

## INTRODUCTION

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The purpose of this book is to introduce readers to Eurasian Late Antiquity, a formative era in world history with a distinct profile of far-reaching cultural contact and change, though one that has not been studied in a synthetic, unitary fashion before and is not yet widely known. The period under discussion runs from roughly 250 CE to 750 CE across a very broad horizon from the eastern Mediterranean to China. Its human face embraces the nomadic communities of the central steppe lands and the inhabitants of the empires of Rome, Iran, and China that bordered them. During the roughly five centuries considered in this volume, these broad territories and their diverse populations witnessed the emergence of a new world order with cultural, religious, and political systems markedly different from the so-called Classical Antiquity of the Roman, Chinese, and Iranian worlds that preceded them. Steppe nomads, usually associated with timeless, unchanging forms of social organization, experienced equally profound transformations.

Late antique Eurasia was a space full of new actors, new beliefs, and new political structures with their own distinct histories and cultural traditions that became more closely knit together in networks unimaginable at the beginning of our period. The concept of Eurasian Late Antiquity that we, as editors, propose in this volume, is one that both delineates this period of change and crosses the historiographical divide between Classical Antiquity and the Middle Ages (in East Asian periodization, “Middle Period”) on a continental scale. Our goal is to provide a coherent frame for developments that have often been studied individually but rarely treated together as part of an integrated picture. Eurasian Late Antiquity was an age in which the continental regions of Eurasia were subject to forces that brought them closer together. When the hidden grid of linkages and the manifold consequences of mutual contacts among these regions are brought to the surface, it will

be possible to present such an interconnected history with new clarity and greater intellectual breadth.<sup>1</sup>

We see this period as one that needs to be approached not in terms of a single grand and all-encompassing narrative, but rather at a more granular and local level of the diverse places, cultures, societies, and empires, whose piecemeal interaction led to large-scale, permanent change. Not unlike the thirteenth century, when, due to the Mongol conquest and increased circulation of people and knowledge, Asia suddenly acquired in the eyes of the Europeans concrete geographical and political features, the period from the third to the eighth centuries was one in which transformative events in various regions acquired a larger scope and made different parts of Eurasia more readily and mutually visible. The concept of a Eurasian Late Antiquity allows us to point a searchlight onto a wider expanse, still dark and inhospitable, and look for familiar things in unfamiliar places. This is what we refer to as the granularity of the period, when events are separate and yet connected; societies, courts, and rulers more readily recognize each other; texts are transmitted more widely; languages circulate more rapidly; and different clerics carry the message of their faiths to a variety of peoples. To appreciate the historical applications as well as the limitations of the concept of Eurasian Late Antiquity that we present in this volume, it is necessary to clarify its geographical and chronological frames.

#### GEOGRAPHICAL FRAME

Our treatment of Eurasia is limited to its central landmass, reaching from the eastern Mediterranean to China and the imperial territories that opened upon them. We do not discuss Western and Northern Europe or much of the Middle East, and although we recognize the unquestionable importance of connections between the maritime and the continental areas of Eurasia, this volume does not consider the Indian subcontinent and Southeast Asia. This is a self-imposed limit borne out of two main considerations. The first is that overland connections in Eurasia are those that were politically and commercially most significant, and it was the continental routes that were crossed by conquering armies or migrating peoples. We are also influenced by Victor Lieberman's characterization of Eurasia as consisting of two separate zones, with the continental one being more exposed to the impact of Inner Asian and steppe peoples, and contrasted with a "protected" periphery at both ends of Eurasia.<sup>2</sup> In regarding these two zones as conceptually

<sup>1</sup> Another book from Cambridge University Press, *Eurasian Empires in Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages*, has appeared while the present volume was in production. We have not had the opportunity to consult it.

<sup>2</sup> V. Lieberman, *Strange Parallels: Southeast Asia in Global Context, c. 800–1830*, vol. 2. (Cambridge, 2009), esp. 92–116. Naturally, since Lieberman's account begins in 800, we refer to his geographic definition without the chronologies associated with it.

and historically distinct, however, we do not mean to deny connections and mutual contacts but rather to suggest that such linkages should be studied separately. The second reason is that much more attention has been paid, often under the convenient term of “Silk Road studies,” to the continental routes, and we regard this particular field of research especially significant as we attempt to deepen our understanding of the webs of connectivity that scholars have identified. Hence, it is appropriate to devote a few words to the question of the “Silk Road(s)” and to how Eurasian Late Antiquity intersects, and in our view transforms radically, the notion of the Silk Road as a useful unit of historical analysis.

