A Silk Road Legacy: The Spread of Buddhism and Islam*

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Since Andre Gunder Frank published The Centrality of Central Asia¹ in 1992, world historians have paid more attention to the dynamic forces radiating from Central Asia during the last few thousand years. However, scholars are frustrated by the extremely fluid nature of the region’s ethnic, religious, and political composition, which makes research on the historical process of any specific period seem like an overwhelming task. Scholars of Central Asia’s Buddhist culture feel reluctant to deal with the region after the Islamic conquest, which occurred in the late seventh and early eighth centuries, while those who study its history after the Islamic conquest are perplexed by the persistent presence of many pre-Islamic languages and cultural traits in the region. Likewise, scholars who are familiar with the Chinese historical literature on Central Asia often hesitate venturing into the deep ocean of Persian and Arabic literature on the region. Furthermore, in the last two decades, the discovery of many documents written in various versions of Greek alphabets in the region that once was Bactria makes the task of treading through literary sources even more daunting. Nevertheless, this article takes up the challenge of exploring

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the religious and social life of Central Asian people both before and after Islamization, mainly by using sources written in Arabic, Persian, and Chinese records, as well as modern scholarship in art history and archaeology. Limited by my own language skills in Sanskrit and Classical Chinese, I have had to rely heavily on English translations of Arabic and Persian works. Fortunately, many historical writings in these two major Western Asian languages have been translated and edited in recent decades by experts whose erudition make possible a world historical approach of studying Central Asia.

The Setting

Long before the arrival and spread of Islam in Central Asia, Buddhism was already well established within two of its regions—Tukharistan, in what is now northern Afghanistan, and Transoxiana (Khoresm and Sogdiana) in what is now Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan where two rivers, the Amu and the Syr, flow westward into the Aral Sea. These two regions encompassed the most important way stations on the caravan routes that moved Chinese silks westward to India, and in addition, Tukharistan and Sogdiana became the homeland of Central Asian Buddhists, some of whom played a major role in the spread of Buddhist faith from South Asia to China.

By the first century c.e. the area that encompassed both Tukharistan and Sogdiana (the southern part of Transoxiana) had become the site of a major junction where routes going east and west crossed those going north and south. It had also become a major trading center for Chinese as well as Mediterranean and Iranian goods. In addition, Buddhist missionaries from India, including some who were planning to go on to China, moved to this area, and were thus located in the midst of this commercial activity. By the third century c.e. artisans had begun sculpting images of the Buddha on the sandstone walls of Tukharistan’s Bamiyan Valley (about one hundred miles west of Kabul). The artistic style of these Buddhas was closely related to the sculptural art of Gandhara (in northwestern India), and thus it displayed the results of the Gandharan’s highly successful merging of Indian, Iranian, and Greek aesthetic traditions. It was the fourth century B.C.E. presence of Alexander of Macedonia’s armies, and their descendants, in Afghanistan and northeastern India that accounts for the presence of Greek artistic styles in this region. Probably during the fifth century c.e., when a nomadic people, Hephthalites in the Greek record, Huna in the Indian record, occupied the region and then further invaded India, two
colossal Buddhas (one 165 feet high and the other 119 feet high) were carved on the sandstone walls of Bamiyan Valley, where they stood for more than 1,500 years as a testament to the Buddhist heritage of this area. Even after the Taliban completely destroyed them in 2001, their ruins still stand as a witness to the long legacy of Buddhism on this route that connected India and China. The cosmopolitan nature of this area continued to increase when Turkish nomads, originally from the eastern steppe north of China, invaded it from the north around the sixth century C.E. Some of these Turks also settled in this area, or moved even farther south into India.

The ever-changing political situation in this region forced its population to rely heavily upon nongovernmental institutions for both social stability and local security. Zoroastrian and Buddhist establishments, as well as other institutions and cultural practices, provided religious and social cohesion in the region. The elites, which included scholars, merchants, and generals, learned to be flexible regarding their political allegiance and often changed masters in accordance with their economic and social interests. Meanwhile, Indian, Chinese, Persian, and Greek cultural elements continued to arrive and flourish in the region, thereby contributing to a unique and robust Central Asian culture.

Perhaps it was in large part due to this eclectic but sound cultural foundation that Central Asia would produce so many outstanding politicians, religious leaders, and scientists during its transition from a Buddhist religious sphere to an Islamic domain in the years between 700 and 1100 C.E. Although many of these individuals are now mentioned in the world history literature and texts, they are almost always presented as “Islamic scholars,” or set in Persian Islamic heritage. Their Central Asian origins are rarely, if ever, mentioned. Even after the establishment of Islam in the region the local culture still retained elements of its earlier multicultural traditions, including the Hellenistic culture that had taken root there during and after Alexander’s conquests. This was especially true with regard to various artistic and architectural styles, as well as the Dionysian viniculture that included music, dancing, and wine drinking.

**Buddhism in Central Asia before the Arab Conquest**

Since Kushan times (ca. second century B.C.E.–third century C.E.) Buddhist institutions had been entrenched in Tukharistan. Chinese records, however, indicate that it was their northern neighbors, the Sogdians, who lived in the southern part of Transoxiana, both as trad-
ers and religious teachers, who were among the first travelers to bring Buddhism to China. Exactly how these Sogdians became exceedingly competent teachers of Buddhism and the Sanskrit language is not clear. Neither the written records of Sogdiana nor those of the Indian subcontinent reveal the presence of Sogdian Buddhists studying in India. This, however, does not necessarily mean that there were no Sogdian converts studying Buddhism in India. Unfortunately, from the point of view of historians, Indian governments during these centuries did not attempt to compile records describing foreign travelers or foreign residents within their domain, and thus they are largely absent from the subcontinent’s records.

Although the archives of India are of little help, records from other countries, especially China, clearly indicate that from the second to the fourth century C.E. many of the Sogdian traders in China were Buddhists. Indeed, Chinese records reveal that during the Han dynasty, when Buddhists first started coming to China, some of the earliest arrivals were not from India, the Buddhist homeland, but from Sogdiana. It was a time that Kushan Empire controlled both northern India and Central Asia. Kanishka, the most powerful Kushan king who probably reigned between the first and second centuries, is a well-known royal patron in Chinese Buddhist literature. Sogdian traders, who most likely acted as trading agents for the Kushans, were among the first to introduce the religion to the Chinese, and for some time thereafter they continued to play an important role in the study of Buddhism in China. For example, two Sogdians, whose Chinese names were Kang Ju and Kang Mengxiang, lived in China for more than twenty years (ca. 168–189 C.E.), and during this time they helped translate Buddhist Sanskrit texts into the Chinese language. At that time, the only place one could study the Sanskrit language and the Buddhist scriptures was in India. Thus, given these very early dates for the presence of such Sogdian Buddhist scholars in China, one can conclude that at least some Sogdian traders must have first learned about Buddhism in India, and then made their way to China, where they practiced and preached it.

