Eurasian Steppe

The Eurasian Steppe, also called the Great Steppe or the steppes, is the vast steppe ecoregion of Eurasia in the temperate grasslands, savannas, and shrublands biome. It stretches from Bulgaria, Romania, and Moldova through Ukraine, Russia, Kazakhstan, Xinjiang, and Mongolia to Manchuria, with one major ecoregion, the Pamirian steppes or Puszta, located mostly in Hungary and partially in Serbia and Croatia.

Since the Paleolithic age, the Steppe route has connected Eastern Europe, Central Asia, China, South Asia, and the Middle East economically, politically, and culturally through overland trade routes. The Steppe route is a predecessor not only of the Silk Road which developed during antiquity and the Middle Ages, but also of the Eurasian Land Bridge in the modern era. It has been home to nomadic empires and many large tribal confederations and ancient states throughout history, such as the Xiongnu, Scythia, Cimmeria, Scythians, Huns, Empires, Chosao, Transoxiana, Sogdiana, Xanbuk, Mongols, and Török Khagans.

Geography

Divisions

The Eurasian Steppe extends thousands of miles from near the mouth of the Danube almost to the Pacific Ocean. It is bounded on the north by the forests of Europe and Russia. Siberia and Asian Russia. There is no clear southern boundary although the land becomes increasingly dry as one moves south. The steppe narrows at two points, dividing it into three major parts.

Western Steppe

- The Western Steppe or Pontic-Caspian steppe, begins near the mouth of the Danube and extends northeast almost to Kazan and then southeastern to the southern tip of the Ural Mountains. Its northern edge was a broad band of forest steppe which has now been obliterated by the conversion of the whole area to agricultural land. In the southeast the Black Sea-Caspian Steppe extends between the Black Sea and Caspian Sea to the Caspian Mountains. In the west, the Great Hungarian Plain, is an island of steppe separated from the main steppe by the mountains of Transylvania. On the north shore of the Black Sea, the Crimea Peninsula has some Hungarian steppe and ports on the south coast which link the steppes to the civilizations of the Mediterranean basin.

Ural-Caspian Narrowing

- The Ural Mountains extend south to a point about 650 km (400 mi) northeast of the Caspian Sea. This is not a major barrier to movement, but the area near the Caspian is quite dry.

Central Steppe

- The Central Steppe or Kazakh Steppe extends from the Ural to Dzungaria. To the south, it grades off into semi-desert and desert which is interrupted by two great rivers, the Amu Darya (Oxus) and the Yenisei (Yenisey), which flow northwest into the Aral Sea and provide irrigation agriculture. In the southeast is the densely populated Fergana Valley and west of it the great oasis cities of Transoxiana, Samarkand and Bukhara along the Zeravshan River. The southern area has a complex history (see Central Asia and Greater Iran), while in the north, the Kazakh Steppe proper was relatively isolated from the main currents of written history.

Dzungarian Narrowing

On the east side of the former Sino-Soviet border mountains extend north almost to the forest zone with only limited grassland in Dzungaria.

Eastern Steppe

- Xingjian is the northwestern province of China. The east-west Tien Shan Mountains divide it into Dzungaria in the north and the Tarim Basin to the south. Dzungaria is bounded by the Tarbagatai Mountains on the west and the Mongolian Altai Mountains on the east, neither of which is a significant barrier. Dzungaria has good grassland around the edges and a central desert. It often behaved as a westward extension of Mongolia and connected Mongolia to the Kazakh steppes. To the north of Dzungaria are mountains and the Siberian forest. To the south and west of Dzungaria, and separated from it by the Tien Shan Mountains, is an area about twice the size of Dzungaria, the oval Tarim Region. The Tarim Basin is too dry to support even a nomadic population, but around its edges rivers flow down from the mountains giving rise to a ring of cities which lived by irrigation agriculture and east-west trade. The Tarim Basin formed an island of near civilization in the center of the steppes. The Northern Silk Road went along the north and south sides of the Tarim Basin and then crossed the mountains west to the Fergana Valley. At the west end of the basin the Pamir Mountains connect the Tien Shan Mountains to the Himalayas. To the south, the Kun Lun Mountains separate the Tarim Basin from the thinly populated Tibetan Plateau.

