

An Age Undreamed: Eurasian Nomads, Gender, and Globalization

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History has been predominantly written by settled, agrarian, and often patriarchal groups. For “civilized” chroniclers, the positive impact of nomads, but especially nomadic women, was insignificant. Yet the nomads of Eurasia facilitated and managed far flung trade and integrated a continent. In many instances, nomadic women were involved in administration and trade within a world of steppe affluence. Examining written histories of settled peoples and multiple oral versions of nomadic history reveals the vast cultural roles played by women. Women made successful nomadic trade networks possible. They connected diverse regions, and secured an interregional flow of information and goods. Even the Internet and other modern trade networks are successors of networks controlled by nomads like the great Silk Road. By solidifying female empowerment in trade and society, nomadic peoples synthesized the exchange of goods and culture across Eurasia.

Before any discussion of nomadic women can take place, it is important to understand bias in many sources that discuss nomads. Nomadic groups were depicted as dimly backward barbarians. In describing the Xiongnu or Huns, the great Chinese historian Sima Qian wrote, “Their only concern is self-advantage and they know nothing of propriety or righteousness.”¹ The philosopher Confucius would have concurred; he said, “Barbarian states with rulers are inferior to Chinese states without them.”² In almost every written source from traditionally sedentary cultures, nomads are barbarians or less than human. Edward Gibbon describes nomadic Eurasian groups as “barbarians;”³ the Roman historian Ammianus Marcellinus called them “two-legged animals”⁴ and the monk Matthew Paris remarked that one nomadic group, the Mongols, were “that detestable race of Satan.”⁵

A mix of oral and written traditions, *The Secret History of the Mongols* “is the only genuine (not to be confused with reliable) native account of the life of and deeds of...Genghis Khan.”⁶ Passed through multiple translations, it is difficult to decipher the work’s definitive writer. It does not help that the Mongols were positioned in the very middle of bickering neighbors. Unsurprisingly, they developed lasting but often hostile relationships with those they traded with or ruled. China was one such neighbor. In 1368, after a variety of rebellions, Mongol power over China finally diminished to nothingness.⁷ The Mongols ruled the Chinese and the Chinese

¹ James Millward, *The Silk Road: A Very Short Introduction*, (New York: Oxford UP, 2013), 13.

² *Confucius: The Analects (Lun Yu)*. trans. D.C. Lau. ed. Betty Radice, (New York: Penguin, 1979), 64.

³ Millward, *The Silk Road*, 11.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 13.

⁵ Jack Weatherford, *Genghis Khan and the Making of the Modern World*, (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2004), 148.

⁶ Igor de Rachewiltz, trans., *The Secret History of the Mongols: A Mongolian Epic Chronicle of The Thirteenth Century*, (Boston: Brill, 2006), xxv.

⁷ W. Scott Morton and Charlton M. Lewis, *China: Its History and Culture*, (San Francisco: McGraw-Hill, Inc., 2005), 122.

fought back. To the Chinese, the Mongol rulers were mockeries: shaggy savages in emperors' clothing.

While English-Mongol relations may not have been quite so intense, modern English versions of *The Secret History of the Mongols* can be very biased. In some versions, there are major differences in writings on *anda* or “friendship or union as close as two tallies [sic]”⁸ between Temujin (a.k.a. Genghis Khan) and his ally turned enemy, Jamuqa. In the first English translation by Francis Woodman Cleaves, Cleaves writes, “...declaring themselves *anda*, loving each other, banqueting and feasting, they [Temujin and Jamuqa] rejoiced and, at night, in their covering they passed the night together alone.”⁹ Another version of the writings printed in 2006 and edited by Igor de Rachewiltz reads, “...they declared themselves sworn friends and loved each other; they enjoyed themselves reveling and feasting, and at night they slept together, the two of them under one blanket.”¹⁰ In the depiction of the Rachewiltz' writing, the intimacy (which is not sexual) is more pronounced. Cleaves first completed his translation in 1957.¹¹ He refrains from taking Temujin out of a twentieth century Western context rooted in Western heterosexual mores.

Before Mongols like Genghis Khan, there existed the powerful Scythians. Most evidence pertaining to Scythians is archeological. Their cultural horizon spanned from Mongolia's Altai Mountains to the Black Sea.¹² The Scythians were predecessors of many other cultural traditions. For example, “Scythians already lived in domed, felt-covered tents”, writes Islamic and Turkish expert Carter Vaughn Findley, “but they had not yet developed the collapsible ones later used by Turks and Mongols and consequently had to transport their dwellings on wagons.”¹³ There is a very real possibility the Scythians may have contributed to the later steppe livelihoods of future continental conquerors like the Mongols.

