

FALL 14, CORE-UA 500, SESSION 1/SECTION 1: CULTURES & CONTEXTS

Title: The “Silk Road” and Central Asia

Time: Mondays and Wednesdays, 9:30 – 10.45 am

Place: Silver Center, 520

Office Hrs: Monday 11-12, Silver Center, Room 909

1. Course Aims

For centuries Central Asia has been a conduit for a variety of cultural encounters and transfers between China, India, the Near East and the Mediterranean. In an almost emblematic way, this position and function seems to be embodied in our image of the far-distant caravan trader, traversing on the so-called “Silk roads” the vast expanses between China and the shores of the Mediterranean Sea. However, it was not only traders that connected the civilizations of the ancient world via Central Asia: with and next to the traders’ caravans traveled diplomats, missionaries, mercenaries, artists and many more; and vast parts of Eurasia were, again and again, connected and controlled by confederations and empires of nomadic origin.

This class will inquire into the many facets, which characterize the resulting network, oscillating around Central Asia, from the Bronze Age onwards up to the days of the Mongol World Empire. Our approach will be multi-disciplinary throughout as we will be concerned with a considerable variety of primary evidence – ranging from ancient travel reports and business letters to spectacular archaeological artifacts. And we will inquire how these different kinds of evidence can contribute in the scholarly reconstruction of an early globalized world. In this way, students will become familiar with the main methods of historical, art historical and archaeological research and be enabled to analyze texts and artifacts themselves.

2. Structure of Course,

The course proceeds in two steps: First a total of 6 lecture classes, which aim to introduce students to the necessary geographical, anthropological and – not least – terminological background for the course. In the second step, lecture classes 7-28 are roughly organized chronologically from the Bronze Age to the Mongol period, each focusing on specific phenomena that are critical for our understanding of pre-modern economic and cultural exchanges throughout Eurasia (such as migration, ethnicity, nomad-sedentary interactions, political and diplomatic networks, etc.). These lectures will often take the shape of a more

general introduction, followed by one or more cases that exemplify the phenomenon (by discussing an archaeological site, or a particular group of objects).

3. Course Requirements and Grading

Students are expected to attend all lectures and sections, and to read the weekly assignments. In order to receive a passing grade, all assignments must be completed on time.

All grades will be assigned on an A to F letter scale, equaling grade points from 4 to 0 for the calculation of their weighted average.

The following course requirements count towards the final grade:

Mid-term Exam (15%): The mid-term exam will draw from the materials discussed in class so far and include both objective and essay components. Make-up exams can only be approved by the instructor for a verified medical or similarly serious excuse (conflicting travel arrangements do NOT count as a valid excuse).

Section Grade (20%): This grade will be assigned by your recitation instructor, based on section attendance, participation, and completion of section assignments.

Final Exam (25%): The final exam will include both objective and essay components, and it will cover material from the readings, lectures, and sections. Make-up exams can only be approved by the instructor for a verified medical or similarly serious excuse (conflicting travel arrangements do NOT count as a valid excuse).

Essays (40%): You will be asked to write 5 short (building from 1 to 5 pages, with a total of 20 pages / ca. 6000 words) essays on assigned topics. They will be worth 2, 4, 6, 8, and 10% of your final grade. Spelling, grammar, writing style, organization, and argument are important for these essays.

4. Course Policies:

Students are expected to attend all meetings of the lecture and recitation. If you are prevented from attendance you must present documented excuses (such as a doctor's note) – either to your recitation instructor (for a missed recitation section), or to the class instructor (for a missed lecture).

Students are expected to show consideration for their fellow students in lectures and sections. If one participates in classroom discussion – which is mandatory for the recitation sections – one must do so in a way that respects fellow students and instructors.

Reading assignments must be completed before lectures and recitation sections. Essays will not be accepted after the due date without excellent excuses. Extensions will not be granted unless there are genuinely exceptional circumstances that warrant them. In this case students have to reach out to the instructor prior to the due date of the essay.

The grade of A is given only for papers and exams that exceed the requirements of the assignment and begin to approach perfection in content and presentation.

Plagiarism and other forms of cheating will not be tolerated. They will result in a significant reduction of the grade, or – in extreme cases – in failure to pass the course. Each case will be reported to the deans. See also the College Core Curriculum Statement on Academic Integrity.