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- Manchuria is a special case. Westerners tend to think of Manchuria as the northeast projection of China that they see on maps. The Chinese now call this, or the eastern two thirds of Northeast China. The drier western third of the Greater Khingan Mountains has normally been part of Inner Mongolia. Before 1859, Manchuria also included Outer Manchuria to the north and east, which is now part of Russia. South of the Khingan Mountains and north of the Tanghai Mountains, the Mongolian-Manchurian steppe extends east into Manchuria as the Liaotung steppe. In Manchuria, the steppes grades off into forest and mountains without reaching the Pacific. The central area of forest steppe was inhabited by pastoral and agricultural peoples, while to the north and east was a thin population of hunting tribes of the Siberian type.

Fauna

Big mammals of the Eurasian steppe were the Przewalski’s horse, the saiga antelope, the Mongolian gazelle, the greater gazelle, the wild Bactrian camel and the onager. The gray wolf and the corsac fox and occasionally the brown bear are predators roaming the steppe. Smaller mammal species are the Mongolian gerbil, the little squirel and the bobak marmot.

Furthermore, the Eurasian steppe is home to a great variety of bird species. Threatened bird species living there are for example the imperial eagle, the lesser kestrel, the great bustard, the pale-back pigeon and the white-throated bushchat.

Ecoregions

The World Wide Fund for Nature divides the Eurasian steppe’s temperate grasslands, savannas, and shrublands into a number of ecoregions, distinguished by elevation, climate, rainfall, and other characteristics, and home to distinct animal and plant communities and species, and distinct habitat ecosystems.

- Alai Western Tien Shan steppe (Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan)
- Altaï steppe and semi-desert (Kazakhstan)
- Baraba steppe (Russia)
- Daurian forest steppe (China, Mongolia, Russia)
- Erim Valley steppe (China, Kazakhstan)
- Kazakh Forest steppe (Kazakhstan, Russia)
- Kazakh Steppe (Kazakhstan, Russia)
- Kazakh Inlands (Kazakhstan, Russia)
Human activities

Trade habits

The major centers of population and high culture in Eurasia are Europe, the Middle East, India and China. For some purposes it is useful to treat Greater Iran as a separate region. All these regions are connected by the Eurasian Steppe route which was an active predecessor of the Silk Road. The latter started in the Guanzhong region of China and ran west along the Hexi Corridor to the Tarim Basin. From there it went southwest to Greater Iran and turned southeast to India or west to the Middle East and Europe. A minor route went northwest along the great rivers and north of the Caspian Sea to the Black Sea. When faced with a rich caravan the steppes nomads could either rob it, or tax it, or hire themselves out as guards. Economically these three forms of taxation or parasitism amounted to the same thing. Trade was usually most vigorous when a strong empire controlled the steppe and reduced the number of petty chieftains preying on trade. The silk road first became significant and Chinese silk began reaching the Roman Empire about the time that the Emperor of Han pushed Chinese power west to the Tarim Basin.

Agriculture

The nomads would occasionally tolerate colonies of peasants on the steppe in the few areas where farming was possible. These were often captives who grew grain for their nomadic masters. Along the fringes there were areas that could be used for either plowland or grassland. These alternated between one and the other depending on the relative strength of the nomadic and agrarian heartlands. Over the last few hundred years, the Russian steppe and much of Inner Mongolia has been cultivated. The fact that most of the Russian steppe is irrigated implies that it was maintained as grasslands as a result of the military strength of the nomads.

Language

According to the most widely held hypothesis of the origin of the Indo-European languages, the Kurgan hypothesis, their common ancestor is thought to have originated on the Pontic-Caspian steppe. The Tocharians were an early Indo-European branch in the Tarim Basin. At the beginning of written history the entire steppes population west of Dzungaria spoke Iranian languages. From about 500 AD the Turkic languages replaced the Iranian languages first on the steppe, and later in the oases north of Iran (the reasons for this are poorly understood). Additionally, Hungarian speakers, a branch of the Uralic language family, who previously lived in the steppe in what is now Southern Russia, settled in the Carpathian basin in year 895. Mongolic languages are in Mongolia. In Manchuria one finds Tungusic languages and some others.