The term “Silk Road” (or “Roads”) is often used as shorthand to indicate interactions and connections across Eurasia, but it is neither a strictly geographical nor a historical concept. While in this volume we include chapters about the Silk Road, we do not take the concept itself to be interchangeable with Eurasian Late Antiquity. Peter Brown, expanding the world of Late Antiquity beyond its earlier boundaries and into the world of the “Silk Road,” cautions us in Chapter 6 that we should not see it simply as a conservatory of cultural mutations or a corridor of trade. Instead, we should exercise careful, discriminating historical judgment to identify the settings in which cultural contact produced change.<sup>3</sup>

Long-distance trade grew in importance as it changed from a chiefly diplomatic medium for the exchange of luxuries and “charismatic goods” to a source of revenues worth fighting for that could support an empire. The inclusion of Eurasian continental trade in the political economy of empires follows the time in which mercantile networks began to expand. The famous Sogdian Ancient Letters attest to the existence of commercial networks extending from Central Asia to the heart of China.<sup>4</sup> Looking at the Eurasian space through the eyes of nomadic rulers, and in particular the Türk *qaghans*, these networks became vehicles of power as well as wealth, and the prosperity of merchant elites started to become more tightly intertwined with the fortunes of political leaders.

This level of analysis is still lacking in most studies of premodern Eurasian history. Only expanding our historical vision to include an area in which the same routes served political and commercial interests can bring us closer to a synthesis adequate to explain how exchanges, communication, power, faith, and values were articulated across different regions and cultures.

There is one fundamental difference between a Eurasian Late Antiquity and the concept of the Silk Road. The underlying idea that inspires works as different as Frankopan’s *The Silk Roads: A New History of the World*, the collection edited by Mair and Hickman, *Reconfiguring the Silk Road*, or

<sup>3</sup> See, for instance, V. H. Mair, ed., *Contact and Exchange in the Ancient World* (Honolulu, 2006).

<sup>4</sup> É. de la Vaissière, *Histoire des marchands sogdiens* (Paris, 2002) 50–75.

Beckwith's *Empires of the Silk Road: A History of Central Eurasia from the Bronze Age to the Present*, is one in which the "Silk Road" becomes a metaphor to interpret movement and connectivity that claims validity across all historical periods. In Eurasian Late Antiquity, on the contrary, cultural contacts and historical events are specific and contingent to their time and context and therefore not linked to an overarching explanatory principle.

Most conceptions of the Silk Road are indeed dominated by the development of networks of east–west exchange, and by special attention to the cities, oases, and trading posts along the supposed routes through which goods and peoples traveled. Less attention is paid to mechanisms that do not directly intervene in commercial transactions (for instance, political ones) or in longer-term changes within societies. While Silk Road specialists reconceptualize or reconfigure the Silk Road by emphasizing – often along theoretical lines already traced by world historians – contacts, exchanges, and networks, we are keenly aware that combining several regional spaces under a single unit of analysis requires interpretative tools that can also illuminate local changes by connecting them with changes at the macroscopic, inter-regional level. Many of the chapters included in this volume explore such connections.

Therefore, while subsuming not just high-end social and political encounters, the concept of a Eurasian Late Antiquity is also useful to provide a different lens through which changes *within* societies can be seen. In fact, the circulation of new religions or ideas, the presence of certain commodities, or the arrival of different peoples produced transformations at the local level that can be difficult or impossible to appreciate fully without understanding dynamics that go far beyond the local. In northern China, for instance, the relationship between a common peasant and the land he tilled was profoundly modified by fiscal measures introduced by the Northern Wei, a barbarian dynasty hailing from the northeast with deep ties to the Inner Asian world.