5. Course Materials

Throughout class we will read chapters from the following books:

Beckwith, C. I. 2009. *Empires of the Silk Road. A history of Central Eurasia from the Bronze Age to the present*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

Golden, P. B. 2011. *Central Asia in world history. The new Oxford world history*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Hansen, V. 2012. *The Silk Road. A new history*. Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press.

There will be additional readings for specific lectures and sections. All additional readings will be made available to the students via email.

6. Classes

Sept. 3 - Class 1.

The “Silk Roads” and Central Asia – in search of a historical concept

The aim of the class is to give an overview of the early research history on Central Asia and to understand how the concept of the “Silk Road” was born in the framework of the late 19th/early 20th century Western (mostly European) academic landscape.

Readings:

Hansen 2012, 3-24

Sept. 8 - Class 2.

The Centrality of Central Asia: Central Asia as a conduit of cultural transfers and encounters

How do we define Central Asia geographically and what makes it culturally, and economically distinct from its neighbors? Particular attention will be paid to the landscape (irrigation oases + open steppe + high mountains) and how it affects modes of production and means of living (i.e. pastoral nomadism, oasis urbanism, high-mountain dwellers). This will enable us to discuss the question of what makes Central Asia distinct from the surrounding cultural areas. The question of “Periphery” vs. “Centrality” requires us then to look at our principle written sources for a history of Central Asia.

Readings:

Frank, A. G. 1992. “The centrality of Central Asia,” *Studies in History* 8: pp. 43-97.

Golden 2011, pp. 9-20

Sept. 10 - Class 3.

Peoples, tribes and nations: ethnicity and group identities along the Eurasian crossroads

Faced with a confusing plethora of relatively young ‘nations’ (which all nonetheless claim a long ancestry in the region) we will discuss ethnicity as a social and political process in general, and its historical and present-day context in Central Asia in particular.

Readings:

Golden 2011, pp. 1-8

Barth, F. (Ed.) 1969. *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries: The Social Organization of Cultural Difference*. London: Allen & Unwin, pp. 9-38

Sept. 15 - Class 4.

“Silk Road” versus “Steppe road” and “Fur road”

“Silk Road” trade is often envisaged as an exchange of precious luxury goods along an East-west axis. This class will show that this is only one strand in a far more complex commercial network, which can only be properly understood within their specific socio-political contexts.

Readings:

Christian, D. 2000. "Silk Roads or Steppe Roads? The Silk Roads in World History," *Journal of World History* 11: pp. 1-26.

Noonan, T. S. 2000. "The fur road and the silk road: the relations between Central Asia and northern Russia in the early middle ages," in *Kontakte zwischen Irun, Byzanz und der Steppe in 6.-7. Jh (Varia Archaeologica Hungarica IX)*. Edited by C. Bálint, pp. 285-301.

Sept. 17: Class 5.

Modes of encounters 1: Empires, Diplomacy and Elite Networks

This class will look more closely at how encounters through and beyond Central Asia are fostered by specific socio-political processes, such as state formation in the steppes, expansion of agrarian empires into Central Asia, diplomatic networks, elite representation, and patronage networks.

Readings:

Skaff, J. K. 2012. *Sui-Tang China and its Turko-Mongol neighbors: culture, power and connections, 580-800. Oxford studies in early empires*. Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, pp. 290–300

Sept. 22 - Class 6.

Modes of encounters 2: Religions along the ‘Silk Roads’

Central Eurasia has been, in particular during the second half of the first millennium CE, a unique meeting place of a plethora of religious ideas, beliefs and movements. On the one hand this is constituted by a mesmerizing diversity of local cults, concepts and practices (some of them associated with Zoroastrian and pre-Zoroastrian religious concepts, current in the Eastern Iranian world; others associated with shamanistic religious practices and “Tengrism”, current in the Eastern steppe zone). On the other hand the heart of Eurasia was a meeting place for several important proselytizing religions, such as Buddhism (itself represented in a number of competing schools and beliefs), Manichaeism, Christianity, and—finally—Islam. For some of these religions (such as Manichaeism in particular), the arid climate of parts of the region allowed for the preservation of texts and images on perishable materials, offering unique insights unknown from other parts of the Ancient world.

The class will also inquire into how this religious diversity stimulated literacy and resulted, in an environment of marked linguistic diversity, in a plethora of writing systems along the trading routes and beyond.

Readings:

Foltz, R. 2010. *Religions of the Silk Road. Premodern patterns of globalization*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 1-22

Gillman, I. and H.-J. Klimkeit. 1999. *Christians in Asia before 1500*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, pp. 205-262

Sept. 24 - Class 7.

