can do little more than form an initial orientation to the given time and place. Only when he has an opportunity to elaborate upon his primary points (or when the time and place is one of his many specialties(view spoiler)) does he wax loquacious. For some readers there may be too many passages where it seems Beckwith is just being dutiful and is not really engaged.

After the rather embarrassing Chapters 11 and 12, Beckwith closes with a summarizing Epilogue in which he returns to scholarly solid ground and brings his primary assertions to a very effective point. Let me be clear: despite my criticisms, I found this book to be well worth reading.

(\*) That there was some unfair maligning of the nomads by their enemies (who, after all, were the ones who wrote the histories) I am quite willing to accept. But I have to say that Beckwith appears to go too far in the opposite direction. (view spoiler) My point is that Beckwith rarely mentions any fact that could reflect poorly on the various nomadic tribes (or their leaders) but is less sparing when it comes to uncomfortable facts about the peripheral empires. (view spoiler) His presentation appears to be biased in the attempt to correct another bias - not an unusual rhetorical ploy but a reader should have a suitable supply of grains of salt at hand.

(\*\*) The word *comitatus* was used by Tacitus in his *Germania* to refer to the group of elite warriors who swore fealty unto death to their leader (the rulers of the respective Germanic tribes) and who, in return, were richly provided for by their leader. In the mainstream CECC cultures (for the CECC had been somewhat watered down during the Germanic tribes' wanderings) this fealty unto death was quite literal: Not only was it culturally impossible for a member of a ruler's *comitatus* to survive a battle in which the ruler was killed, but even if the ruler died of natural causes, his *comitatus* would be buried together with him, so that they could continue to serve and protect him in the afterlife. Such burials have been found from the Yellow Valley in China to western Europe, and Beckwith finds evidence of such *comitati* nearly everywhere. (view spoiler)

(\*\*\*) Signs of emendations to the text due to the refereeing process are actually visible.

(4\*) Zoroaster's dates are famously uncertain, and Beckwith argues against the currently standard dating of the *Avesta*, so Persia might have to be added to this list. Beckwith's assertions about the *Avesta* are among the most radical and hence controversial in this book.

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## Lee Broderick says

I had the good fortune to discuss this book with one of the author's colleagues while I was reading it. He informed me of two criticisms commonly levelled at it: the first is that it is over-reliant on the Chinese sources when, thanks to the author's command of several other languages, there is no need for it to be. I would not have known that without our conversation. The second common criticism was immediately apparent to me: a complete failure to include any archaeological evidence (of which there is an increasing ammount) in his narrative.

I used the word "narrative" deliberately: this is a grand narrative, in the full sense of traditional history writing. It does, in addition to its historical sources, make much use of linguistic research and places Central

Asia quite properly at the centre of Eurasian culture and commerce. As anyone even vaguely familiar with European or Asian history will know, this is an idea that has been neglected for a considerable amount of time - for most of modern scholarship in fact - and this book occupies an exalted position amongst a growing library of work which seeks to rehabilitate the region in world history.

Where the book takes a strictly chronological structure, it begins to unravel in the penultimate chapter, covering the twentieth century. Here, the author's occasional political preaching (apparent at points throughout the text) is allowed to take over in his treatment of the twentieth century and develops into a bizarre, and somewhat out of place, rant against Modernism. This is then developed in the final chapter which looks to see what the future may hold for Central Asia, surely an unwise inclusion for any historian?

Just when the book appears to be at its most peculiar and infuriating though, a lengthy epilogue is included, summarising our knowledge of Central Eurasian history. This epilogue is worth the price of the book alone and should be required reading for any Central Asianist, containing some very useful ideas and reviews.

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## **Rindis says**

Late last year, I picked this book up, as it looked very interesting.

And it is, I highly recommend it as an extremely well done history of a part of the world that most people just don't know about from pre-history to the current date.

But—this book is not for the faint of heart. If you want some light informative reading, you will find the book overwhelming.

This especially holds true in the prologue and first two chapters of the book, where the footnotes and endnote references fly thick and furious. With all the flipping back and forth, and integrating the three different bits of text together, it can take over a quarter hour to get through two pages.

The reason for this is that for the early parts of the book, Beckwith is an expert holding forth on the more obscure parts of his field of expertise. He is well aware that almost everything he has to talk about hinges on specialized knowledge, and the footnotes and endnotes contain clarifications, and when he argues against the conventional interpretation, the general line of logic that leads to his conclusion.