Despite the growing significance of Buddhism in Sogdiana it never became an exclusively Buddhist country. Politically, the numerous city-states never unified themselves into a single polity, and they often fought among themselves for hegemony in the region. In general, in each city urban elites, warriors, and merchant-princes formed oligarchies that made the decisions regarding war and diplomacy. Even when a city-state established a local monarchy, its power, even over its own subjects, tended to be weak. Likewise, the Sogdian city-states never
established an official religion, and they hosted a variety of religious institutions. All of these city-states were interested in making commercial profits, either from the long-distance trade on the Silk Road or the local trade in food and clothing. Also there is much evidence that Sogdian merchants who lived abroad practiced not only Buddhism, but also Manichaeism and Zoroastrianism in their diasporas. For example, recent discoveries of Sogdian merchant tombs in western China reveal that those who were wealthy enough to build such elaborate graves for themselves strictly followed Zoroastrian funeral rituals. Most likely these Sogdians were Zoroastrians at heart, regardless of whatever religious affiliation they may have claimed in the larger commercial community.

Nevertheless, it should be noted here that the Zoroastrianism practiced in Samarkand and other Sogdian cities was quite different from that practiced in Iran, the religion’s homeland. Just as there was no strong monarchy in Sogdiana, Mazda Ahura was not the only patron god. In the Sogdian homeland people worshiped gods from a variety of religions. Every urban household made its own choices with regard to its supreme patron god, and they also made their own choices with regard to a host of minor deities. Thus a household “pantheon” often included both imported and local deities. When the Chinese Buddhist pilgrim Xuanzang passed through Sogdiana around 630, he noticed that many people in the large and beautiful city of Samarkand did not worship the Buddha, but worshipped with fire, a practice of Zoroastrianism. He also thought that the local residents were using firebrands to chase worshippers of the Buddha away from the monasteries. According to an account written by his disciples, Xuanzang subsequently preached before the king and convinced him to stop this harassment.

In this account Xuanzang, or his disciples, may well have been exaggerating his power as a missionary. If there really had been little tolerance of Buddhism in the city, it is unlikely that there would have been two Buddhist monasteries located there. Furthermore, given that the city’s highest priority and most revered doctrine seems to have been that its own commercial interests should prosper, and given that there were many Buddhist merchants active on this portion of the Silk Road

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who expected to be hosted by the hostels that the monasteries provided, it would seem that the city-state’s protection of these Buddhist monasteries would have been crucial to its own interests. Thus it is quite possible that those wielding the firebrands were actually engaged in a local fire ritual that had its roots in Zoroastrianism, but was practiced by the Samarkandis as a way of worshipping the Buddha. If so, this use of the firebrands would not have been the only Zoroastrian ritual that had been mixed into Buddhist worship in this region. As early as the Kushan era, Buddhist rituals were mixed with Zoroastrian fire worship, as Kushan kings patronized both religions.

The Sogdians also enjoyed a wide variety of entertainment in their homeland. Many urban homes had murals of blissful scenes painted on their walls, and they also held banquets where wine was served and entertainment was provided by musicians, dancers, acrobats, and probably storytellers. The wealthiest of the Sogdian merchants living in China even engraved their tombs with displays of such banquets, including the various performances enjoyed by the masters. At least by the latter part of the sixth century, Central Asian musicians and dancers were arriving in China on horseback or on camels, and soon thereafter the music and dancing of Samarkand became the most famous in China. Indeed, a description of the dancers even made it into a Tang dynasty history book, where the author wrote the following. “The musicians wear black silk scarves and red silk robes with brocade collars. (There are also) two dancers in red blouses with brocade collars and green sleeves, green damask silk trousers, red boots and a white sash that served as a belt. They whirl as fast as the wind, and thus the dance is called huxuan (the Sogdian whirling dance). The instruments in the band include two flutes, one main drum, one secondary drum, and a pair of brass cymbals.”

During the Tang dynasty (618–907), Sogdians came to China in such large numbers and attracted so much attention that Chinese artisans began turning out large numbers of figurines representing them, and today, one can see these Tang dynasty tricolor figurines displayed in museums all over the world.

South of Sogdiana, in the region known as Tukharistan (now in the northern half of Afghanistan), Buddhist institutions were even older, having become well established during Kushan times (ca. second century B.C.E.–third century C.E.). Tukharistan was similar to Sogdiana, in that it was divided into many city-states. However, in the

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seventh century, when Xuanzang’s pilgrimage took him through this region, all of Tukharistan was under Turkish rule. The nomadic Turks’ homeland was originally in Mongolia, but they had been making their way westward for many years by this time. Balkh, the most important city in Tukharistan, had once been known as Bactra, when it served as the capital of Hellenistic Bactria. Greek cultural features had been especially important in this region ever since Alexander, the king of Macedonia (d. 323 B.C.E.), had led his armies into Central Asia in the fourth century B.C.E.

Indeed, the Chinese pilgrim Xuanzang makes it quite clear that the Greek language was still being used, at least as a written language, in Tukharistan in the seventh century C.E. He realized that its written language was different from all the other languages that he had encountered in the regions through which he had already passed. In particular he noted that it used twenty-five “signs,” that is, letters, which were variously combined to write different words. He also noted that unlike the Indian script Kharoshthi, which reads from right to left, the words of this language were read from left to right. It was even more different from classical Chinese, since the latter was written in vertical lines from the top to the bottom of a piece of paper. In fact, the literary traditions of Tukharistan so impressed Xuanzang that he concluded that they even surpassed those of Sogdiana.6 The discovery of more than 150 documents inscribed in Greek letters expressing local Bactrian language dating from the second to the mid sixth century verifies that Xuanzang’s observation is accurate.7

To Xuanzang, however, what was even more significant in the Balkh area was a magnificent Buddhist monastery, the New Monastery (Nafusengjialan) which not only housed many precious relics of the Buddha, but was also the center of religious life in Balkh. The monastery and the relics were so famous that Balkh was called “Little Rajagraha” by both the local people and their Turkish overlords.8 Rajagraha was a city in east Ganges basin where Buddha frequently sojourned, so that its fame as a Buddhist pilgrimage destination remained to the time