While the Silk Road is a useful concept for bringing into the fray ideas of cross-cultural interactions, long-term connectivity, and expansion of commercial networks, it rarely achieves the degree of granularity required to explain change within the societies that formed the Eurasian space. Our Eurasia is a place firmly rooted in a period that we see as transformative both in terms of interconnectivity and in terms of new ways for various regions and peoples to look at each other. Whether coarse or fine (depending on evidence), that granularity requires a different conceptual framework that recognizes similarities – across different cultural spaces – in the nature of change and its attributes. The interaction among Eurasian empires, kingdoms and polities, many of which emerged or were reconstituted under different premises in this period, affected different levels of

the societies that participated – surely not all of them and not at every level – in such exchanges. It would be useful in this respect to recall Natalie Davis’s admonition that the historian can retain a global consciousness while writing “decentered” histories, and that establishing points of comparisons, investigating cultural crossings, or pursuing transcultural intellectual pathways may lead to unexpected and illuminating new perspectives.<sup>5</sup>

#### TIMEFRAME

The period we take into consideration extends over half a millennium from the early third century to the middle of the eighth century. This allows us to include the rise of the Sasanian dynasty in Iran (224), and the collapse of the Han dynasty in China (220). At the same time the Roman Empire experienced a series of profound political, military, and economic shocks that led to reorganization of the imperial system. These events were critical to the reconfiguration of imperial spaces (and the lands in between) and to the interactions and exchanges that came into fuller play in the fourth century. The Roman Empire shifted its gaze to the east and moved its capital to Constantinople (324), initiating a Christian, “Byzantine” phase in Roman history.

Rome’s loss of its western European provinces in the fifth century has its East Asian counterpart in the conquest of northern China by the so-called Five Barbarians (*wu hu*) in the fourth century, who controlled it for over two centuries. Central Asia was opened to migratory movements that are still far from being fully understood but surely contributed to the transformation of local societies and to the creation of new political identities.

In the course of the fifth century Sasanian Iran lost its Central Asian territories to Hunnic kingdoms and “reinvented” its political order as a result.<sup>6</sup> Other Hunnic groups pushing westward made their appearance in Europe in the fifth century, upsetting the political equilibrium and inaugurating a millennium in which the steppes became a permanent element in western affairs.

The Türk Empire was the first to unify the steppes and by its expansiveness to increase the range of human connections, deeply affecting the breadth of Eurasia and its Roman and Chinese bookends. The cutoff point of our

<sup>5</sup> N. Z. Davis, “Decentering History: Local Stories and Cultural Crossings in a Global World,” *History and Theory* 50.2 (2011) 188–202.

<sup>6</sup> R. Payne, “The Reinvention of Iran: The Sasanian Empire and the Huns,” in *The Cambridge Companion to the Age of Attila*, ed. M. Maas (Cambridge, 2015) 282–302; R. Payne, “The Making of Turan: The Fall and Transformation of the Iranian East in Late Antiquity,” *Journal of Late Antiquity* 9.1 (2016) 4–41.

discussion coincides largely with the Islamic expansion, which by its domination of Iran and central Asia introduced new patterns of religious and military expansion and initiated a new epoch of long-distance commerce. Thus, the year 750, with the rise of the Abbasids, roughly coinciding with the fall of the Türk Empire (744), with Byzantium reeling from civil war, plague, and the loss of its base in Italy (c. 741–751), the defeat of Tang armies by the Abbasids on the River Talas (751) and the beginning of the devastating An Lushan rebellion (755) in China, appears as a suitable stopping point, but one that has to be regarded as open-ended and fairly loose in both its spatial and temporal dimensions.

#### THE CONCEPT OF LATE ANTIQUITY AND ITS EURASIAN CONNECTIONS

While our concept of Eurasia, even in its relatively truncated formulation, is compatible with a general understanding of Eurasia, the notion of “Late Antiquity” requires explanation. As Peter Brown points out in his contribution (Chapter 6), the idea of a Late Antiquity that applied to the continental space between Rome and China had already been proposed in the first half of the twentieth century. Late Antiquity was named as such in the massive multivolume work by Albert von le Coq (and in part by Ernst Waldenschmidt), *Die buddhistische Spätantike in Mittelasien* (The Buddhist Late Antiquity in Central Asia) published between 1922 and 1933, where “Middle Asia” is not very different conceptually from our Eurasia, even though geographically more specific and less open-ended.<sup>7</sup> Prior to this monumental achievement the same term, with roughly the same meaning and frames of reference (interactions among diverse civilizations and empires) was used in a study of “late antique” silk decoration by Josef Strzygowski, in 1903.<sup>8</sup> The interactions (*Wechselwirkungen*) explored in this prescient essay extend to the same areas (the eastern Roman Empire, China, and Persia) and refer roughly to the same period. The connections identified by studying a specific aspect of material culture were soon going to be substantiated by the manuscripts recovered by Aurel Stein in his expeditions and archaeological work over four decades. The concept of *Spätantike* (Late Antiquity) common in the German-speaking world, did not migrate into the English-speaking world in relation to Central Asia; however, another German term, *Seidenstrassen* (silk roads), has met with widespread acclaim.