That said, he does make some assumptions of knowledge. If you don't know about linguistic reconstruction (and I'm lucky that I've run across it before), you'll be wondering just what he's talking about at many points, and what all those stars in front of words mean (which is a symbol for deduced, but not attested form of a word). As it is, many of the notes, and all of Appendix B, go pretty heavily into the field, and there are pronunciation glyphs I've never seen before.

Speaking of Appendixes, there are two of them, to go with voluminous endnotes, a Prologue, and a Epilogue. Appendix B goes into the reconstruction of the names of various peoples from Chinese sources, working out likely earlier forms of the names, and where those names can be equated with names in non-Chinese sources. Appendix A goes into his reconstruction of the initial diaspora of the Indo-European people, and the initial branching off of Proto-Indo-European into daughter families. I recommend reading it before Chapter 1, and Appendix B before Chapter 2, as they are heavily referenced in those sections. The Prologue is concerned with the "First Story", which is a story cycle common to many Indo-European cultures (including the

Romans) as a hero/foundation myth. The Epilogue is about the concept of 'barbarians' and how the modern conception of such is not only inappropriate to an understanding of the peoples of Central Eurasia (as he takes pains to point out during the book), but is inappropriate to an understanding of the original term, and some of original sources, but is especially inappropriate to use with Chinese sources, where several different terms for 'foreigner' that have little or no pejorative implications, are usually translated into English as 'a kind of barbarian'.

The main part of the book is a history of Central Eurasia, or, more properly, the "Central Eurasian Culture Complex". This history is delineated by broad cultural borders that change over time, not geographical ones.

I have to admit that there are large sections of the book where I am an unarmed man against some of his assertions. In general, I think his construction of pre- and early history are sound, but I don't know enough to raise many objections. My main problem is that he seems to be a bit too strong of a Diffusionist for my tastes, asserting that the chariot was only invented by the Indo-Europeans, and allowed them to impose themselves on the various peripheral cultures.

The bulk of his book spends some time pointing the importance of trade, and the fact it is generally the peripheral civilizations that try to restrict trade, and the Central Eurasian civilizations often attack with the stated demand of opening up trade again. The Age of Exploration is looked in the light of one trade system (the Silk Road) being replaced by another (the Littoral System), with the current backwardness of the area resulting from the collapse of trade in the area.

The last couple chapters turn into a screed against Modernism. Again, I'm largely mentally unarmed against his assertions, but I judge he paints with entirely too broad a brush. He sees Modernism not just as a new movement that overthrew previous traditions, but as a movement that relies on overthrowing the old, and therefore has led intellectual life down the blind alley of continual revolution without trying to move forward with the results of any of those revolutions. He then ties that into efforts of "Modernist" regimes to destroy the cultural past (as examples, the Soviet efforts to destroy religious community and the Taliban's destruction of Buddhist monuments in Afghanistan).

Again, I do highly recommend the book. I have some potential problems with it, but it is far more important than those problems. I would certainly like to hear from people who can talk to my concerns better than I can, but in the end it's biases are fairly clear, and the value of a history that ties together the events of such a large area ranks very high, also the bulk of the most interesting points of the book have not been touched on by me here. Finally, the notes do a valuable service in pointing out places where further scholarly study are desperately needed, and I hope that some of these gaps are directly addressed in the future.

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## **Scott says**

Beckwith's book was recommended by a friend to give me a context for understanding the cultures from which early Tibet emerged. Beckwith touches on Tibet, but it really was refreshing to experience his sweeping perspective.

Although I did not read all the way through to the chapters on more-recent history (which several people found not as good as the early chapters), I came away with a new sense that Eurasia is a much-more unified ancient culture than I'd previously been aware. Although the "civilizations" on the periphery—China, Persian, Greco-Roman—have given us a warped perspective on "barbarian" invaders, Beckwith convinced

me that the violence was usually started by the "civilized" to close down frontier trading centers which were crucial to Central Eurasian survival.

And although there were multiple ethnic and linguistic groups that swept across the steppes, Beckwith showed how they all shared some common cultural characteristics, from the mythologies of founders raised in the wild to the practice of warriors pledging their lives to a leader.