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6 Xuanzang, Da Tang Xiyu Ji [Pilgrimage to the Western Region], ed. Ji Xianlin et al. (Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju, 1985), p. 100.
8 Huili and Yanzong, Da Ci-ensi, pp. 31–32.
of Xuanzang. The title “Little Rajagraha” means that Balkh claimed its importance to the Buddhist followers just next to Rajagraha. Needless to say, Xuanzang enjoyed his stay there, where he visited many of the relics attributed to the Buddha. As far as he was concerned, the New Monastery was the most prestigious and wealthy Buddhist center in Balkh. All its halls as well as its statues of the Buddha were richly decorated with precious jewels, jewels so valuable that they appear to have invited robberies carried out by greedy chiefs and kings. Nevertheless, owing to the protection of Vaishravana-deva, the Buddhist deity who guards the northern heaven, the monastery survived many attempted or even anticipated robberies. Xuanzang heard, for example, that during the most recent incident, a prince of the powerful Kehan (Khan) of the Turks had stationed his troops nearby in order to rob the monastery. Then, in a dream the prince saw the god who guarded the monastery using a long pike in order to pierce the prince’s chest, and once the prince woke up from this nightmare he suffered a fatal heart attack, and thus the robbery never happened.\textsuperscript{9} The moral of the story was that even the Turkish power that controlled the region at this time could not succeed in its attempt to run off with the monastery’s treasures. Thus the Barmaki family, which was in charge of the monastery, the most prestigious and powerful institution in Balkh, weathered many invasions of the region and managed to keep themselves and the wealth of the monastery intact.

After traveling southeast from Balkh toward the Bamiyan Valley in the Hindu-Kush mountains, Xuanzang was welcomed by the two gigantic standing statues of the Buddha. These landmarks appeared some time after the collapse of the Kushan Empire, when nomadic groups, first the Hephthalites, and then the Turks, ruled Tukharistan, which included the region that stretched from Balkh to the Bamiyan Valley. Nomadic rulers were friendly toward Buddhism in this region and patronized it as well. Indeed, it was the Turkish ruler in Huoguo, a mountain valley to the east of Balkh, Kunduz in modern Afghanistan, who had persuaded Xuanzang to make the long detour westward to Balkh, thereby delaying his trip to India.

During the seventh century, Turkish powers had expanded all the way from northwest China to the border of India. Turkish rulers were trade partners of Sogdians and patrons of whatever religions their sedentary counterparts followed. On the steppe, where the Western

\textsuperscript{9} Xuanzang, \textit{Da Tang Xiyu Ji}, p. 117.
Turkish ruler Yabgu Khan observed Zoroastrian rituals as the Sogdians did. In Tukharistan, the ruler of Huoguo patronized Buddhism. Meanwhile, they shared much of the cultural life of their sedentary partners, especially the wine drinking and music. Xuanzang thus described the banquet of Yabgu Khan:

The khan, his ministers, and envoys drank wine, and grape juice was served to the Dharma Master (Xuanzang). Thus, all urged others to drink; wine was poured into bowls and goblets, accompanied by music melodies of various styles of the region. Even though the music was non-Chinese, was quite pleasing to one’s senses and feelings. After a short while, foods such as cooked fresh lamb and veal were served, set in front of everyone except for the Dharma Master, whom special vegetarian food was served, which included such things as pancakes, cream, crystallized sugar, honey, and grapes. After the food, they again filled the Dharma Master’s cup with grape juice, and asked him to lecture on the Dharma.10

Given that the steppe Turks were nomads, such things as the grapes, the wine, and the crystallized sugar had to have come from their sedentary partners, the Sogdians or the Tukharians. To gain protection while traveling on the Silk Roads, merchants were quite willing to entertain their Turkish patrons with wine and music. In China there are still visual depictions of this relationship. For example, the stone tomb of An Jia, a Sogdian chief from Bukhara who died in China in 579, has two scenes carved on it, one showing the Sogdian chief and a Turkish chief, both on horseback, reaching out to each other, and the other showing them both sitting down for a banquet.11 In short, during the sixth and seventh centuries, Sogdians, Tukharians, and Turks followed the tenets of a variety of religions, especially Buddhism and Zoroastrianism, and their religious practices were also imbued with local customs and values. Pervading all was a culture of commercial entrepreneurship, as well as a high level of literacy in traditions of scholarship and learning that had roots in a variety of places. And last, but not least, they shared a culture that was imbued with drinking, music, and dancing that may well have evolved from both local, Hellenistic, and nomadic traditions.

10 Huili and Yanzong, Da Ci-ensi, pp. 27–28.
11 Rong and Zhang, From Samarkand to Chang’an, p. 70.
THE ARAB CONQUEST OF CENTRAL ASIA

The Arab takeover of Central Asia was anything but a sweeping military conquest followed by forced religious conversions. The aim here, however, is not to analyze the complicated movements of the military forces or the paths that led to Central Asia's conversion to Islam. From the perspective of the Islamic empires, the Arab conquest of this part of Central Asia was an extension of the conquest of the Sasanian Empire. The conquest therefore incorporated both Transoxiana and Tukharistan into the Iranian province of Khurasan. From a Central Asian perspective, the more interesting question with regard to early eighth-century Islamic history is how the Arab takeover of Central Asian lands, especially Transoxiana and Tukharistan, suddenly propelled a significant number of Central Asians into powerful positions on the front stage of the Islamic empire.

A recent study of the decline and fall of the Sasanian Empire argues that the goal of the Arab conquest of the Iranian plateau was to control Central Asia, where the key stations of the Silk Road trade were located. Relatively few Arabs established themselves on the Iranian plateau. Indeed, most went farther east in order to settle in Tukharistan and Transoxiana, which was referred to as “Outer Khurasan.” Given the commercial entrepreneurship of the Islamic cause and the amount of information available about the Silk Road trade in the eastern Mediterranean region, it is quite likely the case that Central Asia provided more interesting prey than the Iranian Plateau. Some details of Arab conquests of Central Asia are available thanks to English translations of Arab historian al-Tabari’s extensive records of the process. For instance, according to Tabari, during a punitive Arab expedition against the Sogdians who had been aiding the Turkish resistance, the Arab commander Sa’id Khudhaynah forbid his soldiers from pursuing the fleeing Sogdians, “for al-Sughd is [now] the garden of the commander of the Faithful.” In other words, the Sogdians and their cities should not be destroyed, but be put to good use for the caliphate. In fact, the long-term ambition of the Ummayad caliphate was to conquer China, the utmost source of silk and other wealth that came from the

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east. Indeed, Hajjaj the lieutenant of Caliph Malik promised to give the governorship of China to Qutayba, the governor of Khurasan, or to Muhammad Qasim, who conquered Sind in 711, depending upon which one of them reached China first. This ambition, of course, was never fulfilled. The reason, however, was not that Arab military strength weakened, but that the Islamic empire, once it had Central Asia in its fold, lost the will to conquer China.

