

1. THE PRINCIPAL GEOGRAPHICAL FEATURES AND PROVINCES

Central Asia as defined for this publication (see the Preface) consists of two major geographical areas: the western part that includes the Turan plain east of the Caspian Sea and the Kazakh Upland north of it, stretching eastward to the foot of the Tien-Shan and Pamir-Alay mountains and southward to the Kopet-Dagh mountains; and the eastern part that includes the high plateaus of the Tarim basin and the Junghar basin (separated from one another by the Tien-Shan mountains, while the Tarim basin is separated from the even higher Tibetan plateau by the Kunlun range). These two main parts of Central Asia are often conveniently called Western and Eastern Turkestan (cf. below). The mountain systems that lie between the western and the eastern parts of Central Asia are formed by the ranges radiating from the Pamirs mostly on east-west axes. The highest peaks in these mountains reach 7,496 m in the Darvaz chain (in Western Turkestan) and 7,719 m in the Kongur chain (in Eastern Turkestan). Some of these ranges made the movement of people in a longitudinal direction (especially in the Pamir-Alay) difficult, but these barriers were mostly not impenetrable.

Central Asia as a whole is characterized by an extreme continental climate, with high aridity that increases from north to south and from the mountains to the plains. Accordingly, Central Asia is divided into three main natural regions: steppe, desert, and mountains. The steppe zone, which lies approximately north of the Aral Sea, the Sir-Darya river, and the Tien-Shan mountains, is a part of the great steppe belt stretching across the Eurasian continent from Manchuria in the east to Hungary in the west. The northern part of the steppe consists of grasslands that gradually become forest-steppe bordering the Siberian forest (taiga) in the north; most of the steppe belt is, however, semidesert or desert-steppe, with very few rivers, sparse vegetation, and some salt pans and salt lakes. South of the steppe belt lies the desert zone, which occupies the largest part of Central Asia and encompasses three major deserts, the Qara-qum, Qizil-qum, and Taqla-Makan, as well as a number of smaller areas of sand desert, and the dry Üst-Yurt plateau.

With the exception of the Irtysh river and its left tributaries that belong to the Arctic Ocean drainage and flow through the northern grasslands, all Central Asian rivers are of internal drainage. In the western part of Central Asia, two major rivers, the Amu-Darya and the Sir-Darya, flow, respectively, from the Pamirs and the Tien-Shan to the north-west and empty into the Aral Sea (but cf. map 47). In the eastern part the main river is the Tarim, with its tributaries that rise in the Kunlun, Pamir-Alay, and Tien-Shan mountains; it falls into the “wandering” lake Lop-nor (a remnant of an ancient Lop Sea). Other rivers that do not belong to the basins of the Amu-Darya, Sir-Darya, and Tarim dry up in blind deltas in the sands. All major Central Asian rivers are fed by melting snow in the mountains (in spring) and especially the melting ice of numerous mountain glaciers (in summer). The Amu-Darya, in its lower course, has changed its riverbed repeatedly. In prehistoric times it probably fell into the Caspian Sea, instead of the Aral Sea; the dry bed known as Uzboy is the remainder of this ancient course, and the flow of water through it, at least partially, was renewed several times during the historic period, most notably in the early 13th and late 14th centuries. The delta of the Amu-Darya was characterized by frequent changes in the direction and configuration of the various arms of the river (sometimes these changes were man-made). For a certain time during the first and early second millennium A.D. the Amu-Darya and the Sir-Darya had a common delta, and later on the arms of the Sir-Darya delta would also change their configuration. The Tarim also had a migratory delta whose arms would change and sometimes entirely dry up.

Most of the Central Asian plains in the desert zone have a very fertile yellow loess soil, but, because of the extremely dry climate, it can be used for agriculture only with the help of artificial irrigation (dry farming has existed mostly in the piedmont areas, but it has never been of major importance). Such agriculture developed in the central parts of Central Asia since the second millennium B.C., and it has remained the economic basis of the Central Asian civilization. At about the same time, pastoralist stock-breeding developed in the steppe areas. The sedentary population lived in oases in the irrigated river basins, which became the centers of agriculture and urban life, while the stock-breeders nomadized in the steppes. These two groups were never isolated from one another, however, and, in many ways, they were dependent on one another. The urban centers in the oases developed a sophisticated civilization whose influence spread far into the steppes. But militarily and politically the nomads were predominant for many centuries, due to their superior mobility and military prowess.