I also loved learning about the mostly forgotten civilizations that thrived in Central Asia: The Kushan empire which built Buddhist monastic complexes on the banks of the Oxus River along what is today the Afghan-Uzbek border; the Khwarezm empire, a Zoroastrian culture in the mid-desert wetlands at the end of the Amu Darya River, who later gave us the mathematician al-Khwarezmi ("algorithm"); and the fascinating Kazar culture on the Volga-Don Steppes between the Caspian and Black Seas whose Turkic leaders converted to Judaism to remain independent of the competing Orthodox Byzantines and the Muslim Persians.

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### **Robin Tell-Drake says**

Well, I've read the preface, and it's clear the author is a bit of a prat. I've seen a few reviews around that warned of this. I'm reading it on a Kindle, which is a bit of an experiment--this is a hand-me-down first edition Kindle with a bum scroll wheel, so it's prohibitively difficult to skip in and out of footnotes. Also, the Kindle makes it a pain to skip over things like the preface. Or the bloody acknowledgements. But maybe it's just as well I read the preface.

Mr. Beckwith talks about himself, his interests and his motives kind of a lot. And he clearly has an axe to grind (tediously) about modernism and postmodernism, and within the preface he shows himself to be a seriously sloppy thinker at least about those things. So I'm going in wary.

But then again, he knows a great deal more than I do about the history of this region of the world, not only more detailed history but he knows about whole ethnicities that I've never heard mentioned even in passing, so I can't help but gain by reading this thing, warts and all. We shall see.

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### **Joseph says**

I can't remember what led me to this book. I often read history, but not generally sweeping histories like this, which generally sacrifice depth for breadth. All I know is that I picked it up and found myself hooked from the Preface on. Beckwith has a magisterial command of his material and moves easily from bird's-eye to ground-level views without losing track of the broader story. He also offers up, here and there, amazing comments on the languages used in the cultures he's discussing, which I, as a poet, find fascinating. I only hope I can do the book justice in the following comments.

*Empires of the Silk Road* follows the rise, development, and decline of the land-based network that at its height linked the Far East (Japan, China, Korea), Central Asia (from Tibet and India to Turkey), and Europe in the world's first step toward globalized trade. This robust system thrived until an expansion of the ancient Mediterranean coastal trading system was expanded by Western Europeans into the "regular open-sea trade between Europe and South, Southeast, and East Asia" known as the Littoral System. Over time the Littoral

System outperformed the Silk Road and spurred all kinds of technological developments that led to what some historians refer to as The Rise of the West. Beckwith traces this story all the way back to “the Indo-European diaspora”—mass migrations of proto-Indo-European speakers out of Central Asia, which began about 4,000 years ago. These migrations brought a new technology (the war chariot) and a new political idea (the *comitatus*) that proved crucial to the development of the Silk Road and its empires.

The war chariot and its effects alone are fascinating, but after all it was merely a technological innovation destined to be supplanted by other innovations. The *comitatus* as a political paradigm, on the other hand, has proved more durable.

Essentially, the *comitatus* was a band of loyal warriors devoted to a single heroic lord, who compensated them through wealth, power, and social status. Members of a *comitatus* swore a blood oath that committed them to fight and die for their lord. If the lord died before his core *comitatus* members, they would commit ritual suicide and be buried with him in full battle regalia in order to fight on their lord’s behalf in the next world; sometimes, especially when a *comitatus* numbered in the hundreds, some less committed members would refuse suicide and end up being executed by the lord’s successor. This model shaped political structures across ancient Europe; the western, central, and eastern steppes; the Arabian peninsula; India, Tibet, China, Mongolia; and even down into Southeast Asia. In other words, the Eurasian Culture Complex united cultures that today seem neatly divided between West and East. The *comitatus* paradigm affected them all.

In fact, although beyond the scope of Beckwith’s book, clearly the *comitatus* is with us today. It exists in popular mythology (King Arthur and the knights of the Round Table, for example), religion (Jesus and the Twelve Apostles, the Sahabah who supported the Prophet Muhammed), and in connection with any number of criminal organizations (the Japanese Yakuza, the Sicilian Mafia,). Even the bodyguards protecting members of the One Percent and the soldiers of fortune fielded by Academi (the former Blackwater) follow the *comitatus* model. Of course, these are my associations, not Beckwith’s!

