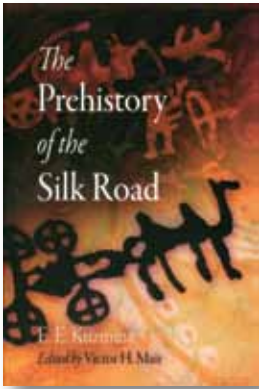


Before the Silk Road



The Prehistory of the Silk Road

by E. E. Kuzmina. Victor H. Mair, ed. (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007). 264 pp., 73 illustrations, cloth, \$65.00, ISBN 978-0-8122-4041-2

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Few regions in the world have captured popular imagination as much as the “Silk Road,” the overland trade routes that connected the great cities of Xian and Rome through the Central Asian oases. However, long before silk was traded as a commodity along this fabled route, intensive cultural interaction between the East and the West had been taking place, from as early as the Bronze Age (*ca.* 2000 BCE) in the Eurasian Steppe.

In *The Prehistory of the Silk Road*, eminent Russian archaeologist Elena Kuzmina presents a critical overview of the cultural conditions in Eurasia’s past that may have precipitated the establishment of the Silk Road, and how these conditions, in turn, profoundly impacted the development of the Old World. This book marks the first major scholarly effort that synthesizes a large body of interdisciplinary subject matter on Eurasian archaeology into a comprehensive account.

The book begins with an introduction to steppe ecology, emphasizing the interrelationship between the environment and the cultural development of Copper and Bronze Age Eurasian communities. Kuzmina views the emergence of a mobile economy on the Eurasian Steppe as an adaptive strategy devised by early populations to counterbalance unfavorable ecosystems, as evidenced by the first major migration of Indo-Europeans from the Pontic Steppe into Central Asia in the 3rd millennium BCE, which coincided with a period of climatic shift in the steppe grassland. With the advent of this new economy, the spread of wheeled transport technology intensi-

fied, laying the foundation for semi-nomadic pastoralism as the predominant lifestyle of the Eurasian Steppe.

To provide a proper cultural context, Kuzmina discusses the complex cultures of Bronze Age Eurasia and their regional interactions. She specifically references the Andronovo culture, known for its spoked-wheeled chariots and metallurgy, whose cultural influences were felt as far as the Shang Dynasty in China. Kuzmina argues against the idea that the horse-drawn chariot first appeared in the Near East. Instead, she proposes the Eurasian Steppe as the chariot’s place of origin. To support her argument, the author cites the evidence of the early remains of spoked-wheeled chariots, cheek pieces, and bones of sacrificed horses discovered at the graves of the Sintashta-Petrovka culture in the Ural Mountains. Though a consensus has yet to be reached on the chariot’s origin, the extensive amount of data presented in support of her hypothesis has nevertheless demonstrated the central role of prehistoric Eurasian populations in the diffusion of cultural and technological ideas throughout the region.

The last part of the book examines the role of Indo-Europeans in the development of Xinjiang and its neighboring territories. Looking at funerary customs and craniological research from the Gumugou burials in Xinjiang, Kuzmina identifies the population at this site as Tocharian. In addition, the author discusses different indigenous archaeological cultures along the northern and southern rims of the Tarim Basin—the routes that correspond to those of the future Silk Road—to illustrate the intensity of the historical process that transpired there.

As a student in the archaeology of China, I benefited immensely from the book’s analysis of the complex prehistory of the Silk Road. It provides not only an account of Eurasian prehistory, but also insight into mankind’s ability to adapt and innovate. Kuzmina’s research provides a much-needed framework to bridge the theoretical vacuum between Chinese and Western scholarship on the transcultural phenomenon of Bronze Age Eurasia. While some of her hypotheses still await corroboration from future archaeological research, her effort to make Eurasian archaeology more accessible to a broad audience makes this book an indispensable resource. Scholars will find this book a helpful research summary and reference guide to Eurasia’s prehistory, and informed readers will find a gateway through which to further explore the rich cultural tapestry of the steppe. 🏠