Qutayba conquered Central Asia with all the cruelty and craft that he could muster. His strategy was playing some city-states off against others. In 712, Qutayba helped the Khwarazmshah subdue his rebellious brother, and then allied with the Khoresmians and Bukharians in an attack on Samarkand. Qutayba also ordered that mosques be built in the cities and then forced local inhabitants out of their homes in order to provide for the Arabs who were moving in. It is said he converted residents of Bukhara three times, but the people apostatized each time. The fourth time, he had a great mosque built and ordered residents to attend Friday prayer, through which he succeeded making Bukharians Muslims. His harsh policies inevitably fueled rebellions, some of which forced the Arabs to at least temporarily flee from the cities. Qutayba himself was killed in 715 when he tried to lead an unsuccessful rebellion against the new caliph Sulayman. In short, politics at the Ummayad court seem to have had a direct impact on the campaigns in Central Asia.

Throughout the centuries, Central Asian city-states had been the target of many different invaders, and thus they had developed various survival strategies. Sometimes they resisted invaders, and sometimes they compromised with them, if the latter would allow them to survive. There were times when they even bribed invaders to join them in attacks on neighboring city-states. On other occasions, if the invader became too oppressive, they called upon allies from near and far to join them in an attack on the invader. And after a catastrophe, they did what they had to do to survive. For example, when Qutayba’s

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17 Barthold, *Turkistan down to the Mongol Invasion*, p. 186.
forces reoccupied Paykand, a well-known merchant town in the oasis of Bukhara, after it had rebelled against the Arabs, they killed all the men that they had captured, enslaved the women and children, and leveled much of the city. There was, however, a one-eyed man, a man who attempted to ransom himself. He offered to give the Arabs “five thousand pieces of Chinese silk worth one million dirhams” if they would let him live. It was a tempting offer, and thus there was some discussion about it, but Qutayba insisted that the man must die. His reason was that it was known that this man had been encouraging Turks to attack Muslims, and for that reason there could be no ransom, and he was killed along with the other men that they had captured. Later it became clear that many of the Paykand men had not been at home during the reoccupation of the city, but in caravan towns east of Paykand, as far as probably China. These traders were able to make a deal with Qutayba. They agreed to pay a hefty ransom in order to recover their wives and children, and once they were back in Paykand they began rebuilding the city.

After the Sogdians were conquered by the Arabs they were willing to abandon their previous religions and convert to Islam, provided that their Arab rulers granted them the usual benefits of conversion. Early in the process the Arab governor Ashras (727–729) had launched a missionary campaign in Sogdiana, during which he promised freedom from taxation for converts who underwent circumcision and read a sura (one section) of the Qur’an. The Sogdians claimed that they had all converted and had started to build mosques. However, in order to increase state revenues, Ashras reversed his policy and tried to tax the entire population. The cities rebelled and called in Turkish troops to help them.

The widespread trading networks of the Sogdians and their commercial ethics were helpful from time to time. Turkish chiefs, who had long been in the region and often employed Sogdian traders to sell the silks that the Turks had brought from China, were called in to help fight the Arabs. However, in many parts of Central Asia the Turks were not able to sustain their power at a time when the Arab army

was at the height of its military power. The Turks lost control over Tukharistan to the Arabs, and thereafter the city of Balkh became a headquarters of the Arab forces in the enlarged province of Khurasan. The Turkish tribes also were constantly engaged in fighting with each other, and, at the same time, they also had to contend with the Tang Empire. Nevertheless, Tang archives reveal that even after the Arabs took over a significant amount of what had been Turkish-ruled Central Asia, Turkish envoys from Central Asia continued to make their way to China, and when they got there they still claimed that they had been sent by former Turkish rulers. In particular, the Tang archives indicate that from 718 until 748 a long list of envoys, bearing gifts or commodities, were sent to the Chinese court by the “Yabgu Khan” of Tukharistan.21 Thus it appears that even after the Turkish chiefs had submitted their political sovereignty to the Arabs, at least some of them still managed to sustain a significant, if unofficial, presence in Arab-controlled Central Asia.

During these decades the Sogdian cities also sent envoys loaded down with gifts to the Tang court, where they made an appeal for Chinese aid against the Arabs. For example, in 719 the king of Samarkand sent a letter to the Tang emperor that described Qutayba’s seizure of the city some six years before, saying that the Arabs “attacked with 300 mangonels (a device used to throw missiles), and had excavated three big tunnels.” He also pointed out to the Tang court that he was sending gifts that included an excellent horse, a Bactrian camel, and two donkeys, and that he hoped that the Tang emperor would send military aid so that the Sogdians could fight the Arabs. The king of Samarkand also told the Chinese emperor that the Tang court should at least send him something in return for the gifts that he had sent to China.22 Meanwhile, the Sogdians continuously rebuilt their towns whenever there was a break in the war. In the years following the Arab conquest of the Sogdian cities, their merchants continued to send many missions to the Tang court, and they continued to export their specialties, such as whirling dancers, cheetahs, grape wine, lions, and horses, to China.23 In addition, they somehow succeeded in maintaining many of their religious and cultural traditions inside their own homes, while in the

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21 Cefuyuangui (Most important files from the archive); the items are collected in Zhang Xinglang, Zhong Xi Jiaotong Shiliao Huibian [A Collection of Sources on the Communication between China and the West] (Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju, 2003), pp. 1435–1440.
public sphere they gradually accepted Islam for economic and political reasons.

During the first half of the eighth century, Khurasan, which was far from Damascus, Syria, the center of the Ummayad caliphate, became a place where Muslim dissidents from many different backgrounds gathered. Among the various protesters in the Islamic movements, it was the Abbasid revolution, in particular, that changed the direction of Islamic expansion. Even though the Abbasids had overthrown the Ummayads claiming that they would reestablish the power of the Prophet’s family, one of the real sources of Abbasid power was based in Khurasan, or, more precisely, in outer Khurasan—that is, its newly acquired Central Asian parts. The man who was most significant in the Abbasid seizure of power from the Ummayads was Abu Muslim, whose power base was in what had been Central Asian Transoxiana.24 Abu Muslim, however, was not trusted by al-Mansur, the second Abbasid caliph, and thus Abu Muslim was lured westward and murdered by the caliph in 754. Nonetheless, even without Abu Muslim, the Abbasid caliphate still represented a totally different culture from that of the Ummayad caliphate. Thus rather suddenly, Central Asians, along with their culture and their wealth, soon gained a strong presence in the newly established political center in Baghdad, Iraq.