As we follow Beckwith through the development of the Littoral System and its withering impact on the Silk Road, we also see that the roots of colonialism’s brutality reach all the way back to the rise of the Eurasian empires. With the advent of world religions—Buddhism, Christianity, Islam, and their various subsets—Eurasian empires began adopting particular religions: Buddhism in Tibet and China; Christianity in Europe; Islam in Central Eurasia, the Arabian Peninsula, and much of North Africa. These choices had the effect of unifying each Empire from the ground up and projecting the glorious afterlife promised by the *comitatus* paradigm onto all the people in a given empire.

One outcome of this shift was the creation of our modern notion of “barbarians.” Eurocentric historians, sons and daughters of the Littoral System, have long portrayed Central Eurasians as “fierce and cruel natural warriors” whose “nomads’ life-style left them poor, because their production was insufficient for their needs.” As a result, Central Eurasians “robbed the rich peripheral agricultural peoples to get what they needed and wanted.” What Beckwith demonstrates, in wonderful detail, is that every element of this portrait is wrong. The “barbarians” were (and are) no more naturally warlike than other peoples; they were certainly not poor (in fact, they were generally much better off than their agriculturalist neighbors), their trading skills being more than sufficient to provide for their needs. (One startling fact supporting this view is that the Great Wall of China was expanded under the Ming Dynasty not to keep “barbarians” *out* but to keep the poverty-stricken agriculturalists of that area *in*.) In establishing the Littoral System, the colonialist West initiated war after brutal war while driving the native populations of their colonies into miserable poverty. Only by blaming their victims’ “barbarity” could the European kingdoms and nation states excuse their own.

Eloquent as Beckwith is in his defense of the cultures that developed from the Central Eurasian Complex, when he gets to the modern period his argument collapses, as often happens when historians try to account for a contemporary condition. The condition Beckwith critiques—attacks would be a better word—is what he calls “Modernism.” His argument hinges on the following definition: “The core idea of Modernism is simple, and seems harmless enough by itself: what is modern—new and fashionable—is *better* than what it replaces.” This attitude wasn’t a problem, he writes, “as long as classicism (or the idea that what is old is better than what is new) still acted as a counterweight.... But the classical and aristocratic became identified became identified with each other in opposition to the modern and nonaristocratic, along with the spread of industrialization and urbanization, when nonaristocratic people doing modern industrial, urban things came to dominate Europe, North America, and eventually much of the rest of Eurasia.” The whiff of elitism here is unmistakable, along with nostalgia for the comforts of the political structures destroyed in the last century’s two great wars and the eruptions that Beckwith calls “radical Modernist revolutions.”

Once he has identified Modernism with revolutions, Beckwith proceeds to trash Modernism in the arts—specifically music (Stravinsky, Webern, rock-’n’-roll), painting (Picasso and Pollack), and literature, especially the poetry of Pound and Eliot. Most heinous of all, in Beckwith’s view, is that Modernism—“not so much a philosophy or movement as a total world-view”—begat Postmodernism, a form of “hyper-Modernism” that he believes has destroyed all traditional intellectual values. He is especially distressed that Modernism has spread to Central Eurasia. “In [post-WWII] Europe,” he writes, “Paris is still characterized by its beautiful old traditional architecture, and the libraries and museums are full. [...] In Central Eurasia, by contrast, only a few famous monuments were *not* destroyed, and only a tiny percentage of the once vast number of old books was preserved. By the end of the twentieth century, the evil done in the name of Modernism and ‘progress’ left Central Eurasians bereft of much of their past.”

By “the evil done in the name of Modernism” Beckwith means primarily Stalin and Mao, although he cites the Iranian revolution’s deposition of the Shah and other similar events as well. For some reason, even though the book’s index has a “Modernism, in Germany” entry, the text it refers to *never explicitly links Hitler with Modernism*. This failure doesn’t indicate fascist sympathies; instead, it shows Beckwith glossing over a flaw in his argument about Modernism. Unlike the “all things new,” future-oriented totalitarianism of Stalin and Mao, Hitler’s revolution was a backward-looking fantasy, a pathological attempt to recreate the past. In fact, it was the clearly Modernist Weimar Republic Hitler had to crush in order to attempt his reestablishment of the Third Reich. Why would Beckwith, every inch the honest scholar, dodge this issue? My guess is that he does not want to admit that the Hitler, Stalin, and Mao were perhaps the last gasp of the ancient Central Eurasian Complex paradigm: each was a “lord” served by a suicidal comitatus; each used his “lordly” status to build an empire, just as every Central Eurasian warlord had attempted to do since the beginning of the proto-Indo-European diaspora. If Beckwith were to acknowledge the persistence of the comitatus idea, he might see Modernism for what it is: a visceral and intellectual reaction to the collapse of the paradigm which for 4,000 years had grounded the psycho-spiritual lives of people within the Central Eurasian Culture Complex.

