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Nomads and the Rise of Eurasian Empires and Civilizations (a review of the monograph by Kenneth W. Harl. Empires of the Steppes: The Nomadic Tribes Who Shaped Civilisation. London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2023)

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Kenneth W. Harl's *"Empires of the Steppes: The Nomadic Tribes Who Shaped Civilisation"* sheds light on the history of nomads, nomadic political entities and their contribution to the rise and development of societies and civilization across Eurasia. This book is a sweeping narrative and reexamination of 4,500 years of Eurasian nomads from the earliest nomadic societies to the

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Empire of Tamerlane. Despite being a prominent classical historian of ancient Greek and Roman history as well as early medieval political entities such as Byzantine, Harl has ventured far beyond the limits of his scholarly training by providing an extensive and thorough narrative of Eurasian nomads and their empires. The book covers the history and social development of not only familiar and prominent nomadic empires erected by Attila, Genghis Khan and Tamerlane, but also those less-known nomadic peoples and entities such as Xiongnu, Kushans, Rouran, Northern Wei, Hephthalites, Karakhitans and others (Harl 2023: 12). The book consists of 24 chapters in which the author provides a comprehensive and vigorous narrative, analysis and evaluation of Eurasian nomads from the advent of first nomadic groups and societies in ancient times to the era of Tamerlane. The reason for Harl's choice of the Empire of Tamerlane as the last great nomadic entity is that with the demise of Tamerlane in 1405 in less than a couple of generations due to the invention of firearms and technological progress settled European nations ultimately terminated the historical and geopolitical domination of nomads, who "steadily lost their decisive role in history over the next two centuries" (Harl 2023: 12). In this case, even if nomadism and nomadic peoples continued to play a substantial role in historical development and social interactions between societies and civilizations, they came under a growing assault by technologically and economically advanced and sophisticated sedentary agrarian and urban nations of Europe and elsewhere.

The first chapter, *"The Peopling of the Eurasian Steppes,"* introduces the readers to the geography, spaces, timeline, climate, environment, ecology, and large-scale population movements driven by a number of factors, including environmental, social, economic and warfare. Harl argues that climate and environmental fluctuations and sudden changes were, in fact behind deep social and historical transformations of nomads and their ways of life. The chapter claims that the domestication of certain wild animals, specifically the domestication of horses, had a revolutionary impact on the everyday life of nomadic peoples across Eurasia, revolutionizing their mobility and perfecting their art of warfare. Besides the art of warfare of nomads, the chapter stresses the strategic significance of mobility as a powerful dimension in nomadic cultures. The spatial and geographical boundaries of nomadic steppe civilization stretched from Central Europe to Manchuria, which became vital spaces for human migration, cultural interaction, warfare and conquests. Kinship-based tribal systems determined the structural foundations of nomads and their societies. In terms of early nomadic pastoral cultures, Harl indicates the Yamnaya and Andronovo peoples, who played a decisive role in Eurasian history and civilization. Throughout the book, the author makes bold claims, challenging the existing prevalent knowledge and theories in science, history, archeology and cultural studies. Specifically, Harl questions the historical validity of the conventional assertion that the earliest nomads migrated from east to west, arguing that it was in fact quite the contrary, the mass movement of nomads occurred from west to east (Harl 2023: 32). In his view, Indo-European speaking nomadic pastoralists not only brought certain great accomplishments of human civilization such as the domesticated horse, the wheel, wheeled carts, and the nomadic lifestyle to the central and eastern Europe, their rapid expanding across the steppes of Eurasia came to shape the modern cultures, societies, languages and ethnic groups (Harl 2023: 32-33). The book asserts that nomads transformed the linguistic and cultural map of Europe and Eurasia in general, having enriched and defined the classic civilizations of ancient Greece, India and the Mideast (Harl 2023: 43). At the same time, Harl calls attention to the fact that with time passing, nomadic peoples shifted from nomadism to sedentarism. Ancient nomadic peoples like Anatolians, Tocharians, Indo-Aryans, Persians and many others changed their way of life,

abandoning nomadic lifestyle and embracing a settled one, engaging in farming and dwelling in urban centers.