It was in 751, soon after the retreat of Ummayad power from Khurasan and Central Asia, that the first and only military encounter between the Islamic empire and the Tang Empire took place near Talas on the border between present-day Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan. The cause of the event was the unfair treatment of the ruler of Tashkent by the Tang general Gao Xianzhi, who was actually a Korean national who had risen through the ranks of the Chinese army. After Gao had reached an agreement with the Tashkent ruler, he had then betrayed him and had him killed. Central Asian states then allied with Arab forces in the region in order to attack the Tang force. To a large extent, this battle had no significant military or political impact on the relationship between the Tang Empire and the new Abbasid caliphate. What it did have was a very significant cultural impact. Many of the twenty thousand Chinese and Central Asian prisoners captured by the Caliphate and its allies were taken westward and employed in the construction of the new caliphate, and thus they made a profound cultural contribution to the new Islamic center.

24 Pourshariati, *Decline and Fall of the Sasanian Empire*, pp. 426, 435.
Central Asians in an Islamic World

The Abbasid revolution changed the fortunes of Tukharistan and Transoxiana, which included both Khoresm and Sogdiana. The Abbasid imperial agenda encouraged conquered peoples to join the Islamic cause. Central Asians were willing to join the empire as the leading intellectual and economic elite. In Baghdad, the famous Barmakid family who served the Abbasid caliphate for several generations came from the city of Balkh, the city called Bactra in Hellenistic times. According to Mas’udi, the historian of the Abbasid caliphate, Barmak the Elder was managing the “Nawbahar” in Balkh before he joined the Islamic cause. What Mas’udi calls the Nawbahar is most likely the Sanskrit navavihara, namely the New Monastery that Xuanzang had visited. Xuanzang had called it the nafusengjialain Chinese, which is a transliteration of nava sangharama in Sanskrit.

There is no information in the historical sources that describes how the Barmakid family survived the initial Arab military attacks on Central Asia. What we do know is that the city of Balkh and the navavihara were destroyed during the Arab conquest, and that they were reconstructed around 725. Perhaps the reason that Khalid al Barmak, the son of Barmak the Elder, moved to Baghdad, where he became very influential, was part of the family’s plan to protect their interests not only in Baghdad but also in Tukharistan. It was at that time that Asad B. Abdullah, the Arab commander in Khurasan, commissioned Barmak the Elder, the father of Khalid al Barmak, to take charge of the reconstruction of Balkh and “Nawbahar.” Given the amount of tax collected by the Arab government, the family would have had no trouble in recruiting workers from the area. The New Monastery remained an important religious institution in Balkh for quite a while. Its legacy lingered even when the region well evolved into an Islamic country. As late as the time of Mongol conquest of Central Asia in the thirteenth century, the memory that Balkh was once a religious pilgrimage destination was still alive. Ata-Malik Juvaini (1226–1283), the historian of Genghis Khan, quoted from Shahnameh by Ferdowsi (940–1020): “He departed unto fair Balkh to the nau-bahar which at

26 Tabari, History of al-Tabari, 25:1490 (27); Barthold, Turkistan down to the Mongol Invasion, p. 77.
that time the worshippers of God held in as much honor as the Arabs now hold Mecca.”

The Barmakids held great power in the court of the Abbasid caliphs after they migrated to Baghdad, and at the same time they maintained frequent contacts with their homeland. No one knows exactly when or how the Barmakids converted to Islam, but by the time Fadl ibn Yahya ibn Khalid Barmaki became the governor of Khurasan, he was an enthusiastic builder of great mosques. The family’s contribution to establishing the state structure and culture of the Abbasid caliphate is well known. Mas’udi spent many pages detailing the activities of several generations of Barmakids in the service of the caliphate. Given that the Chinese invention of paper, along with knowledge of its manufacturing processes, had spread to Tukharistan when Buddhism flourished there, and that Central Asian papermaking was generally associated with Buddhist institutions, as were the Barmakids, and that paper’s sudden arrival in the caliphate during the time that a Barmakid was in the process of constructing a government bureaucracy for the Abbasids, one can say that the Barmakids are the most likely people to have introduced paper to the caliphate. In addition, they probably were also responsible for the transmission of papermaking technology from Central Asia to Baghdad.

The Barmakid family, as vazirs of the caliphs, supported many cultural activities, including the collecting and translating of Persian, Greek, and Sanskrit literature into Arabic. There is no way to ascertain their knowledge of Greek literature, but at least they were aware of the significance of Greek literature and made an effort to have it collected and translated. And one must add that following the steps of the Barmakids, many scholars from various parts of Central Asia went to Baghdad to seek their future.

Even though many of the early Central Asian converts to Islam changed their religion for survival purposes, some of them eventually did become sincere and learned Muslims. Al-Bukhari, obviously from Bukhara, became one of the most respected authorities on the Hadith, the collection of the Prophet’s teachings. His rigorous scholarship, a legacy of the Central Asian tradition, won him the reputation of hav-

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28 Narshakhi, History of Bukhara, pp. xxi, 68.
ing produced a reliable collection of the Prophet’s words. Al-Khwarizmi (ca. 780–850), who modified the Indian digits and transformed them into Arabic numerals and also invented algoritms and algebra, came from Khoresm, the northern part of the Transoxiana region. In Baghdad, he worked in the House of Knowledge, a center of scholarship that put much effort into translating Greek, Persian, and Sanskrit works into Arabic. Indeed, the knowledge of those languages was a prerequisite for scholars who wanted to work in that facility. Al-Khwarizmi, for example, was familiar with the geography of Ptolemy, and corrected many of the author’s mistakes. Presumably, Al-Khwarizmi had acquired his language skills in Transoxiana before he set out for Baghdad.

Among the renowned philosophers in Baghdad, Al-Farabi (d. 950) was from a Turkish military family based in Transoxiana. In Baghdad he had studied the teachings of the Hellenistic Christian tradition, also known as the school of Alexandria. Although he considered himself a Muslim, he really thought that religion was just for commoners, who should follow its rules for the good of the society. A society that believed in a single god would have an advantage in creating a politically ideal society, a society such as Plato described. In addition to Plato, he translated and studied many Greek works, including both philosophy and literature. The first half of the tenth century, the period when Al-Farabi was active in Baghdad, witnessed the arrival of the Turkish Mameluks, sometimes referred to as slave troops, although that term is misleading, and the growth of their power in the capital of the caliphate. They had arisen on the Eurasian steppe, and this new Turkish military power entered the center of the Islamic empire with violent force. Al-Farabi, on the other hand, represented another face of Turkish culture from Central Asia, the culture preserved in the Transoxiana region, in spite of the many invasions from the steppe.