I *will* admit that Beckwith’s critique of Modernism is persuasive in parts, and I haven’t given it the attention it deserves. In any case, his remedy—a call for “artists, musicians, and poets ... to focus their minds on the creation of a new high art tradition”—hearkens to the utterly discredited hierarchies rooted in the lord/comitatus paradigm. This paradigm consists now of nothing but vestiges. Modernism recognizes this, though some Modernists lament while others celebrate. Eliot and Pound, at whom Beckwith sneers more than once, are among the lamenters, looking to the past for their values, enamored of fascism (Pound in particular found inspiration in the 15th century poet and warlord Sigismundo Malatesta, whose image he loonily projected upon the strutting pagliaccio Benito Mussolini), and devoted nevertheless to “the new” in verse; among the celebratory Modernists were Walt Whitman (yes, I would argue for Whitman as the first

English language Modernist), William Carlos Williams, and e. e. cummings. What a shame it would be to throw out all these poets and their fellows in music and visual art, all in the name of “Make It Old!”

Now, I will say that Beckwith is right that no one has yet figured out how to critique Modernism *from the outside*. That needs to happen. And yes, the stranglehold that Modernism’s bastard child, Postmodernism, has developed in the Academy needs to be broken. In fact, in his Introduction Beckwith mounts a succinct, powerful attack on Postmodernism that he can’t seem to match in his attacks on Modernism:

History is only opinion. Therefore, no valid judgments can be made. We cannot know what happened or why, but can only guess at the modern motivations for the modern “construction of identity” of a nation, the nationalistic polemics of anti-intellectuals and nonscholars, and so on. All manuscripts are equally valuable, so it is a waste of time to edit them—or worse, they are said to be important mainly for the information they reveal about their scribes and their cultural milieux, so producing critical editions of them eliminates this valuable information. Besides, we cannot know what any author really intended to say anyway, so there is no point in even trying to find out what he or she actually wrote. Art is whatever anyone claims to be art. No ranking of it is possible. There is no good art or bad art; all is only opinion. Therefore it is impossible, formally, to improve art; one can only change it. Unfortunately, obligatory constant change, and the elimination of all criteria, necessarily equals or produces stasis: no real change. The same applies to politics, in which the Modern “democratic” system allows only superficial change and thus produces stasis. Because no valid judgments can be made by humans—all human judgments are opinions only—all data must be equal. (As a consequence, Postmodernists’ judgment about the invalidity of judgments must also be invalid, but the idea of criticizing Postmodernist dogma does not seem to be popular among them.) In accordance with the Postmodernist view, there is only a choice between religious belief in whatever one is told (i.e., suspension of disbelief) or total skepticism (suspension of both belief and disbelief). In both cases, the result, if followed resolutely to the logical extreme, is cessation of thought, or at least elimination of even the possibility of critical thought. If the vast majority of people, who are capable only of the former choice (total belief), are joined by intellectuals and artists, all agreeing to abandon reason, the result will be an age of credulity, repression, and terror that will put all earlier ones to shame.

All this, I think, is undeniable, and does not at all understate what’s at stake. On the other hand, while Postmodernism is indeed dangerous, it is nothing like the hyper-Islamism of Al-Qaeda, the hyper-Christianism of the Christian Identity movement, the hyper-Judaism of Kahane Chai, or the hyper-New Ageism of Aum Shinrikyo—none of which can be described as “rooted in Modernism.” But the truth is, Postmodernism excuses these bizarre and deadly hyper-groups when it pretends that reason isn’t preferable to unreason and that all values are equal.

Ultimately, *Empires of the Silk Road* is brilliant history because of Beckwith’s commitment to reason, his openness to evidence, and his profound respect for the cultures he studies. I think that someday this book is bound to be recognized as a classic.