The desert zone of Central Asia can also be described as a “sedentary zone,” because it was the area in which all the settled rural and urban population was located. But in this “sedentary zone” the oases occupied only a small part of the area, and they were interspersed with steppe and desert, which could be quite close even to the major population centers (like Bukhara and Khiva). Therefore, throughout historic times, groups of nomads, sometimes very substantial ones, could be found within the “sedentary zone,” occupying these ecological niches, while the areas of sedentary population would almost never form a large compact territory. In some desert regions the sedentary population was concentrated in relatively small isolated oases surrounded by vast expanses of desert, as was the case in Eastern Turkestan.

The majority of the sedentary population of Central Asia was concentrated in five regions: the Zerafshan and the Qashqa-Darya river valleys (known as Soghd in pre-Islamic and early Islamic times), Khorezm (the area of the lower course of the Amu-Darya, with its delta), Ferghana (the fertile basin in the middle course of the Sir-Darya), Chach, or Shash, together with Ilaq (the area in the basin of the Chirchik and the Ahangeran, right tributaries of the Sir-Darya), and in the area of Balkh, south of the Amu-Darya. All regions between the middle and upper course of the Amu-Darya and the Sir-Darya were known in Islamic times as “Mā’ warā’ an-Nahr” (in simplified transcription, Mavarannahr), lit. “That which is beyond the River” (i.e. beyond the Amu), which corresponds to the “Transoxiana,” or “Transoxania” (“That which is beyond the Oxus”) of classical authors; the name Mavarannahr was used in Central Asia until as late as the early 20th century. The region to the south of the upper course of the Amu-Darya and north of the Hindukush mountains was known in the Islamic period as Tokharistan; this term was used also in a wider sense, including also the highlands north of the upper course of the Amu-Darya. The Amu-Darya was traditionally considered the border between Iran and Central Asia, and the lands south of it belonged to Khorasan—the north-eastern province of Iran; the actual political boundaries would only seldom run along the river, and, since the Özbek conquest, the parts of Khorasan north of the Kopet-Dagh and east of the Murghab mostly belonged to different Central Asian states. There was another geographical term, Turkestan (or Turkistan, lit. “The land of the Turks”), loosely applied to Central Asia or to different parts of it. It changed its meaning with the changes in the ethnic composition of the population and state boundaries, and it is actually misleading for the early periods of Central Asian history, when no Turks were yet historically attested; but by the end of the 19th century three parts of Turkestan were usually distinguished: Western (or Russian), Eastern (or Chinese), and Afghan Turkestan. The terms Eastern and Western Turkestan can still be conveniently used to distinguish between two major geographical and historical regions of Central Asia, although the term Eastern Turkestan is often used only for the Tarim basin, excluding Jungharia—the region north of the Tien-Shan. Separate parts of the Tarim basin region have been known only under the names of the cities that were their centers (in pre-Islamic times, city-states), although sometimes the name Kashghar, or Kashgharia, was applied to Eastern Turkestan as a whole. The steppe lands of Central Asia, north of the Aral Sea and the Sir-Darya, became known to the Islamic geographers under the names of the nomadic peoples who were dominant in these steppes. Accordingly, beginning in the 8th century A.D. the steppe region was called “the Steppe of the Ghuzz” (i.e. Oghuz), and, beginning in the 11th century, it became “the Steppe of the Qipchaqs” (Dasht-i Qipchaq in Persian). This latter name remained in the local usage down to the 19th century, although the Qipchaqs disappeared as the dominant ethnic group in the steppes after the Mongol conquest.

A separate part of the steppe belt of Western Turkestan is the region between the Tien-Shan in the south and Lake Balkhash in the north known under its Turkic name Yeti-su (or Zheti-su) or, in Western literature, under the Russian version of this name, “Semirech’e”—literally, “Seven rivers.”