During the eleventh century, the central power of the Abbasid caliphate had been shattered, and many scholars from Transoxiana no longer went to Baghdad to look for jobs. Instead they sought patronage from local sultans and amirs (commanders). Those that were interested in Greek studies could not go to Byzantium to study, the only major source of Greek literature at that time. Nevertheless, these scholars were still very familiar with the classical Greek sciences. One example of these scholars was Al-Biruni (973–ca. 1050), who like Al-Farabi, came from the Khoresm region. He had been captured by Mahmud of

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30 Ibid., p. 145.
Ghazni in Afghanistan and was then sent to India to study astronomy and other sciences. In his book about India, he compared every theory in the Indian sciences with its classical Greek counterpart. “The heathen Greeks, before the rise of Christianity, held much the same opinions as the Hindus; their educated classes thought much the same as those of the Hindus; [and] their common people held the same idolatrous views as those of the Hindus. Therefore I [would] like to confront the theories of the one nation with those of the other simply to account of the close relationship, not in order to correct them.”

Al-Biruni made this statement in the first chapter of his book. He obviously thought that it would be very difficult to explain the complicated ideas found in the difficult Sanskrit language to his fellow Muslim scholars. He thus concluded that it would be much easier to explain by comparing it to the philosophy and sciences of the Greeks, since he knew that the Muslim scholarly audience was familiar with all the important Greek works and authors.

Ibn-Sina, or Avicenna in Western literature (980–1037), a contemporary of Al-Biruni, never went to Baghdad either. His life story illustrates how the education of scholars was carried out in eleventh-century Central Asia. His father was born in Balkh, then moved to Bukhara, where Ibn-Sina was born. His father hired tutors to teach him the Qur’an, and the adab, the Arabic secular literature. Thereafter he studied philosophy, geometry, and Indian mathematics under various teachers. He learned the geometry of Euclid quickly, but had a hard time with the metaphysics of Aristotle. He read the book forty times and remembered every word, but still could not understand it. Finally, he was enlightened by an introductory book on Aristotle, written by Al-Farabi, which he bought from the local market. Ibn-Sina’s most important work, The Canon of Medicine, quickly became the most used medical text both in the Middle East and in Europe and remained so for many centuries thereafter. Clearly it was the highly educated and accessible scholars, as well as the availability of books from several classical traditions in the Transoxiana region, that paved the way for Ibn-Sina’s accomplishments, and thus his significant influence on subsequent scholars throughout a large part of Eurasia.

Central Asian Islam Spread Out

Central Asia gradually became a truly Islamic region, with Transoxiana serving as Islam’s eastern center. Nevertheless, this religious transformation did not mean that its peoples had abandoned all of their pre-Islamic customs. Furthermore, its conversion to Islam had the effect of turning Central Asia into an even larger center of communications with ties to an even larger geographical area, thereby connecting it with even more diverse cultural traditions. With regard to the study of religious and cultural conditions in Central Asia, the next major transition did not occur until the Mongol conquests. This time, its conquerors came not from the southwest, but from the easternmost steppe. The early thirteenth-century conquest of Central Asia, carried out by a nomadic power fresh from the steppe, brought utter devastation to the urban structures and the economy of Transoxiana and Tukharistan. There was, however, a small silver lining, not so much for the Central Asian peoples, but for other lands conquered by the Mongols. Because their armies at that time had little familiarity with the administration of either agricultural or urban areas, they needed educated administrators who could assist in such areas. Thus they adopted a policy of taking highly educated and skilled Central Asian Muslims and forcing them to relocate in other conquered lands where their services were needed. There they served the Mongolian regimes, and inadvertently spread the rich knowledge and advanced technology of Central Asia to other regions.

Actually, not all of the educated people that the Mongols used were Central Asians. Even before Genghis Khan conquered Transoxiana in 1218–1219, he already had realized the usefulness of scholars. One of the khan’s advisors who followed his army to Central Asia was not Mongolian. Yelü Chucai (1190–1244) was a Khitan national whose ancestral homeland was in what is now northeastern China. Although the Khitan peoples were semi-nomadic, the ruling elite who established the Liao Dynasty in north China (916–1125) managed to learn Chinese culture, and Yelü Chucai was one of the Khitan nobles who had studied the Chinese classics. Prior to the Mongol conquest of North China, the Jin dynasty (1115–1234), established by the Ruzhen, another semi-nomadic people from northeastern China, had conquered the Liao and established their capital in the site of modern Beijing. Yelü Chucai served the Jin government for a while in the capital. It was only after the Jin fell to the Mongols that Yelü Chucai became an advisor to Genghis Khan. Fortunately for historians, in his memoirs
this Khitan scholar wrote a detailed description of Samarkand just after its capture by the Mongols.

According to him, the city was located on very fertile land and surrounded by numerous gardens. Every household had a garden, and they all were well watered by means of canals and large fountains that supplied water to both round and square ponds. Willows and cypress trees lined the landscape, while peach and plum orchards followed one after the other. During Central Asia’s dry summers, water from the river was lifted for irrigation. And, needless to say, Yelü Chucai thought that the locally made grape wine was excellent. Indeed, he was so impressed by the beautiful city that he even wrote several poems to praise it.34 He was even more impressed by the area’s advanced technology, particularly such things as the use of windmills to grind wheat into flour.35 In one of his poems written at Samarkand, he admired the resilience of its people: “In the silence of the land between rivers, people always suffer disasters. They dig tunnels to hide from warfare, and build high dykes to ward off flooding water.”36 He enjoyed the region’s sweet melons, and numerous other kinds of fruit, whether fresh or dried. Nevertheless, foremost among its produce and products were grapes and grape wine.

Furthermore, as one of the advisors of Genghis Khan, Yelü Chucai knew very well that the wine and food crops produced in the region were not taxed by the Mongols.37 The Mongols did indulge themselves with local foods and beverages, and they did drink the grape wine, but they did not try to tax it. They were much more interested in taking advantage of the trading skills of Central Asian Muslims than in collecting agricultural taxes. Fortunately this policy provided the local people just a little breathing room that helped them start to recover from the war.