Early Globalization 1: The Oxus civilization (BMAC) and the Steppe Bronze cultures

Between roughly 2500 and 1800 BCE the “Oxus civilization” (or “Margiano-Bactria Archaeological Complex” / BMAC) flourished north of the Hindu Kush mountains, between the northern foothills of the Kopet-Dagh mountain range and the southern offshoots of the Pamir mountains, centered in the historical regions of Margiana (the Murghab-delta) and Bactria. Although distinct from the neighboring Bronze Age cultures, the monumental architecture and cultural objects of the Oxus Civilization nonetheless indicate extensive contact and exchange with the Iranian plateau, Mesopotamia, the Indus valley and the Eurasian steppe zone. At the same time the vast expanses of the Eurasian steppes became an important conduit for Early Trans-Eurasian exchanges.

Readings:

Kohl, P. L. 2007. *The Making of Bronze Age Eurasia*. *Cambridge World Archaeology*. Cambridge, New York: Cambridge University Press, pp. 244-260

Kaniuth, K. 2010. "Long distance imports in the Bronze Age of Southern Central Asia," *Archäologische Mitteilungen aus Iran und Turan* 42: pp. 3-22.

Sept. 29 - Class 8: **Guest Lecture by Prof. Dan Potts (ISAW)**

Early Globalization 2: The Bronze Age “World” system and Central Asia

This class will present an overview of early commercial (e.g. tin, lapis, copper) and ideological networks, and the resulting cultural ties between the 3rd and 2nd millennium Near East, Indus Culture, Western Central Asia (Oxus civilization/BMAC), and the Eurasian steppe zone.

Oct. 1 - Class 9.

Early Globalization 3: Early Iron Age Steppe nomads and their culture between the Ancient Near East, China and the Mediterranean

This class will extend the discussion of early globalization to nomadic cultures in Eurasia. Nomadic cultures played (and continue to play) a vital role in many cultures and civilizations in the “Old world”.

In this class we will inquire how a new type of mounted nomadism rapidly came to dominate the entire steppe zone of the Eurasian continent from the early 1st millennium BCE and how this, consequently, led to a surprisingly uniform material culture (horse riding equipment, weaponry) and artistic language (Scytho-Siberian Animal Style) over all of Central Eurasia. We will also inquire how these nomads interacted with the agrarian states in the Ancient Near East and in Northern China, and how this resulted in a multitude of mutual exchanges and a number of almost 'globalized' cultural objects (such as in costume and weaponry). Students will also be introduced to the specifics of the formation of archaeological assemblages in the Eurasian steppes (and their interpretative limits).

Readings:

- Beckwith, C. 2009. *Empires of the Silk Road : a history of Central Eurasia from the Bronze Age to the present*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, pp. 58-77
- Stark, S. 2012. "Nomads and Networks: Elites and their connections to the outside world", in S. Stark and K. S. Rubinson (eds.), *Nomads and Networks. The Ancient Art and Culture of Kazakhstan (exhibition catalogue)*. Princeton/Oxford: Princeton University Press, pp. 107-138.

Oct. 6 - Class 10.

"Hellenism" in Central Asia 1

Alexander the Great's campaign (and those of his successors) opened the "Classical" world far to the east. This resulted in an unprecedented exchange of people, goods and ideas between the Mediterranean and Central Asia. We will discuss the main features of these new connections and their consequences for societies in both Central Asia and the Mediterranean.

Readings:

- Bernard, P. 1994. "The Greek Kingdoms of Central Asia," in *History of Civilizations of Central Asia. Volume II: The development of sedentary and nomadic civilizations: 700 b.c. to A.D. 250*. Edited by J. Harmatta, pp. 99-129. Paris: UNESCO Publishing.
- Mairs, R. R. 2008. "Greek Identity and the Settler Community in Hellenistic Bactria and Arachosia," *Migrations and Identities 1*: pp. 19-43.

Oct. 8 - Class 11.

"Hellenism" in Central Asia 2: Ai Khanoum – a Greek city at the banks of the Oxus River (Afghanistan).

This class will examine in closer detail our main example of a Greek colonial city in Central Asia: The late 4th-late 2nd century BCE site of Ai Khanoum in present-day Afghanistan.

Readings:

Bernard, P. 1982. "An Ancient Greek City in Central Asia," *Scientific American* 246: pp. 126-135.