<sup>7</sup> A. von Le Coq, *Die buddhistische Spätantike in Mittelasien* (Berlin, 1922–1933).

<sup>8</sup> J. Strzygowski, “Seidenstoffe aus Ägypten im Kaiser Friedrich-Museum: Wechselwirkungen zwischen China, Persien und Syrien in spätantiker Zeit,” *Jahrbuch der Königlich Preussischen Kunstsammlungen* 24.2. H (1903) 147–178.

*EURASIAN LATE ANTIQUITY IN TERMS OF EUROPEAN AND NEAR EASTERN HISTORY*

It was Peter Brown's seminal work *The World of Late Antiquity* (1971) that proved to be the springboard for what is presently a flourishing area of interdisciplinary research and the main point of departure for this volume. One of the virtues of this work was to extend (in the spirit of the author's continental predecessors) the geographical range of what usually had been treated as "the Later Roman Empire." By expanding his inquiry to include lands that Rome had never controlled – not simply as imperial neighbors but as partners and full participants in a shared historical frame in which they were not judged and dismissed as "barbarians" – Brown inaugurated a new phase in the study of this pivotal age. Sasanian Iran, Islamic lands through the early Caliphate, the Red Sea kingdoms, the forest lands of northern Europe – all of these became parts of a fresh and integrated historical account.

In reaction to Brown, scholars began to debate the time span of this period, arguing for a "long" or "short" Late Antiquity,<sup>9</sup> and discussion began as well about its proper geographical span. An implicit call for the extension of the concept of Late Antiquity to include Eurasia was made by the late Jerry Bentley, in a footnote, in which he adumbrated the possibility of a Eurasian or hemisphere-scaled Late Antiquity, and thus the study of cross-culture interaction beyond the bounds of the (admittedly already quite large) Brownian concept.<sup>10</sup>

From a world-historical perspective like Bentley's, speaking of a Eurasian Late Antiquity naturally expands the reach of an already rich concept to embrace interactions and connections that can be followed across the continental expanse of Eurasia. Cultural and political frontiers appear, at most, as stumbling blocks whose existence needs to be studied together with what goes across and how. While Brown and other scholars<sup>11</sup> have developed an understanding of a broader late antique world in which the fate of the Roman Empire was not the tacit point of departure for discussion, Late Antiquity, as a historical concept, remains rooted in the Mediterranean: its "antiquity" – however broadly construed – was Greco-Roman, and its "lateness" was that of the Roman Empire, particularly in terms of its "fall" and aftermath.

<sup>9</sup> Averil Cameron, "The 'Long' Late Antiquity: A Late Twentieth-Century Model," in *Classics in Progress: Essays on Ancient Greece and Rome*, ed. T. P. Wiseman (Oxford, 2002) 165–191; A. Marcone, "A Long Late Antiquity? Considerations on a Controversial Periodization," *Journal of Late Antiquity* 1.1 (2008) 4–19; I. Wood, *The Modern Origins of the Early Middle Ages* (Oxford, 2013).

<sup>10</sup> J. H. Bentley, "Cross-Cultural Interaction and Periodization in World History," *American Historical Review* 101.3 (1996) 749–770, here 751.

<sup>11</sup> M. Humphries, "The Shapes and Shaping of the Late Antique World: Global and Local Perspectives," in *A Companion to Late Antiquity*, ed. P. Rousseau (Chichester, 2009) 97–109; S. F. Johnson, "Preface: On the Uniqueness of Late Antiquity," in *The Oxford Handbook of Late Antiquity*, ed. S. F. Johnson (Oxford, 2012) xi–xxx.



The present volume proposes a concept of Eurasian Late Antiquity based on different premises. By embracing multiple regional histories, this approach performs the critical function of presenting Eurasia as a unified object of analysis. Eurasian Late Antiquity does not mean to eliminate or marginalize Europe – or any other cultural area – but to connect it with the vital transformations that were occurring elsewhere in Eurasia. We can then understand the appearance of Christianity in China, merchant networks across central Asia, and Byzantine diplomacy with nomadic peoples from the vantage point of interconnected histories. In this vein, the historical developments we discuss are not limited to any one empire (or its afterlife) but include farther-reaching processes of cultural and economic exchange. In other words, the central significance of this approach is not the extension of an established historiographical concept (Late Antiquity) to the rest of Asia but the awareness that understanding a great many events that took place in the period ca. 250–750 requires the adoption of an integrated perspective and a new descriptor: Eurasian Late Antiquity.