Religion

Taoism was introduced by Turko-Mongol nomads. Nestorianism and Manichaeanism spread to the Tarim Basin and into China, but they never became established majority religions. Buddhism spread from the north of India to the Tarim Basin and found a new home in China. By about 1400 AD, the entire steppes west of Dzungaria had adopted Islam. By about 1600 AD, Islam was established in the Tarim Basin while Dzungaria and Mongolia had adopted Tibetan Buddhism.

History

Warfare

Ranks between tribes were prevalent throughout the region's history. This is connected to the ease with which a defeated enemy's flocks can be driven away, making raiding profitable. In terms of warfare and raiding, in relation to sedentary societies, the horse gave the nomads an advantage of mobility. Horsemen could raid a village and retreat with their loot before a foot-based army could be mustered and deployed. When confronted with superior infantry, horsemen could simply ride away and re-group. Outside of Europe and parts of the Middle East, agrarian societies had difficulty raising a sufficient number of war horses, and often had to enlist them from their nomadic enemies (as mercenaries). Nomads could not easily be pursued onto the steppe since the steppe could not easily support a land army. If the Chinese sent an army into Mongolia, the nomads would flee and come back when the Chinese ran out of supplies. But the steppe nomads were relatively few and their rulers had difficulty holding together enough clans and tribes to field a large army. If they conquered an agricultural area they often lacked the skills to administer it. If they tried to hold agrarian land they gradually absorbed the civilization of their subjects, lost their nomadic skills and were either assimilated or driven out.

Relations with neighbors

Along the northern fringe the nomads would collect tribute from and blend with the forest tribes (see Khazars). From about 1240 to 1480 Russia paid tribute to the Khanate of Sibir. South of the Kazakh steppe the nomads blended with the sedentary population, partly because the Middle East has significant areas of steppe (taken by force in past invasions) and pastoralism. There was a sharp cultural divide between Mongolia and China and almost constant warfare from the dawn of history until 1757. The nomads collected large amounts of tribute from the Chinese and several Chinese dynasties were of steppes origin. Perhaps because of the mixture of agriculture and pastoralism in Manchuria its inhabitants knew how to deal with both nomads and the settled populations, and therefore were able to conquer much of northern China when both Chinese and Mongols were weak.

Historical peoples and nations

- Chosron—3rd-4th centuries BC
- Chimru—12th-7th centuries BC
- Magns—11th century BC - 8th century AD
- Scythians—8th-4th centuries BC
- Sogdians—8th-4th centuries BC
- Jaxedones—7th-1st century BC
- Massagetae—7th-1st century BC
- Thysagetae—7th-3rd century BC
- Donghu—7th-2nd century BC
- Diaos—7th BC 5th century AD
- Jiks—6th-1st century BC
- Sarmatians—6th century BC - 5th century AD
- Bulgars—7th century BC-7th century AD
- Transoxiana—4th century BC - 14th century AD
- Xiongnu—3rd century BC - 2nd century AD
- Jivzges—3rd century BC - 5th century AD
- Yuechi—2nd century BC - 1st century AD
- Turks—1st century BC - 6th century AD
- Iberians—1st century BC
- Parthians—2nd century BC
- Huns—4th-8th centuries
- Alans—5th-11th centuries
- Avars—5th-9th centuries
- Hepthalites—6th-7th centuries
- European Avars—6th-8th centuries
- Ostrogoths—6th-8th centuries
- Sogdians—6th-8th centuries
- Khazars—7th-11th centuries

Gallery
See also
- Steppe Route
- Izymysh Trail
- Great Alföld
- Little Alföld

References

Bibliography
- Sinor, Denis, "Horse and Pasture in Inner Asian History," in Denis Sinor, (Collected Studies Series), Inner Asia and its Contacts with Medieval Europe, London: Variorum, 1977, II.

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