Hiebert, F. and P. Cambon. Editors. 2008. *Afghanistan: Hidden Treasures from the National Museum, Kabul*. Washinton D.C.: National Geographic, chapter "Ay Khanoum"

Oct. 15 - Class 12.

Migrations in Eurasia 1: The Xiongnu Age of Migration – character and consequences of nomadic migrations

A recurrent topic in historical and anthropological discussions is the role of "migrations". The example of the Xiongnu in eastern Central Asia will help us to understand the complexity of such processes, often bound to the formation of political power and resulting in "ethnic" processes over surprisingly vast geographic areas.

Readings:

Beckwith 2009, pp. 78-92

Several articles from the edited volume: Brosseder, U. and B. K. Miller. Editors. 2011. *Xiongnu Archaeology. Multidisciplinary perspectives of the first steppe empire in Inner Asia. Bonn contributions to Asian archaeology*. Bonn: Vor- und Frühgeschichtliche Archäologie.

Oct. 20 - Class 13: Guest Lecture by Dr. Karen Rubinson (ISAW)

Migrations in Eurasia 2: The burials in Tilla-tepe (Afghanistan)

The elite burials in Tilla-tepe in Afghanistan provide us with striking evidence for early nomadic elite representation and how it employed both 'foreign' ('Hellenistic' and 'Chinese') and 'indigenous' Steppe traditions. This class will confront students with more general questions such as how are role models of cultural identity expressed in material culture? What are the possibilities and limitations of archaeological artifacts in answering such questions?

Readings:

Rubinson, K. S. 2008. "Tillya Tepe: Aspects of Gender and Cultural Identity," in *Are All Warriors Male? Gender Roles on the Ancient Eurasian Steppe, Gender and archaeology series*. Edited by K. M. Linduff, K. S. Rubinson. Lanham: AltaMira Press, pp. 51-63

Oct. 22 - Class 14.

Mid-term in-class

Oct. 27 - Class 15

Central Asia between Rome, India and Han China

This class will examine the first “classic” apogee of the Silk Roads during the first and second centuries CE, when commercial and political exchanges remarkably increased between the Eastern parts of the Roman Empire, southern and northern India, the Central Asian oasis territories, the Steppes and Han Dynasty China – with the Kushan Empire in northern India and parts of Central Asia as one of its main axes.

The character of these networks and exchanges will be discussed by having a closer look at the composition of the famous hoard from the site of Begram (formerly Kapisi, the summer residence of the Kushan kings), containing surprisingly delicate artwork from the Roman east, southern India and China. Our discussion will show how incomplete our knowledge about the ultimate purpose of the assemblage (part of a palace treasury, remains of a trader’s depot?) still is.

Readings:

Hansen 2012, 25-55

Mehendale, S. 2008. "Begram: at the Heart of the Silk Roads," in *Afghanistan: Hidden Treasures from the National Museum, Kabul*. Edited by F. Hiebert and P. Cambon, pp. 131-143. Washington D.C.: National Geographic.

Oct. 29 - Class 16: Guest Lecture by Prof. Thelma Thomas (IFA)

Silk in the Material Cultures of Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages

Focusing especially on Eastern Rome and Byzantium, this class will consider silk as a material and a prized commodity, and for its associations to exoticism, luxury, and prestige.

Readings:

Thomas, Th. 2012. “‘Ornaments of excellence’ from ‘the miserable gains of commerce’: Luxury Art and Byzantine Culture,” in *Byzantium and Islam, 7th to 9th Century: Age of*

Transition. Edited by H. C. Evans with B. Ratliff, pp. 124-133 and notes 284-287. New York/Princeton: Metropolitan Museum of Art/Yale University Press

Nov. 3 – Class 17.

Diplomatic Networks across Asia in Late Antiquity: Byzantium, Iran, the Turks and China

With the rise of the Turks in Mongolia and Southern Siberia in the middle of the 6th century, the diplomatic world of Late Antiquity changed to a considerable degree. Within only a few decades, new diplomatic networks were established, resulting in an intensified exchange of people, goods and ideas on a transcontinental scale between Constantinople, Ctesiphon, Samarkand and Chang'an.

Readings:

Golden 2011, pp. 35-49

Skaff 2012, pp. 134-168

Nov. 5 – Class 18.