*EURASIAN LATE ANTIQUITY IN TERMS OF CHINESE AND CENTRAL ASIAN HISTORY*

From a Chinese perspective, matters are considerably different. This book emphatically does *not* suggest that the post-Han and early Tang periods in Chinese history should be known as “Chinese Late Antiquity,” but rather that a large part of what we today call China, and in particular its northern and northwestern regions, was strongly connected with the broader world of Eurasia and thus participated in Eurasian Late Antiquity. The postclassical world of China has been defined for a long time uniquely in the negative. The period between the end of the Han (220 CE) and the Sui-Tang period (ca. 581–907) has been most commonly known as the period of disunion, which included the Three Kingdoms (220–280) and the so-called Northern and Southern Dynasties (ca. 386–580). More recently this period has been recast as the early medieval period, which responds to the need to frame it in terms that are not simply tied to a dynastic model. In Chinese historiography the whole medieval period (ca. 220–1300) is referred to as “Middle Period” or *zhonggu*, that is, Middle Antiquity. The term “middle” suggests of course an analogy with the European Middle Ages but is also a reflection of the Chinese notion of an antiquity that continues into the modern period. The concept of early medieval China already has been accepted in the scholarly community, and the *Journal of Early Medieval China* explicitly aims to address the period from the third to the sixth centuries. This period is followed by the traditional dynastic periodization (Sui, Tang, Five Dynasties and Song), which has not been supplanted by a clear definition of central or late Middle Ages. The concept of Eurasian



Late Antiquity, breaking through the Sui-Tang dynastic reunification of China in the late sixth century, allows us to recognize that relations with Central Asian and Turco-Mongol peoples continued to play a preeminent role in China's relations with the Eurasian continent throughout the seventh and eighth centuries. The historical watershed constituted by the An Lushan rebellion (755–763), on the other hand, marks a new era in Chinese history. While such temporal boundaries remain open to discussion, they have sufficient heuristic value to be adopted for the purposes of the present work and may contribute to a broader discussion of the periodization of “Middle Antiquity” or “Middle Period” in Chinese history.

What we are suggesting, therefore, is that important long-term trends and transformations in Chinese history from the end of the Han dynasty onwards must be seen in the context of a Eurasian Late Antiquity, rather than in the context of a patently artificial notion of a self-enclosed or fully coherent “China,” with the implicit understanding that no definition ought to cancel another, and that no periodization can fit every purpose.

On the Central and Inner Asian side, the dates 250 through 750 also make good explanatory sense. These dates are already accepted as a unit in the UNESCO publication of the *History of Civilizations of Central Asia* (see vol. 3), which is one measure by which the field has acknowledged the specific characteristics of this period on a macrohistorical level. As Litvinsky and Zhang mention in their introduction, the period ca. AD 250–750 “witnessed the rise of mighty new empires (Sasanian, Gupta, Sui and Tang; and the Arab Caliphate) on the fringes of Central Asia. It also saw the successive movements of nomadic peoples . . . that played a major and at times decisive role in the later ethnic and political history of the region.”<sup>12</sup> While this period is not given a name, we agree with this general definition and with its chronological boundaries.

We therefore muster the separate temporalities of a Mediterranean and Near Eastern “Late Antiquity,” a Chinese “Early Middle Antiquity,” and a Central Asian ca. 250–750 period into a Eurasian Late Antiquity that strives to expand and combine their relative concerns and regional applications into an altogether new concept.

## ORGANIZATION AND CONTENTS OF THE BOOK

The chapters in this volume are grouped into three sections that reflect similar themes and concerns. Together they help frame Eurasian Late

<sup>12</sup> Litvinsky, B. A., and Zhang Guang-da, “Historical Introduction.” In B. A. Litvinsky, Zhang Guang-da, and R. Shabani Samghabadi, eds., *History of the Civilizations of Central Asia, Volume III: The Crossroads of Civilizations: A.D. 250 to 750* (Paris: UNESCO Publishing, 1996), p. 19.

Antiquity as a distinct era on the long continuum of Eurasian history during which the political, ethnic, and cultural map was reconfigured. In different ways the essays show how these changes occurred locally and regionally as well as on a grander geographical scale.