Due to the space limitation, we provide a brief overview of the remaining chapters. The second chapter *"Surviving on the Eurasian Steppes"* explores pastoral nomadism, seasonal migration patterns, herd management, clan loyalties, warfare, the art of war, warrior culture and weapons of nomads (Harl 2023: 44). As nomadic peoples inhabited vast steppes of Eurasia with harsh inclement climate and inhospitable environment, their survival demanded a strict discipline, effective rule and management, communal organization, highly adaptive social systems that would foster social interaction and rapid military mobilization. The third and fourth chapters, *"Scythians and the Great King of Persia"* and *"Alexander the Great: Walling off Gog and Magog,"* look into the Scythian and other ancient nomads and their interaction and hostility towards Persians and Greeks. The third chapter narrates the Persian invasion of Scythian lands and the avoidance tactics used by the Scythians, which warranted the strategic failure of Persia owing to the strategic depth of the steppe, asymmetric warfare and the ineffectiveness of standing professional armies against mobile nomads. The fourth chapter argues that the organized, settled political entities struggled to subdue mounted nomads despite their military superiority. The fifth, sixth and seventh chapters, "*Modu Chanyu and the Great Wall of China", "The Xiongnu and Chinese Emperors at War"*, and *"The Sons of Heaven and the Silk Road"* focus on the political unification of the steppe and the rise of the Xiongnu and other nomadic entities and their interaction and confrontation with China. The powerful Xiongnu under Modu Chanyu prioritized the deterrence strategy aimed at containing the Han Chinese empire in Central Asia. Besides engaging in warfare, both Han China and the Xiongnu leveraged a variety of methods in their interaction and confrontation, including the use of diplomacy, alliances, diplomatic marriages, tribute systems and appeasement. Although Han China came to perceive the Xiongnu as 'barbarians', to appease them, the Chinese had to pay tribute to them (Harl 2023: 101).

The eighth chapter, "*The Parthians, Nomadic Foes of Imperial Rome,"* draws attention to the Parthian empire, which is defined by Harl as a synthesis of nomadic and imperial traditions. Besides shedding light on the Roman-Parthian rivalry and frontier warfare, the eighth chapter discusses the Silk Road diplomacy. The ninth chapter *"Heirs of the Xiongnu: The Northern Wei"* extensively considers the process of adoption of Chinese culture, political bureaucracy and way of life by nomads, which led to their cultural assimilation and Sinicization of nomadic rulers through intermarrying, receiving a proper Chinese education, converting to Buddhism, learning to dress "proper Chinese dress, assume Chinese names, and speak Chinese" (Harl 2023: 153). The tenth chapter, *"The Hephthalites: Huns in Iran,"* focuses on the Hephthalites, their wars and hostility to neighboring political entities such as Sasanian Iran, India and Byzantium. Chapters eleventh, twelfth and thirteenth, *"Huns, Allies and Foes of Rome", "Attila, the Scourge of God,"* and *"The Heirs of Attila and the New Rome"* trace the rise of one of the powerful nomadic peoples in the early medieval era – the Huns, who are described as the force of transformation of Europe and the Roman empire. Harl claims that despite the widespread negative portrayal of the Huns as "harbingers of the Apocalypse and European fears of the Asiatic peril", and including their ruler, especially their ruler Attila, as a barbarian, he eventually shaped medieval Europe by ensuring that "the Germanic kingdoms of the West would succeed Rome as the new order of Medieval Europe" (Harl 2023: 194-195).

The fourteenth chapter, *"Turkish Kaghans and Tang Emperors"* explores the Göktürk khaganate, its creation and historical development, relations with Tang China, trade and economic exchanges along the Silk Road, Turkic diplomacy and statecraft. Discussing Turkic