The Merchant Network of the Sogdians 1: the Sogdians in their Homeland

In the course of the second and the third centuries CE, powerful trading families from the region of Sogdiana (now in Uzbekistan and Tajikistan) gradually established a trading network which, at its apogee in the first half of the 8th century CE, spanned from southern China, Northern India, the Eurasian steppes, all the way to the Crimean (and up to Constantinople). This network is usually associated with the “classical” apogee of the “Silk roads”. This class offers an introduction into what Sogdian culture looked like in the homeland of the Sogdians, the region of Sogdiana with the capital Samarkand, during the heydays of transcontinental trade between the 6th and the early 8th century CE.

Readings:

Hansen 2012, pp. 113-140

Marshak, B. I. 2002. "The Sogdians in their Homeland," in *Monks and Merchants. Silk Road Treasures from Northwest China Gansu and Ningxia, 4th -7th Cent.* Edited by A. L. Juliano and J. A. Lerner, pp. 231-237. New York: Asia Society.

Nov. 10 – Class 19.

The Merchant Network of the Sogdians 2: Life, death, and trades in the Early Medieval town of Pendjikent

The best evidence for what daily life in Sogdiana during the first half of the 8th century looked like comes from the small-sized Sogdian town of Pendjikent (now in Tajikistan), which has been systematically excavated by Russian and Tajik archaeologist for more than 60 years. With its bazaars, numerous private houses, two temples, and palaces – all of them once splendidly decorated with wall paintings – as well as its necropolis, this little town forms a unique microcosm for our understanding of Sogdian urban society in the years just prior to the Islamic conquest and during the heyday of the “Silk roads”.

Readings:

Marshak, B. I. 2002. *Legends, Tales, and Fables in the Art of Sogdiana (with an Appendix by Vladimir A. Livshits)*. Biennial Ehsan Yarshater lecture series. New York: Bibliotheca Persica Press, pp. 1-24

Nov. 12 - Class 20.

The Merchant Network of the Sogdians 3 or: What can we learn from a basket of undelivered letters from China to Samarkand?

This class will discuss a unique corpus of written materials: letters written in the first quarter of 4th century by Sogdians in China to their relatives in Sogdiana that were for reasons unknown to us, lost in a beacon tower of the Great Wall in present-day Gansu. They provide us, in an amazingly direct way, with a plethora of details concerning the daily live of Sogdian trading families living in 4th century China. The discussion will provide insights into how such a corpus complements other groups of sources on this topic.

Readings:

Hansen 2012, 113-140

Nov. 17 - Class 21: Guest Lecture by Dr. Judith Lerner (ISAW)

The Merchant Network of the Sogdians 4: Sogdian tombs in Northern China

This class will show how recent archaeological investigations have supplemented the information from the “Ancient Sogdian letters” discussed in class 17. We will discuss how within only a decade or so a whole new corpus of funerary monuments in Northern China has substantially changed our understanding about the life the Sogdian elites in northern China, testifying to a number of spectacular careers – but also to creative tensions between homeland traditions on the one hand and adaptation to a new cultural environment.

Readings:

Lerner, J. A. 2005. *Aspects of Assimilation: The Funerary Practices and Furnishings of Central Asians in China Sino-Platonic Papers*. Philadelphia: Department of East Asian Languages and Civilizations, UPenn.

Nov. 19 - Class 22.

The Cosmopolitan Tang 1: Western Exotica and aristocratic life in China's capital Chang'an

The class will inquire into the role of exotica, particularly of "western" origin (that is Central Asian, Iranian, Indian) in the elite representation at and around the Tang capital Chang'an.

Readings:

Hansen 2012, pp. 141-166.

Schafer, E. H. 1963. *The Golden Peaches of Samarkand. A study of T'ang exotics*. Berkeley: University of California Press, pp. 7-39

Nov. 24 - Class 23.

The Cosmopolitan Tang 2: Western exotica from the Shōsō-in in Nara (Japan)

Only very few assemblages of exotica, once stored in the temple and palace treasuries, have survived the vicissitudes of time in China proper. Today, the best-preserved example must be sought in Japan: the famous collection of the Shōsō-in, the treasure house of the Tōdai-ji in Nara (8th century). We will have a close look at this unique ensemble, once belonging to the household of the household of a Japanese queen and featuring many exotica of western origin.

Readings:

Hayashi, R. 1975. *The Silk Road and the Shoso-in. The Heibonsha survey of Japanese art*. New York: Weatherhill.

Nov. 26 - Class 24.