Qiu Chuji, a Daoist teacher, visited Central Asia when he was summoned by Genghis Khan soon after the conquest. Although Qiu Chuji and Yelü Chucai had known each other for a long time, they were rivals, not friends, and their argument about religious affairs was well known. Nevertheless, in their accounts of Central Asia they shared the same impression, not only about Samarkand, but all the cities. Wherever

34 Yelü Chucai, *Xiyou Lu* [Journey to the West], ed. Xiangda (Beijing: Zhonghua Shuju, 2000), p. 3.
36 Ibid.
37 Ibid.
Qiu went, he was entertained with grape wine. Even when he became ill in Samarkand, the governor of the Mongols brought him freshly made wine as a remedy.\(^{38}\) He noted that the population of Samarkand reached ten thousand or more before the Mongol conquest, but only one quarter of the people remained there at his time.\(^{39}\) Thus in spite of the demographic changes caused by the war and the forced migrations, viticulture and wineries seem to have survived and flourished in Transoxiana during the Mongol occupation.

It should be noted that when Yelü Chucai and others like Qiu Chuji were writing about the charms of Samarkand, they were describing a city that was in postwar ruins. Both Samarkand and Bukhara were among the places in Central Asia that were severely damaged by the Mongol conquest. Yelü Chucai was very much aware of the damage caused by the military action, but because of his relationship with Genghis Khan, he was not at liberty to write about it. Only in some of his poetry can one find hints of what he really thought about the destruction.

Yet even in its damaged state, the charm of Samarkand persisted. A little more than one hundred years after the conquest, at some point in the 1330s, the famous Moroccan traveler Ibn Battuta stopped to visit the city on his way to India. He, a scholar from the western edge of the eastern hemisphere, seemed to have been just as impressed by the city as Yelü Chucai had been. He described Samarkand as “one of the largest and most perfectly beautiful cities in the world.”\(^{40}\) And he also admired the water wheels on the river that supplied its gardens with water.\(^{41}\) On the other hand, he noted that the formerly grand palaces were still in ruins and the city’s walls and gates had disappeared.

By the time that Ibn Battuta arrived, many of the Mongols living in what was then known as the Chaghatai Khanate, which included Sogdiana, had converted to Islam. In particular, he noted that the city’s residents were allowed to pray at the tomb of a Muslim martyr who had died trying to defend the city from the Mongols. He also noted that even Mongols, presumably those who had converted to Islam, visited

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\(^{38}\) Qiu Chuji, *Changchun Zhenren Xiyoulu* [Travel to the West], Zhang Xinglang, 1712.

\(^{39}\) Ibid., 1710.


this tomb and made donations to it that included large numbers of cattle and sheep, as well as money.\textsuperscript{42}

The destruction carried out by the Mongols also led to the displacement of many people, including renowned literati and religious leaders of the time. One of the refugees was an ancestor of Jalal ad-din Muhammad Din ar-Rumi (1207–1273). He had fled from Balkh to Konia, in Seljuk Anatolia, where Rumi was born and flourished as a spiritual leader of a Sufi school. Juzjani, a thirteenth-century historian from Juzjan (Ghuzgan), a city located southwest of Balkh in Tukharistan, was one of the refugees who served at the court of the Delhi sultanate. In his writings he described the Delhi sultanate’s eager reception of Central Asian refugees. The father of the most well-known poet in the court of the Delhi sultanate, Amir Khusrau (c. 1253–1324), was a Turkic refugee from the Transoxiana region who had fled to India. And an ancestor of Nizam Ad-din Awliya (c. 1243–1325), the teacher of the Chishti Sufi community near Delhi, had fled from Bukhara to India. These names provide only a few examples of the many eminent personages who had no choice but to leave what had been the easternmost centers of Islamic culture. Thus one could say that when the Mongol invasion damaged Samarkand, Bukhara, and Balkh, and thereby pushed a large refugee population to India, especially Delhi, the first capital of the Islamic Indian sultanates, the Mongols were in large part responsible for the relocation of the easternmost centers of Islamic culture from Samarkand and Bukhara to the sultanates of India.

The first sultans in Delhi were ghulams, military slaves who served in the Turkish Islamic army. Though slaves in status, they served in elite military units, and many ascended to the position of commander and even became sultans through their military achievements. Once they became the rulers of India, they were eager to obtain recognition from Islamic authorities in western Asia and Egypt in order to legitimize their regime in a newly conquered land. Sultan Iltutmish sent an envoy to Baghdad for an investiture document from the caliph al-Mistansir, and duly received it in 1229. Even after the Mongols destroyed Baghdad, Sultan Muhammad Ibn Tughluq struggled to get credentials and finally got in touch with the “caliph” captured in Cairo in 1343.\textsuperscript{43} Nevertheless, the sultans knew that these caliphs no longer had any real authority over Islamic doctrine. Instead, they had to

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\textsuperscript{42} Gibb, \textit{Travel of Ibn Battuta}, p. 175.
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look toward people from their own Central Asian homeland for any religious direction that they felt a need for. And given the influx of ulemas from Samarkand and Bukhara to India, the interpretations of the Sharia law books in the Indian sultanates were based on the scholarship of Transoxiana.\textsuperscript{44}

The sultans in Delhi were enamored with the culture of Samarkand. They missed the gardens, melons, music, poetry, dance, and, in the case of at least some of them, also the wine. They often set their eyes toward Transoxiana and dreamed of reconquering the lands that had been lost to the Mongols. While this dream was never to be realized, they did set about remaking Delhi in the image of Samarkand. With this inspiration, the talented poet Amir Khusrau found himself in a position for achieving excellence. Khusrau’s linguistic talents were not limited to Persian poetry, for he became familiar with Hindustani languages, and a lexicon of Persian, Arabic, and various Indian dialects was popularly attributed to him. Although his authorship of the lexicon is doubtful, Khusrau was clearly a pioneer in writing in Hindustani and enriching it with Persian and Central Asian vocabulary and literary metaphors. Most certainly, he was one of those who helped fashion what became Urdu as a literary language.

But despite his official position, Khusrau was not always comfortable writing eulogies for sultans. When in despair, he looked to Nizam Ad-din Awliya, the Chishti Sufi saint whose residence was outside Delhi, for spiritual guidance. It was said that Khusrau went to see the Sufi master several times to express his pain at being a poet who had to praise tyrants. However, the master’s answer was to be patient until God intervened.\textsuperscript{45} Nizam Ad-din Awliya was not associated with the court, but he was more influential than most of the ulemas who did serve the sultans. Khusrau went to see the master not only to complain about his job at the court, but also to write music for the master so that he could practice sama’, the music and dance through which Sufis tried to reach a union with God. The music was purely Perso-Islamic in style.\textsuperscript{46} In the practice of sama’, Khusrau and the Sufi master shared the same cultural tastes, tastes that were deeply rooted in the history of Samarkand and Bukhara.