culture, identity and writing system in Orkhon inscriptions, the chapter draws attention to how Bilge Kaghan of the Eastern Turks warned his people against cultural assimilation and adopting Chinese way of life, giving guidance that Turks ought to shun buildings and urban areas and should not build cities, instead they were advised to keep their nomadic way of life, remain free and cherish freedom and "ride free over the steppes and sleep in the felt tents of the yurt" (Harl 2023: 216). The fifteenth chapter, "*Turks and the Caliphate"* delves into historical, political and cultural relations between Turkic peoples and the Islamic world of the Middle East. In the interaction between Turks and the Abbasid Caliphate the most significant worldwide event perhaps was conversion of Turks to Islam, which induced their religious transformation, cultural merge and synthesis, the perfection of military professionalism. Religious conversion forever transformed the spiritual and cultural lives of Turks, who not only became an integral part of the ummah, but also the main defenders and rulers of the Islamic world and civilization. From now on, the Seljuk Turks were not regarded as the 'Scourge of God', but rather as "Muslim warriors waging the steppe way of war in the name of the Sunni Caliph of Baghdad. The horsemen of the Seljuk Turks did not herald the Apocalypse. Instead, they revived Muslim power, dominated the battlefield for the next millennium, and changed the world from Britain to India" (Harl 2023: 247).

The next sixteenth chapter, *"The Seljuk Turks and Their Sultanate"* further expands the previous chapter, narrating the Battle of Manzikert (Malazgirt) in 1071 between the Byzantine emperor Romanus IV Diogenes and the Seljuk sultan Alp Arslan, in which, according to Harl, the Turks fought as warriors of Islam against the unbeliever (Harl 2023: 248). The triumph of Alp Arslan heralded the demise of Byzantine power in Anatolia and the rise of the Seljuk power and mass settlement of Turks across Asia Minor (Harl 2023: 249). The seventeenth chapter, "The Legend of Prester John and the Gurkhans of Cathay" narrates the events unfolding in the 11th and 12th centuries in Eurasia against the backdrop of Crusader-Muslim clashes and relations before the rise of Genghis Khan. The main focus of this chapter is Crusaders' search for a mythical figure Prester John, who was supposedly believed to rule over a utopian empire in the East. The essence of the invention of this legendary belief of the existence of a powerful Christian ruler in the East was rooted in the hope to squeeze, overwhelm and crush the Muslim world on two fronts from the west and the east. This myth persisted over time, shaping Christendom's worldview of the East and the Muslim world. When Yelü Dashi, Gurkhan of the Khitans, vanquished the army of the Seljuk empire under Sultan Ahmad Sanjar in 1141 near Samarkand, Crusaders came to increasingly see this event as the event delivered by Prester John (Harl 2023: 267).

The remaining chapters focus on the rise of Genghis Khan and the emergence of his vast empire across the steppes of Eurasia and the conquests of Genghis Khan and his successors. These chapters also explore the successor states of Genghis Khan and their relations with other political entities across Eurasia. The eighteenth chapter, *"From Temujin to Genghis Khan"* and *the nineteenth chapter, "Genghis Khan, the World Conqueror,"* examine how Temjuin, known as Genghis Khan, transformed the Mongol tribes into a great nation and a global empire (Harl 2023: 180-181). Having emphasized Genghis Khan's genius for organization and statecraft, Harl considers him a historical figure who was able to build the most formidable nomadic empire in history. Although Genghis Khan had destroyed and obliterated urban centers of the Khwarazmian Empire and other political rivals, Harl claims that the Mongols exhibited their innovative approach to statecraft and organization. Western Christendom rejoiced at Genghis Khan's military victories over Muslim states, likening the Mongols to the warriors of Prester John. Yet Western Christians were shocked when the same Mongols invaded Europe under Batu, a grandson of Genghis Khan, twenty years later (Harl 2023: 312). The twentieth chapter,

"Batu and the Devil's Horsemen", the twenty-first chapter *"The Mongol Sack of Baghdad,"* and the twenty-second chapter *"Kublai Khan and the Unification of China"* explore Mongol conquests of Eastern Europe, Kievan Rus, Russian lands, the Abbasid Caliphate and Song China. Russian and Soviet historiography defined the Mongol conquest of Russian lands as "the beginning of Russia's three centuries under the Tartar yoke" (Harl 2023: 315).