Not only traders: Buddhist pilgrims and cave monasteries between Afghanistan and China

Beside traders religious 'experts' played an important role in intercultural exchanges along the "Silk Roads". Most prominently among them figure Buddhist pilgrim-monks that travelled the caravan routes back and forth between China and India in the search of

religious texts. Their travelogues are fascinating early eyewitness accounts, quite different from the corpus of official dynastic chronicles of the period. Their reports are complemented by the remains of rich and once splendidly decorated cave monasteries between Gansu and Afghanistan.

Readings:

Various short passages from Xuangzang's travel account on the "Western Regions" (transl. Beal, S. 1906. *Si-yu-ki. Buddhist records of the Western World*. London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner)

Higuchi, T. and G. Barnes. 1995. "Bamiyan: Buddhist Cave Temples in Afghanistan," *World Archaeology* 27: pp. 282-302.

Hansen 2012, pp. 167-198.

Dec. 1 - Class 25.

Arabs, Uyghurs, Tibet and the Late Tang: new networks in the 9th century

With the conquest of Sogdiana by the Muslims in the first half of the 8th century, the rise of Tibet, the decline of the Tang Dynasty, and the toppling of the Turks by the powerful Uyghurs, new networks of communication between East and West evolved in the second half of the 8th and the 9th century. This class will inquire into how these changes took place and what components of culture were affected.

Readings:

Beckwith 2009, pp. 140-162.

Beckwith, C. I. 1991. "The Impact of the Horse and Silk Trade on the Economics of T'ang China and the Uighur Empire," *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 34: pp. 183-198.

Dec. 3 - Class 26.

Karabalghasun and Por-Bajin: cities and palaces in the steppes

A remarkable phenomenon, resulting from these new networks, was the influx of Chinese and Sogdian specialists into the steppe regions controlled by the Uyghurs. We will look at two sites representing, in different ways, the results of this influx: First the site of Karabalghasun (or Khar Balghas), which was the capital of the Uyghurs in the Orkhon valley in the Mongolian steppes and once an enormous urban agglomeration, and the recently excavated "palace" complex at Por-Bajin – situated in the far-away mountains of Tuva in southern Siberia but nonetheless representing a fairly accurate copy of a Tang period Chinese palace.

Readings:

Arden-Wong, L. A. 2012. "The architectural relationship between Tang and Eastern Uighur Imperial Cities," in *Frontiers and Boundaries. Encounters on China's margins, Asiatische Forschungen*. Edited by Z. Rajkai and I. Bellér-Hann, pp. 11-47. Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz.

Arzhantseva, I., O. Inevatkina, V. Zav'yalov, A. Panin, I. Modin, S. Ruzanov, and H. Härke. 2011. "Por-Bajin. An enigmatic site of the Uighurs in Southern Siberia," *The European Archaeologist* 35: pp. 6-11.

Dec. 8 - Class 27.

The Mongol Empire and its aftermath: apogee and transformation of trans-Eurasian exchanges

This last class will look into the diplomatic and commercial networks that evolved during the Mongol period and how they differ from the earlier ones.

Readings:

Golden 2011, pp. 77-90.

Allsen, T. T. 2001. "Culture and Conquest in Mongol Eurasia," in *Cambridge Studies in Islamic civilization*. Cambridge/New York: Cambridge University Press, pp. 189-211.

Dec. 10 - Class 28

Medieval Travelogues and the Spade: Karakorum – the capital of the Mongol empire

Until recently, our knowledge about Karakorum, the capital of the Mongol empire in Central Mongolia, was almost exclusively based on the report of the 13th century visitor William of Rubruck, a Franciscan missionary from Flanders. It gives us amazing glimpses into how the Mongol World power was perceived and rationalized in the eyes of 13th centuries Western European observers. Since the late 1990s systematic archaeological excavations in and around Karakorum have substantially added to this picture of a capital of a nomadic empire that spanned all across Eurasia. This example nicely demonstrates how eyewitness accounts and archaeological data complement each other in the study of past cultures.

Readings:

Various short passages from Rubruck's travelogue (von Ruysbroeck, W. 2009, *The mission of Friar William of Rubruck. His journey to the court of the Great Khan Möngke, 1253-1255*. Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Pub. Co.)

Bemmann, J., U. Erdenebat, and E. Pohl. Editors. 2010. *Mongolian-German Karakorum Expedition. Volume 1: Excavations in the Craftsmen Quarter at the Main Road. Forschungen zur Archäologie aussereuropäischer Kulturen*. Wiesbaden: Reichert, pp. 1-20