Fearsome yet influential, Scythian women held tremendous social power and influence. A strong female tradition reflected on groups such as the Pazyryk. In her October 1994 *National Geographic* article, “A Mummy Unearthed from the Pastures of Heaven”, archeologist Natalya Polosmak writes on her expeditions including one which unearthed a powerful Pazyryk woman: the Ice Maiden of Ukok.¹⁴ Describing the Ice Maiden's body, Polosmak writes that she found fanciful animal tattoos with a strong, stylistic resemblance to styles used by people from the Black Sea known as Scythians.¹⁵ If this is the case, the Pazyryk were at least exposed to some vestige of Scythian tradition. Whether through trade mastery or political supremacy, Scythian traditions were imprinted on other steppe communities.

⁸ Francis Woodman Cleaves, *The Secret History of the Mongols*, (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1982), 271.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 50.

¹⁰ Igor de Rachewiltz, trans., *The Secret History of the Mongols: A Mongolian Epic Chronicle of The Thirteenth Century*, (Boston: Brill, 2006), 45.

¹¹ Francis Woodman Cleaves, trans., *The Secret History of the Mongols*, (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1982).

¹² Millward, *The Silk Road*, 21.

¹³ Carter Vaughn Findley, *The Turks in World History*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 25.

¹⁴ Natalya Polosmak, “A Mummy Unearthed from the Pastures of Heaven”, *National Geographic*, October 1994.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 82.

Much like other steppe groups, Scythian tradition considered gender in a surprisingly open light. As Polosmak writes, “Herodotus wrote that it was common among at least one Siberian group for women warriors, skilled with the bow and the javelin, to ride into battle with men.”¹⁶ As Renate Rolle, a writer on Scythian history explains, “Female warriors’ graves were found that contained a large numbers of weapons, both offensive and defensive, including body armor.”¹⁷ According to Rolle, some women were even “buried together with their toddlers.”¹⁸ Combat did little to diminish maternal values. Women demonstrated their powers in both domestic and confrontational spheres.

Along with weapons and toddlers, horses also accompanied real life “Amazons”. Natalya Polosmak mentions how one female she discovered had “doubtless been a good rider, and the horses in her grave were her own.”¹⁹ The description bears a striking resemblance to Herodotus’ description of Scythian funerals where “they strangle...the fifty finest horses.”²⁰ Horses are precious commodities. They carry many labors like nourishment or transporting goods and warriors into battle. In the latter’s case, the horse could be fetishized as a weapon. Such fetishizing does occur for a variety of other weapons in other Pazyryk digs. Writing about a dig with a deceased man and girl, Polosmak writes on how both bodies “had similar weaponry- battle-axes, knives, bows”²¹ and “horses accompanied them.”²² The horses here may have exceeded their role as mere tools to become symbols of aggression and pride like the weapons beside them.

On the Silk Road, horses and other precious commodities were keys to nomadic success. In his book, *The Silk Road: A Very Short Introduction*, James A. Millward explains how long networks of routes transferred a variety of goods, technology, religion, and ideas across Eurasia. Nomads made the Silk Road’s many cultural and commercial transactions possible. As so called “spaces in between”²³ ancient civilizations, nomads impacted Eurasian life for ages to come.

A staple of past nomadic life, the horse pulled nomads into the future. As James A. Millward explains, “China’s relationship with northern steppe peoples and the silk road [sic] centered on the horse as much as on silk.”²⁴ What was an important part of nomadic life became a profitable item nomads used to integrate themselves into large economies. Even here women played a vital albeit less than positive role. One commodity rises above others in significance: women.

Hardly oblivious bystanders in this exchange, women recognized the challenges that came with leaving their home behind to travel to supposedly “barbaric” steppe kingdoms like the Uighur kingdom. In 821, the princess Taihe (or Tai-ho) journeyed as a bride to Uyghur (a.k.a. the

¹⁶ Ibid., 95.

¹⁷ Renate Rolle, “The Scythians: Between Mobility Tomb Architecture, and Early Urban Structures”, *The Barbarians of Ancient Europe: Realities and Interactions*, ed. Larissa Bonfante (New York: Cambridge UP, 2014), 120.

¹⁸ Ibid., 120.

¹⁹ Polosmak, “Pastures of Heaven”, 99.

²⁰ Askold I. Ivantchik, “The Funeral of the Scythian Kings: The Historical Reality and Description of Herodotus”, *The Barbarians of Ancient Europe: Realities and Interactions*, ed. Larissa Bonfante, (New York: Cambridge UP, 2014), 81.

²¹ Polosmak, 95.

²² Ibid., 95.

²³ The description “spaces in between” comes from British politician Rory Stewart. James Millward, *The Silk Road: A Very Short Introduction*, (New York: Oxford UP, 2013), 7.

²⁴ Millward, *The Silk Road*, 48.

