
Nomadic Cultures in the Mega-Structure of the Eurasian World by Evgenij N. Chernykh is a comprehensive work that examines the history of Eurasian nomadic peoples and their influence on world history and culture. Translated from the original Russian, it consists of an introduction, forty chapters organized into five parts, five appendixes, two extensive bibliographies – one for sources written before 1500, and one for modern sources - and an index.

The book begins with “Part I: The Steppe Belt in the Mega-Structure of the Eurasian World”, which contains three chapters. This section provides a detailed description of the geo-ecology of the Eurasian steppe zone, as well as an introduction to the impact of the region’s geo-ecology on human existence. The discussion of how Eurasia’s landforms and climatic regions have affected human migration and settlement is particularly detailed and extremely well illustrated.

The second section, “Part II. The Archaeology of Nomadic Cultures” is comprised of sixteen chapters that cover the period from the Bronze Age through the period of the Scythians and ends with the collapse of the Sarmatians in the 4th century CE. This section begins with a discussion of the use of archaeology to reconstruct the history of Eurasia in pre-literate periods, and highlights archaeologists’ heavy reliance on excavations of burial structures which are often the only remaining structures of past cultures in this region. However, the author provides a cautionary note against what he terms the “Mongolian Syndrome”. He points out that while the Mongol conquests of the 13th century are extremely well documented in numerous written sources from China to Western Europe, they left very little archaeological evidence of their presence – no major urban sites nor elaborate burials. Chernykh argues that if the Mongol conquests had occurred during an earlier period when there were no written sources, archaeologists would have little physical evidence of...
their existence or the role they played in events across Eurasia. As a result, gaps in historic or prehistoric archaeological sequences may not be indicative of a lack human occupation in that period, but rather occupation by a group or groups that left little physical evidence behind.

The remaining chapters cover the development metallurgy and the spread of metal working from ancient Anatolia and the Near East across Eurasia. They trace the various cultures that have been identified through tool and pottery remains and their diffusion into new regions. After a discussion of the development of metal working in China, the author moves on the spread of iron working across Eurasia and its impact. The section ends with the history of the Scythians, examined both from the descriptions found in Herodotus and other Greek sources and the archaeological record.

The next section, “Part III. Nomadic Culture in Historical Context” is comprised of eleven chapters. The first two examine the rise of Islam and the following Arab conquests, and the conflicts between Muslims and Catholic Christians, focusing primarily on the Crusades. The remainder of this section is devoted to the history of what the author describes as three “waves from the east” – the Huns, the Turks and the Mongols. Chernykh presents a relatively concise of the Huns and their interaction with Rome in one chapter, but a considerably more detailed history of the “Huns” / Xiongnu in the east in the following chapter. The author not only analyses the relations between the Chinese and the Xiongnu, but also presents what archaeological excavations have revealed about the culture of the Xiongnu. The following two chapters are dedicated to the second wave, the Turks. One chapter is dedicated to the Eastern and Western Turkic Khanates, while the other discusses later Turkic powers in Eurasia – the Bulgars, Khazars, Oghuz and Cumans. The next four chapters cover the history of the Mongols, the third wave from the east. The first of these four chapters examines the history of the Mongols in China and Tibet, the next the Mongols in the Islamic lands, the third the Mongols and the Christian lands, and the fourth investigates the collapse of the Mongol Empire. This section ends with a chapter that examines the similarities and differences of the three waves of invasion, the issues with the written sources from these periods, and archaeological issues related to Mongol history.

“Part IV. Rus’, Russia and the Nomadic World” is the title of the next section which contains seven chapters. The first two parts examine the early history of Kievan Rus’ and the existence of the neighboring Turkic nomadic tribal unions – the Avars, Khazars, Pechenegs and Cumans - threatening the southern border of the first Eastern Slavic state. Then comes the period of the Mongol yoke which lasted more than two centuries bringing an end to the Kievan state and, in turn, weakening the Horde. The chapter continues with the period of Ivan the Terrible who contributed to the collapse of the Rurik Dynasty, and then introduces the Time of Troubles period, a political crisis in Russia that began right after the end of the Rurik Dynasty. This part also includes the issues of the colonization of Northern Eurasia and the Kazakh steppes by the Russians; the conquest of the Kazan Khanate; the Crimean campaigns; the conquest of Kazakh Khanate; the subjugation of the Bukhara, Khiva and Kokand Khanates; and finally, the history of the Soviet Union’s relationship with the pastoral world of Eurasia.

The fifth and final section, “Part V. In place of an Epilogue: Difficult questions and complex problems”, is, as its title suggests, an extended discussion in three chapters of issues related to intellectual approaches to Eurasian history, the influence of ideology and culture on historical interpretation, and historical development.
The following five appendixes are an eclectic collection of articles on the radiocarbon dating in western Eurasia; Genghis Khan and the Taoist monk Ch’ang Ch’un; the excavation of the mass grave of the defenders of Yaroslavl killed during Batu Khan’s siege in 1328; a Giray from Crimea who claimed to be the last descendant of Genghis Khan; and the account of the journey Lt. Chokan Valikhanov, an Kazakh officer in the imperial Russian army, made from Verny (north of Lake Issyk Kul) to Kashgar in 1858.

While there are a number of other excellent books devoted to the history of central Eurasia, among them The Empire of the Steppes: A History of Central Asia (originally published in 1939) by René Grousset, Empires of the Silk Road: A History of Central Eurasia from the Bronze Age to the Present (2009) by Christopher I. Beckwith, and By Steppe, Desert and Ocean: The Birth of Eurasia (2015) by Barry Cunliffe, Chernykh’s work has a number of qualities that make it a valuable addition to the histories of Eurasia. To begin, Chernykh has attempted to present a comprehensive picture of the history and culture of central Eurasia beginning from the earliest human settlement down to the present. The lengthy sections on the geo-ecology of central Eurasia make it very clear to the reader how the climate, landforms and ecology have helped to shape the history and culture of this region. In addition, the author has also shown how the history of this region and its cultures are linked to the better known civilizations that surround it – Mesopotamia, the Middle East, Europe and China. In presenting this ambitious account, Chernykh has necessarily presented the history of these peripheral regions in a somewhat summary fashion, but this does not detract from the points he is making. Another very positive aspect of this work are the illustrations. Every chapter is more extensively illustrated than any other history of Eurasia with color photographs, drawings, maps and charts that make the complex information in that chapter extremely clear. Finally, because it is a translation of a work originally written in Russian and which relies heavily on Russian-language secondary sources, this book makes a vast body of Russian scholarship and Russian approaches to the history of Eurasia available to readers and researchers who do not read Russian. For those who do know Russian, the bibliography contains an extensive list of Russian works related to the history, culture and geo-ecology of Eurasia. In short, for anyone, student or scholar, with an interest in the history of Eurasia and its place in world history this is a valuable work that can be highly recommended.

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