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### **Katia N says**

Firstly I need to say that i am not a professional historian. I have a great interest in this region simply because it constitutes a gap in my understanding of the history of the world. Also there are not many books available in english to fill it. This region is often treated as a part of Middle East, which creates additional

problems for any person interested to know more about. Therefore this review is written from the perspective of a curious reader not a weathered professional historian.

I was driven to this book after reading "The Silk Road" by Peter Frankopan. Which I found well written, but not very relevant. This book on the contrast is much more relevant, scholarly, but sometimes quite difficult to get through. In spite of this, I learned quite a few things, especially in respect of the historical reasons (according to the author) of the current state of the region. The most interesting part of the book was about the ancient period of history up to 15th century.

I appreciate the author trying to give much more balanced view on the history compared to the recounts when the nomad tribes considered as "barbarians" vs settled "civilised" societies of the period. However, I think this book is almost unbalanced into other direction: big chunks of it are written in defence of the "barbarians". But some negative facts are not considered in sufficient details. For example, a sacking of the cities and killing off almost all the population indiscriminately were used like a legible tactic (eg Baghdad by the Mongols). Also it is unclear from the book whether those tribes had developed its own literacy.

But my main criticism of this book is that nearly the quarter of it is devoted to the author's rant against Modernism. There are a lot of definitions of modernism in the book. But according to the author it is an overwhelming evil. It created Russian revolution, Chinese Modernisation, Hitler and you name it. Neither TS Eliot, nor Stravinsky is spared in the process of this long and angry rant.

The author takes lots of time and space philosophizing whether Modernism is real art, and compares the old day to the current situation:

"Life undoubtedly has always been difficult for creative people, but it used to be that there was a fairly fixed socioeconomic slot for artists and artisans, because the aristocrats needed them. The aristocrats, bad as they sometimes might have been in reality or in practice, represented an ideal, not only something people could look up to but something the aristocrats expected of themselves, too. Looking upward, they demanded perfection or as close to it as they could get, so they hired the best artists to produce it, and those working for them tried their best to achieve it. If artists were not looking up and doing their best to serve God, they were doing their best to serve men they thought were "better"; it had nothing to do with the Church or the aristocrats really were somehow better. Trying to upend things, so the basest type of man above the others, cannot actually replace the old order - no one can look up to someone who is by definition as low as can be - so the result is elimination of order itself. Today the artist socioeconomic slot no longer exists, and nothing has really replaced it. But the entire purpose of art or goal of art is largely gone anyway. The total victory of Modernism meant consciences rejection of the traditional values of Reason, artistic order, and Beauty."

This is just an example how far it goes from the Central Asian history. If it would be written by some post revolutionary offended Russian exile a century ago, I would totally sympathise. But to generalise so grossly at the beginning of the 21st century looks simply ridiculous and even unfair. And it is not relevant for me as a reader.

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## Migl? says

Gera, nors ir kiek šališka, istorinė knyga, kurios pabaiga mane labai nuliūdino. Bet, sakyčiau, vis tiek verta paskaityti.

Parašysiu, kas mano nuomone, buvo ten gerai, o kas blogai.

Knyga yra MONUMENTALI vien savo apimtimi. Pasakojant Centrinės Azijos istoriją? ?traukiama ir Kinijos istorija, ir arabų dinastijos, ir Vakarų Europos ?vykiai - nieko nuostabaus, jei nori apimti procesus, kurie dar? poveik? Centrinės Azijos istorijai (ir atvirkščiai), reikia ?traukti ir kaimynines valstybes / imperijas / konfederacijas.

- GERAİ tai, kad tikrai daug sužinojau. Skaičiau, pasibraukinėjau ir gėriau ? save informaciją kaip į?ros agurkas. Sužinojau apie Jurchen imperiją?, kitanius, tangutus ir kitus, turėjusius milžinišką poveik? istorijoje, bet man kažkodėl visai iki tol nežinotus.
- BLOGAI tai, kad kiekviename skyrelyje pasakojama labai platus taut? ir imperijų judėjimas, bet žemėlapiai pateikiami tik du ir tik knygos gale. Kodėl gi nepadarius žemėlapio prie kiekvieno skyrelio, kad būtų geriau ?sivaizduoti, kas ten dėjosi?