Uighur) lands where she was widowed within two years, yet, rather than commit suicide or leave, she remained in the capital Karabalghasun until the Kirghiz people undermined Uyghur rule and forced her to leave in 843.²⁵ In a supposedly “barbarian” kingdom, the “khatun [queen] wielded power.”²⁶ The queen was a political force to be reckoned with. She was more than just a bargaining chip.

Exchanging in commodities and mastering communications, nomads molded and conquered the Silk Road. Spreading ideas and improving communications was a strongpoint of nomadic groups like the Mongols. Along with a more ostentatious fusion, the Mongols’ cultural transfiguration relied greatly on individual experts and specialists. Transplanted from their initial homes, these interesting characters spread ideas and techniques to far flung regions. In one case after a successful European conquest, the Mongols, “marched thousands of the [defeated German] miners east to begin mining the rich mineral deposits in Dzungaria, the western Mongolian area that was the personal property of [Genghis Khan’s son] Ogodei.”²⁷

Enhancing myriad ways information was sent, the Mongols specialized in communication. The Mongols created impressive communications networks that ensured goods and copious information were transported with ease. They were also fierce trade advocates. As the anthropologist Jack Weatherford writes, “Through their shares, the members of the Mongol royal family controlled much of the production throughout Eurasia, but they depended on the merchant class to transport and sell their wares.”²⁸ Rather than attach themselves to a single bureaucracy or state, Mongols attached themselves to forces actually transporting goods and information. To consolidate the Mongol leader Genghis Khan’s power, his daughters invested in profitable goods and controlled meeting areas and routes along the Silk Road.²⁹

Foreshadowing future advances in information technology like the Internet, Mongols perfected many means to encode vast informational sums. The Mongols “discerned the advantages of utilizing columns of numbers or place numbers in the style of Arabic numerals, and they introduced the use of zero, negative numbers, and algebra in China.”³⁰ The Mongols were bridging culturally diverse regions such as Arabia and China. Other than bridging cultural divides, they streamlined many approaches to communication. The Mongols innovated by applying pre-constructed type for administrative interests and by utilizing type on a greater scale.³¹ By toying with mathematics and quickly produced type, the Mongols simplified information for mass communication. In a move mirroring a world bound by codified computer languages, Khubilai Khan, Genghis Khan’s grandson, conceived an even more ambitious project. Khubilai Khan sought to write the world’s every language using a forty one letter, Tibetan inspired alphabet posed to him in 1269 by a lama from Tibet: Phagspa.³²

²⁵ Findley, *The Turks in World History*, 54. Carter V. Findley does not specify a dating system but it is likely C.E. The Tang Dynasty lasted from C.E. 618-907.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Weatherford, *Genghis Khan and the Making of the Modern World*, 153.

²⁸ Ibid., 225.

²⁹ Jack Weatherford, *The Secret History of the Mongol Queens: How the Daughters of Genghis Khan Rescued His Empire*, (New York: Crown, 2010), 78.

³⁰ Weatherford, *Genghis Khan and the Making of the Modern World*, 232.

³¹ Ibid., 233.

³² Ibid., 205.

For nomads like the Mongols, Silk Road treasures carried a political connotation. *The Secret History of the Mongols* displays the pivotal role of trade in Mongol conquest. Speaking to Genghis Khan about his loyalty, a Uighur leader said, “If through your favor, O Cinggis Qa’an [Genghis Khan], I were to obtain/ But a ring from your golden belt, / But a thread from your crimson coat, /I will become your fifth son and will serve you.”³³

Even if the excerpt is more a testimony to hostile Mongol interpretations of Uighurs, wealth is clearly given prime importance. Flaunting wealth shows an advantage over other ethnic groups and clans. Wealth demarcates prestige and power. However, in taking precious treasures, Genghis Khan unlocked a Pandora’s Box of wants and desires. Jack Weatherford explains treasures’ impact on Mongol attitudes in his book *Genghis Khan and the Making of the Modern World*, first published in 2004:

...he [Genghis Khan] realized that his empire depended on constant conquest... his followers had grown dependent on a steady flow of goods. They would not willingly return to the simple goods that he had known as a child. In order to feed this voracious appetite, he had to move on to new conquests.³⁴

As Jack Weatherford explains in his book *The Secret History of the Mongol Queens*, first published in 2010, the vast empire of the Mongols would have been nonexistent without women. *The Secret History of the Mongol Queens* explains how women served an important purpose in Mongol history through significant religious, government, martial, and trade roles. Trade mastery was one of many powers, like the ability to fight, Mongol culture bestowed upon its women of power. Women controlled trade through prestigious political marriages into powerful kingdoms and ethnic groups. They also ensured the subservience of neighboring kingdoms and peoples. Moreover, women held significant positions along the Silk Road.