When the Mongols invaded Europe, Pope Gregory IX declared a crusade against them (Harl 2023: 329). The next Pope, Innocent IV, preferred diplomacy to war and hoped to convert the Mongol rulers to Christianity with the intent to transform them into a mighty crusader army that would defeat Muslims and retrieve Jerusalem for Western Christendom (Harl 2023: 329). The Mongol siege and sack of Baghdad in 1258 under Hulagu, a grandson of Genghis Khan, profoundly shocked the Islamic world, yet this tragic event was celebrated in Western Christendom (Harl 2023: 331). Although Hulagu was an enemy of Islam whose army deliberately destroyed Muslim urban centers, mosques, libraries and schools, Berke, a grandson of Genghis Khan and the Khan of Golden Horde, embraced Islam and sought an alliance with other Muslim states against Hulagu (Harl 2023: 331). However, the destruction of Baghdad and the Abbasid Caliphate by Hulagu is assessed by the author as a transition to a new regional and continental order. Another grandson of Genghis, Kublai Khan, directed his attention to Song China, having succeeded in conquering and ruling the country. Kublai Khan and his successors feared and avoided cultural assimilation and Sinicization, trying to keep their distinct nomadic Mongol identity (Harl 2023: 362-363). The twenty-third *"Papal Envoys, Missionaries, and Marco Polo*" describes political and cultural interactions and relations between Western Christendom and the Mongol empire.

The last twenty-fourth chapter, *"Tamerlane, Prince of Destruction,"* extensively narrates and evaluates the last great nomadic empire of Eurasia ruled by Tamerlane. Harl draws attention to the fact that the Soviet regime inherited tsarist Russia's Eurocentric colonial and Orientalist worldviews vis-à-vis the easterners and nomads (Harl 2023: 387). One of the key reasons for exhuming Tamerlane's body by the Russian Soviet scholar Gerasimov in 1941 was to substantiate the validity of scientific assertion and racial theory of the savagery of Tamerlane and that he was "a Mongoloid barbarian conqueror" (Harl 2023: 387). Despite having been known in Western Christendom as the *"Prince of Destruction"* and in Russia as a ruthless barbarian Mongol conqueror and fanatical Muslim invader, Tamerlane is portrayed by the author as a "product of the high civilization of Eastern Islam" (Harl 2023: 388). Moreover, although Tamerlane was himself of a nomadic origin, he invested in building a flourishing settled society and urban areas. Furthermore, Harl claims that although Tamerlane may be regarded as the equal to Genghis Khan on the battlefield, his empire did not survive his death and soon declined and fractured, having represented the culmination and termination of the *"Eurasian nomads' military dominance of over two millennia"* (Harl 2023: 407). It should also be noted that the long domination of nomads came to an end due to the rise of Europe and the invention of artillery and firearms.

In the last section of the book *"Epilogue: Nomadic Conquerors: Achievements and Legacies,"* Harl puts forth his views and assessment of Eurasian nomads and their empires for over 4,500 years. First and foremost, he challenges deep-entrenched Eurocentric stereotypes and biases against nomadism and nomads. Since ancient times, in the worldviews of Europeans and other settled societies, nomads have historically and traditionally been viewed as "backward", "primitive", "uncivilized", "barbarian" savages, troublemakers and destroyers of cultures and civilizations. In this regard, Harl notes that nomads "were forever condemned in the writings of historians of the urban literate civilizations as rapacious barbarians, ignorant of agriculture and prone to violence. The stereotype has persisted to this day" (Harl 2023: 49). In his view, nomads,

especially Genghis Khan and his successors, were not mere brutes and primitive savages; they were transmitters of knowledge, cultures, religions, ideas and technologies (Harl 2023: 410). The author also depicts them as the founders of the modern global political and economic order. In particular, he claims that the modern age came into being thanks to the Mongol legacy.

It is evident that this is an informative, fascinating and useful book, yet its certain limitations ought to be emphasized as well. Although Harl attempts to distance himself from Eurocentrism, challenging deficient Western-centric worldviews of nomads and highlighting the positive contributions of nomads to civilization and the modern world, he seems to have failed to free himself from Western sedentary prejudices against nomads, extensively applying old Western tropes such as "barbarians" and "savages" in the book. Moreover, the author's assertion that the movement of populations across Eurasia was not from the east to the west and Indo-European speaking pastoralists brought to Inner Eurasia the achievements of human civilization seem to be questionable. Despite these and other possible limitations, this book by Harl deserves a wide readership and readers will benefit from his lucid and detailed narrative of Eurasian nomads and their empires. The significance of the book is also evident against the backdrop of growing interest in the nomadic past and the efforts to depict Kazakhstan as an heir to the Golden Horde.

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Authors' Contributions

The authors have made an equal contribution to the collection, analysis and writing of the article.

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