#### *PART I: HISTORICAL THRESHOLDS*

The first section includes eight chapters that offer a historical overview of continental Eurasia between Rome and China. These chapters illustrate the main geographical–cultural blocs in play (Rome, China, Iran, and the Steppes) and some lines of their interconnection.

First, Michael Maas reviews Roman-steppe relations and suggests how Rome's engagement beyond its threshold to the north resulted in a recasting of the steppe lands and their peoples within a new Byzantine worldview that reformulated older patterns of diplomacy, geographical knowledge, and religious prophecy. Then, Nicola Di Cosmo sketches the long history of the nomadic frontier with China, concluding that by the time of the rise of the Türk hegemony in the sixth century, the steppes – and not China – had become the more forceful motor of change: “What was new in the China-steppe relationship is that the nomadic politics had become a decisive element in facilitating the evolution of commercial routes, and more specifically, in the economic relations between China and the West.” Matthew Canepa highlights Iran's central role in Eurasian affairs. He emphasizes how much the Sasanian Persian realm contributed to a royal cosmology shared across the steppes and with Roman and Chinese rulers, as monarchs participated in an international culture of competitive political display.

These first chapters suggest not just the depth and breadth of connectivity among regions but also a concurrent broadening of cultural horizons. Associated with the growth of awareness and interaction over great distances is the notion of “Silk Roads” that passed through these separate worlds and brought a heightened measure of integration. Richard Lim describes various routes of communication and trade reaching from Rome to China, primarily the economic ones. Rong Xinjiang, who bases his discussion on recent archaeological discoveries, illustrates the presence of Sogdian commercial colonies that were a multi-strand necklace of trading hubs across Central Asia to China. The urban-based Sogdian traders constituted a vital link not only between Chinese suppliers and Roman and Persian buyers of prized commodities but with Central Asian nomadic communities as well.

Cautioning that “silk . . . was more than a commodity” and that “silk was as central to the flow of power and prestige in eastern Eurasia as is the movement of enriched uranium between modern states,” Peter Brown alerts us to the symbolic, imaginative weight as well as the financial value of this desirable commodity in a world of constant diplomacy and warfare.

Through evaluation of China's Eurasian contacts, Valerie Hansen opens the door to understanding the many profound foreign influences that came to Chinese lands during our period: "People living in different regions of present-day China met neighboring peoples as enemies on the battlefield, missionaries propagating new religions, merchants selling goods, refugees from war-torn lands, and even as emperors ruling dynasties with Chinese names." The overland silk routes were a significant conduit for the passage of these people and ideas.

Where Brown notes that the perspective of Chinese geographers reached as far west as Constantinople, Giusto Traina explores the limits of the Roman gaze eastward through examination of classical and postclassical sources, finding that the extent of Alexander the Great's expedition into Central Asia and the scientific legacy of the Hellenistic Age created conceptual boundaries. Although much remained dangerous *terra incognita*, for missionaries, traders, and soldiers traveling from all directions, Eurasia increasingly became a place filled with known and attainable destinations.

#### PART II: MOVEMENTS, CONTACTS, AND EXCHANGES

The second section of our book considers mobility in a broad sense as well as various forms of interaction and exchange. All of the goods and ideas mentioned throughout the volume were carried by individuals or small groups of merchants, for example, or Christians, or Buddhists, who only over time may be understood in the aggregate. In contrast was the phenomenon of large-scale migration, in which substantial communities may have traversed great distances to find new homes. These extensive population movements, regardless of their causes, were often accompanied by violent transformations of local societies, although to this day we have very little idea of what happened to so many peoples who have left only faint traces of their passage in written and archaeological sources.

Several authors consider the phenomenon of migration from discrete critical angles. Patrick Geary introduces the historical challenges associated with genetic research. He notes that while properly structured study of ancient DNA can enhance our understanding of ancient migrations, it must be combined with equally careful analysis of cultural context. Michael Kulikowski discusses the idea of migration and invasion from the north as a trope in modern western historical writing and the opportunities and pitfalls that await researchers who employ the trope unquestioned, especially in Asian contexts. Luo Xin also offers a historiographical study in his examination of two conflicting approaches to the Northern Dynasties, one Chinese and the other Inner Asian. He urges care in accepting uncritically the more familiar Chinese perspectives on migration and foreign rule, and suggests that much needs to be done in articulating and analyzing the view

from the steppes. Ursula Brosseder offers an archaeologist's critical perspective on migrations. In her chapter she discusses the well-known "Hunnic" cauldrons, concluding that they are false friends if invoked as proof of Hunnic identity across Eurasia from the Altai Mountains to Hungary.