Despite the powers of Mongol women, *The Secret History of the Mongols* does not even take note of women until Mongqoljin Qo’a: the first wife of the eighth human mentioned in the Mongol universe!³⁵ Still, women were the foundation of religion in Mongol life. “Female spirits were worshipped near bodies of water”, writes Jack Weatherford, “or else in caves, which were the wombs of Mother Earth. In contrast to the stationary *ovoo* [male shrine], the *ger* [Mongol tent] became a sort of portable cave that allowed worshippers to honor the female spirit wherever she was taken.”³⁶ The *ger* was the centerpiece of Mongol existence: the source of warmth and life on the harsh steppe. The tent represented the dramatic evolution from cave to a wandering, Mongol life; therefore, the Mongol lifestyle was indebted to female energy.

Along with religion, women were integral to Mongol government. Just as the *ger* was sacred and powerful, so was the rule of women. Unlike the *guregen* [male son-in-law of Genghis Khan]”, explains Weatherford, “who lost what power he had over his tribe and was destined to quickly lose his life, the daughter in law [of Genghis Khan]...became a *beki*, a title of honor previously

³³ Igor de Rachewiltz, trans., *The Secret History of the Mongols*, 163.

³⁴ Weatherford, *Genghis Khan and the Making of the Modern World*, 127.

³⁵ Igor de Rachewiltz, trans., *The Secret History of the Mongols: A Mongolian Epic Chronicle of the Thirteenth Century*, (Boston: Brill, 2006), 1.

³⁶ Jack Weatherford, *The Secret History of the Mongol Queens: How the Daughters of Genghis Khan Rescued His Empire*, (New York: Crown, 2010), 197.

used primarily for powerful men, or she became *khatun*, a queen.³⁷ The disparity in titles shows women sometimes carried a greater worth and weight than their consorts. Whereas son-in-laws, or male competitors, were subdued by marriage, women effectively used their stations to benefit the empire. “[The] *khatuns*”, writes Weatherford, “functioned as the ambassadors of their tribes. They handled negotiations, served as the communications network, and hosted visitors from their own group.”³⁸ As representatives to the Khan, daughters-in-law benefited intra-tribal cohesion by centralizing clan powers. The many queens ensured clans were united under a single khan.

Women’s roles, however, were not just grounded in political or trade work. Women could command great respect, especially in Mongol combat tradition. Women in Mongol culture, like Genghis Khan’s mother Hoelun, epitomized strength, durability, and self-sufficiency. As one excerpt from *The Secret History of the Mongols* reads, “Lady Hoelun was born / A clever woman / And she nourished her small sons... / Born brave, the noble mother / Nourished her sons who were favored / With heaven’s good fortune.”³⁹ Hoelun’s depiction was certainly a selling point for Genghis Khan’s destiny as a world conqueror. It also many insights on Mongol women. Hoelun could survive on her own when confronted with adversity. More importantly, her efforts were recognized as being at least impressive in future chroniclers’ writings. There was no great religious savior or knight in shining armor for her. Hoelun was a survivor worthy of praise.

Like Hoelun, other Mongol women could be equally ferocious. Indeed some participated as warriors. “Their deeds were usually explained as arising from unusually dire circumstances or in some cases from exceptional aptitude”, writes Weatherford.⁴⁰ Marco Polo describes one such fearsome female warrior queen and how “she would ‘make a dash at the host of the enemy, and seize some man thereout [sic], as deftly as a hawk pounces on a bird, and carry him to her father; and this she did many a time.’”⁴¹ While not always common, women warriors did not totally go against societal norms. Mongol society showed an egalitarian strain by making warrior status a matter of merit rather than gender.

In history, the writings of settled, agrarian, and often patriarchal groups rule. Positive nomadic impacts, like those made by nomadic women, were dismissed as insignificant. On the contrary, nomads were facilitators and managers of trade. They integrated the diverse Eurasian continent. In an affluent steppe world, nomadic women participated in administration and trade. Accounts in written settled peoples’ histories, as well as written oral traditions, show women carrying broad cultural roles. One of these roles included connecting diverse regions. Powerful Mongol women did so by actualizing successful nomadic trade networks and securing a flow of information and goods across different regions. Nomadic networks like the great Silk Road contributed to modern trade networks like the Internet. Nomads exchanged goods and cultures across Eurasia; however, their advances were made possible by empowered women in trade and society.

³⁷ Ibid., 36.

³⁸ Ibid., 36.

³⁹ This is taken from poetic verse form. Igor de Rachewiltz, trans. *The Secret History of the Mongols*, 19.

⁴⁰ Weatherford, *The Secret History of the Mongol Queens*, 120.

⁴¹ Excerpt from Marco Polo’s *The Travels of Marco Polo*. Ibid., 118.

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