Autorius pateikia daug ?domios informacijos ir gal netgi bando būti nešališkas, bet iš tikrųjų tai labai matosi, k? jis mėgsta, o ko nemėgsta, o nemėgsta jis kin?.

- GERAİ tai, kad kai pagalvoji, didel? dalis istorijos yra šališka (pvz Europocentrinė istorija, kuri mokym? mokykloje). Todėl tas šališkumas nelabai ir trukdo, kai pateikiamas iš kitos pusės. O kodėl gi ne?sivaizdavus istorijos, kur CA "barbarai" yra normalūs faini pirkliai, o Europa ir Kinija - plėšrėnai?
- BLOGAI: Nu bet ir užsis?do jis ant t? kin?, gaila, kad bišk? ir sveikas protas nukentė. Kinų kalba - indoeuropieji?? Bitch please. Jiems pastoviai prirašinėjamos blogiausios intencijos, o CA imperijoms - geriausios. Pvz: "Although Ghadan appears to have had no intention of threatening China, and continued to behave as a peaceful neighbour, when he moved eastward along the Kerulen River and then southeast toward Jehol, he is said to have been positioned to attack Peking. However, he was actually so far away..." etc. Ko tu taip gini Ghadan?, autoriau? Ar tikrai jau taip gerai žinai jo intencijas? A?

CA imperijų pagrindinė intencija ir išsilaikymo pagrindas buvo prekyba - sako autorius. Ir labai daug istorinė? proces? aiškina būtent ekonominiais veiksniais.

- GERAİ: tas yra ?domu ir dažnai (bent jau man) negirdėta. Gali pritarti, gali nepritarti, bet faina išgirsti toką aiškinimą. Pvz Islamo atsiradimą aiškina išsiplėtusia Bizantijos ?taka pietuosna, kur trukd? arabų gen?i? prekybos keliams, todėl arabams prireik? kažkokio susivienijimo, todėl atsirado ir taip išpopuliarėjo islamas. Ištobulėjus laivybai europiečiai ?m? brautis ? Aziją? ir kurtis pakrantės miestuose, kurie tradiciškai CA imperijų būdavo gana apleisti ir nelabai svarbūs. Taigi išaugo Europos prekyba regione, taigi ir ?taka ir prasidėjo kolonizavimas.
- BLOGAS ir labiausiai mane nuliūdins dalykas - priėjus XX amžiaus istorijų autorius kažkodėl atsisako taip gerai iki tol veikusio ekonominio aiškinimo ir pradeda visas to amžiaus būdas aiškinti kažkokia m?slinga idėjine konstrukcija vardu Modernizmas. Tas Modernizmas neva kaltas ir dėl stalinistinio teroro, ir dėl Tibeto okupacijos ir, kas durniausia, dėl menų "nunykimo". Kažkodėl jisai nusprend? ?dėti net du skyrelius apie tai, kaip modernizmas sunaikino meną, pvz: "Modern poets stripped poetry of its elite status in relation to prose: free verse, a thinly disguised form of prose that anyone could write and was therefore accessible to anyone, replaced poetry." Net nepasakosiu, k? jis mano apie modernizmą dailėje. Šit? viet? man buvo net ne pikta, o liūdina skaityti, nes jaučiausi lyg diskutuočiau bare su draugeliu, su kuriuo ne visada sutinku, bet gerbiu jo nuomonę, o draugelis prigirtų šotuką pradėtų staiga šnekėti visiškai nesąmones, man tuo metu bandant ?tikinti save, kad tai ne mano draugelis, o šotukai kalba.

Apskritai labai vertinga knyga iki pat XX amžiaus, bet patarčiau paskutini? skyreli? neskaityti - vis tiek visi jau žinom t? XX a. istorij?, nieko neprarasim.

BONUS: man žiauriai patiko sogdai! Tokie CA pirkliai - pilkieji kardinolai, kurie plotino prieš Umajadus ir ?steig? Abasid? dinastij? arab? imperijoj ir beveik tuo pat metu su An Lu-Shan plotino prieš Tang? dinastij? Kinijoje. Be to, jie nešiojo juokingas kepur?les.

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## **Bryn Hammond says**

Time for a re-read of this extraordinary and controversial book. Given its World History range, I imagine the arguments that tie it together are more digestible the second time. Perhaps even the ill-reputed chapter on Modernism can be seen to fit in.

I still think it underadvertised by the commonplace title.

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