Ethnic attribution – so closely linked to the movement and peoples and cultural contacts – is a matter that has animated many debates in both archaeology and ancient and medieval history. Walter Pohl discusses differences between political and ethnic identity. He notes that a prestigious name of a past empire, like Xiongnu or Rouran, could be claimed by mixed groups to impart coherence and identity and serve as a base for political action. He contrasts the different fate of Avars and Huns: "Avar political identity outweighed ethnic identity. Whenever Avars left the khaganate to settle elsewhere, they dropped the ethnonym and came to be called Huns, Bulgars, or Slavs. After the end of Avar rule, their name disappeared. Huns, on the other hand, maintained their ethnic identity, whether in Roman service or after the fall of Attila's empire." In either event, we learn that both ethnic and political identities were flexible constructs and that there is no place for essentialized, permanent identities – except perhaps in the legends of a ruling elite.

Religious ideas traveled long distances along these routes, in slower migrations of ideas, texts, and forms of worship. Scott Johnson traces the progress of Christianity (a Mediterranean religion in its formative stages) from the Middle East to China, as its practitioners traversed different linguistic milieux in which their co-religionists spoke different languages and where the act of translation proved to be yet another sort of profitable exchange. The use of a *lingua franca*, in this case Syriac, in contexts of trade and Christian expression indicates the participation of speakers of different tongues who sought a common voice. Similarly, as Max Deeg shows, Buddhists found Central Asian communities a welcome home and a place from which many carried their beliefs and books to Chinese lands. The challenges of translating not just words but Buddhist ideas into alien idioms became a focused effort involving great numbers of individuals. Frantz Grenet traces another body of knowledge that circulated across religious and political boundaries. Astrological lore, the science of the movement of the stars, found ready acceptance – and was put to political use – in the cultures considered in this study.

Merchants traded goods other than silk as they passed from city to city across the breadth of Eurasia. They carried other high-profile luxury goods such as pearls in their saddle bags. Joel Walker describes the widespread influence throughout Eurasia of the Sasanian use of pearls as markers of royal authority. These pearls were not simple objects of practical use but highly prized prestige items. Out of the steppes to surrounding lands came slaves and horses in exchange for grains and other commodities that were

consumed domestically and not traded farther afield, as Michael Drompp notes in Chapter 20. Warrior horsemen had a long history of serving as mercenaries beyond the steppes, and they brought with them new military tactics and technology, including the use of stirrups, that entered the European realm among elite cavalrymen in the sixth century.

### *PART III: EMPIRES, DIPLOMACY, AND FRONTIERS*

During the period of Eurasian Late Antiquity, all of the great cultural realms – Rome, China, Iran, and the Steppes themselves – experienced significant internal political and social restructuring, some of which at least was due to external causes. Rome lost its western European home provinces and revitalized itself as a Christian state based at Constantinople. Roman emperors became preoccupied with threats from Sasanian Iran to the east and from steppe nomads north of the Danube, notably the game-changing Huns in the mid-fifth century and the Avars of the sixth. Mark Whittow analyzes the development of a Roman/Byzantine “Eurasian policy” in which the Türk Empire played an important part. He argues that Constantinople’s policy makers possessed a shrewd grasp of steppe cultures and politics bred of long experience as well as the wrenching events of the early seventh century.

The impact of the steppes was no less severe on Sasanian Persia. Daniel Potts discusses the enormous political and financial cost to the Sasanian state accrued by maintaining its ever-receding frontier with steppe kingdoms to the north. Interaction with the steppes played a formative role in the shaping of the Sasanian state.

New models of imperial power developed among the continually shifting populations of the steppes. Michael Drompp explores how the early Türk Empire created a highly successful system of rule different from those of settled states. He speaks of the relations of the Türk Empire with both China and Byzantium. As he puts it, “The absence of large structures, impressive cities, and major literary accomplishments should not lead us to imagine the Türk empires were ‘insubstantial’ or ‘empty.’ They were eminently well-suited to the environment in which they occurred and to the technologies available to them.” Peter Golden, on the other hand, shows that in some instances, especially on the western steppes, nomadic groups did not develop imperial structures and remained stateless. The existence of these nonimperial nomads is elusive but at the same time cannot be ignored. The extent of their integration in larger polities is key to understanding why or how steppe nomads developed their political culture.

Sören Stark demonstrates how the Türks deliberately appropriated “an astonishing variety of so-called Chinese, Iranian, and even Byzantine features of elite representation to create their own symbols of power, and thus express

legitimate rule and princely status.” We have seen this sort of phenomenon as well in the chapters of Canepa and Walker. Ekaterina Nechaeva additionally shows us that at least on the part of many steppe leaders there was a desire to participate in shared hierarchies of power, to play at the big table with Rome, Iran, and China. These relationships were spelled out in diplomatic exchanges and protocols.

During Eurasian Late Antiquity, China witnessed a hybridization of political systems due to interaction and conquest by non-Chinese polities, an increase of outside religious influences as shown by the influx of Buddhism, and more generally a greater cultural openness as a result of contact with steppe peoples. What the chapters on East Asia show with particular emphasis is the relevance of the connections between the steppes and China on the political plane.

Andrew Eisenberg discusses how the ruling elite of the Northern Wei introduced new forms of rulership and political ideas. The patrimonial conceptions of the state that characterized this foreign dynasty “provided a demarcated world for the work, political competition, and socialization of members of politically elite households and their associates.” In addition, Eisenberg discusses the role played by ethnicity in the self-definition of foreign elites and their governments, finding in this a significant difference from Chinese courts because of the need to maintain ethnic boundaries and retain and notion of separateness between the ruling minority and the subjects.

Jonathan Skaff describes the entangled ideological systems shared and contested by Chinese and Inner Asian steppe rulers. From 580 to the outbreak of the An Lushan rebellion (755) Turco-Mongol and Chinese courts engaged not just in political conflict but also in an ideological battle over cultural symbols. The chapter shows the critical role played by bicultural local elites and by leaders who were familiar with, and could therefore manipulate, symbols of power from either the Inner Asian or the Chinese milieu. The Sui and Tang courts also adopted a combination of ideological means drawn from different traditions to appeal to the multicultural peoples under their rule.

Naomi Standen tackles the question of identity and group formation by discussing “followership” in steppe political organization. She locates a controlling source of power not primarily in the personal ambition of a leader but in the people who allowed him to rule. Resonating especially with Skaff’s understanding of Inner Asian (or Turco-Mongol) politics, Standen’s analysis deepens our understanding of the political aspects underlying power contests in medieval northeast Eurasia.

#### CONCLUSION: A NEW FIELD OF VISION

When we (Di Cosmo and Maas) had our first conversation several years ago about a conference that would bring together scholars interested in Rome,

China, and the steppe lands in between, we anticipated that the discussion would fruitfully cross disciplinary as well as geographical lines. The conference, “Worlds in Motion: Rome, China and the Eurasian Steppe in Late Antiquity,” convened at the Institute for the Advanced Study on 30 May–1 June 2013, and funded jointly by Rice University and the IAS, more than fulfilled our expectations. Most of the conference presentations were adapted for this volume, but other contributions have been added as well. The chapters in this volume demonstrate how the results of the discussion have matured since then. What has emerged is the existence of a historical era that we call Eurasian Late Antiquity. It was, so to speak, hiding in plain sight: the vectors of change and the ripple effects of events across the Eurasian steppes and the surrounding territories of settled empires have been studied from different perspective and for different purposes over the years, but this volume now offers unity in what had previously been seen as fragmentary and disassociated. This is quite far from saying that Eurasian Late Antiquity possessed a common, homogeneous culture or that its history can be told as one smoothly unrolling ribbon of causes and effects. The diversity of political communities from villages to empires, the variety of economies and world-views, and the sheer weight of local imperatives rightly prevent such oversimplification. The wide variety of interconnections and their reverberations illuminated by the chapters in this volume make it quite clear that Eurasian Late Antiquity exists as a coherent historical epoch in its own right. This period in Eurasian history witnessed manifold changes and distant contacts, the dissolution and invention of empires, the movements of ideas, religions, peoples, languages, and goods over vast distances, and the appearance of new peoples on the world stage. In the same breath we must say that historical discontinuities, dead ends, and isolated disasters abounded. To understand this panoply of experience, the essays gathered here encourage us to place Romans, Chinese, Iranians, Huns, and a host of others in the same frame. Eurasian Late Antiquity stretches our peripheral vision as well as our historical imagination. It invites new questions and answers.