\textit{A sama’} is an occasion when Sufi dervishes gather to listen to music and perform a whirling dance that follows the beat of the music. Nizam

\textsuperscript{44} Ibid., p. 27.
\textsuperscript{45} Ibid., p. 197.
Ad-din Awliya was quoted as saying: “The masters of the Way have declared that divine mercy alights on three occasions—(1) at the time of a musical assembly (sama’). (2) at the time of eating food with the intent (of keeping fit) to obey God’s will and (3) at the time of discourse among dervishes when they clarify (to one another their inner thoughts).” It is obvious that Nizam Ad-din Awliya considered sama’ as one of the important approaches, if not the most important approach, to reaching a union with God. Not all Sufis agreed with this practice. A master named Maulana Rukn ad-din Samarkandi, presumably a man of Samarkand ancestry, was a fierce opponent of sama’ and avoided any performance of it. Sama’ nevertheless persisted in India, especially among the Chishti Sufi order. Indeed, Burhan al-din Gharib, the Sufi master who succeeded the line of Nizam Ad-din Awliya in the Deccan region, became famous for his ecstasy in both sama’ and dance.

The sama’ and the dancing dervishes were not just an Indian phenomenon. Its roots actually went back to the Transoxiana/Tukharistan region, to Samarkand, Bukhara, and Balkh. It is generally agreed that Jalal al-Din ar-Rumi was the founder of Mevlevi Sufi, the school of dancing dervishes. His name, Rumi, indicates that he was from Turkey and his order was based in Konia. However, as mentioned above, his family was actually from Balkh, and had gone to Turkey only after fleeing from the Mongol conquest. Legend has it that he started the new style of dance because of the sadness that settled on him after the departure of his beloved friend and teacher. However, his own writings tell a somewhat different story. In one of his collections of moral teaching stories, known as the Mathnawi, he described a group of poor dervishes who played music and danced to ecstasy all night in a hospice. It seems that Rumi, himself, did not think that he had invented this new style of music and dance session that was practiced by the dervishes. More likely, it developed as a common practice among wandering dervishes. The dervishes from certain schools that practiced sama’ would seize every opportunity to practice music and dance, especially when they gathered in the hospices that catered to the Sufi dervishes.

One might wonder if the dancing dervishes in Turkey that Rumi wrote about were related in some way to the Sufi masters in India.

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48 Ibid., p. 348.
49 Ernst, Eternal Garden, p. 120.
Given that after the Mongol takeover of Transoxiana this use of music and dance to get closer to Allah could be found both in Konia in Turkey and in Delhi in India, two places that had taken in refugees from Transoxiana/Tukharistan, means that this particular form of worship had come from the same source—the cities of Samarkand, Bukhara, and Balkh. This would not be too surprising given that Sufi Muslim groups were highly mobile. They had long wandered all around the Islamic world, carrying with them little more than simple clothing and eating utensils. Indeed, Ibn Battuta stumbled upon a group of “Persian Darvishes” in Granada, Spain. While talking with this particular group he found out that one of them was from Samarkand, one was from Tabriz, a third was from Konia, a fourth was from Khurasan, two more were from India.51

When sacking cities, the Mongols deliberately spared the lives of traders, artisans, and some scholars. Often they would directly employ the Muslim traders from the region. At that time the Mongols were constructing new tent cities on the steppe. Among other things, they used the traders as contractors, ordering them to secure all the supplies needed to build and decorate their huge tent palaces. The Mongol term for these contractors was ortoy, and the various Mongol courts provided them with protection letters. Not surprisingly, many of these Muslim contractors came from the Transoxiana/Tukharistan region, which had long been involved in the trade between China and India. When Qiu Chuji was in Samarkand, he reported seeing peacocks and elephants that had been imported from India.52 Thus it was not long until the Mongols followed the centuries-old trade routes and invaded the western part of India, where the city of Lahore was among their prizes. According to Juzjani, the leaders of Lahore had failed to put up a unified front against the Mongols, in part because many of the traders living in Lahore had long traded into Mongol-controlled Central Asia and thus they possessed protection letters issued by the invaders.53 In any case, the Muslim sultans of India did manage to force the Mongols out of India shortly thereafter.

Meanwhile, back in Mongol-controlled China, Central Asian Muslim scholars constituted much of the administrative apparatus. Since they had better administrative skills than their Mongol overseers, they

51 Gibb, Travel of Ibn Battuta, p. 316.
52 Qiu Chuji, Changchun Zhenren Xiyoulu, Zhang Xinglang, 1712.
were more efficient in collecting taxes from Chinese peasants and merchants, and thus some of them reached a high level in the bureaucracy. Since the contributions of these Central Asian Muslim artisans and scholars in all of the Mongol-controlled territories have already been fully addressed by Thomas Allsen in his two monographs *Commodity and Exchanges in the Mongol Empire, a Cultural History of Islamic Textiles* (Cambridge University Press, 1997) and *Culture and Conquest in Mongol Eurasia* (Cambridge University Press, 2001), the focus here is on a single individual, a Bukhari, who clearly stands out in the ranks of Mongol-appointed administrators.

Sayyid Ajall Omer Shams Al-Din, whose Chinese name was Saidianchi, had once been an aristocrat in Bukhara. When Genghis Khan began marching toward his country, Sayyid Ajall went out to meet the Mongol chief, and when he saw him, Sayyid Ajall offered his services to him, as well as the services of his thousand-man cavalry. Ghenghis Khan accepted his surrender, and he was soon posted to strategically important positions such as Yanjing (modern Beijing) as “daluhuachi” (darughachi in Mongolian), which could be translated as governor. Sayyid Ajall was both an excellent military commander and a skillful administrator. He participated in numerous military campaigns against the Chinese, including the last major battle with the Song dynasty at Xiangfan, the last stronghold on the Han River, near where it meets the Yangzi River. He managed to restore order and increase the taxable population in his jurisdictions and the revenue of several provinces. His political savvy saved him from disasters caused by the jealousy of Mongol colleagues, disasters that were a major problem for the non-Mongol staff of the regime. But his most remembered achievement was his governorship of Yunnan, in the southwestern corner of China. Prior to the coming of the Mongols, Yunnan had never been a part of China. It was conquered by Khubilai Khan, the first Mongol khan to transform himself into a Chinese-style emperor and establish his own dynasty, the Yuan. Prior to Khubilai’s conquest of Yunnan there had been very little Chinese influence there. It was a mountainous land with a great many distinct ethnic groups, and thus it posed a serious challenge to the Mongolian-Chinese administration. Nevertheless, Sayyid Ajall managed to introduce both irrigation agriculture and Confucian education to the region without provoking rebellions.54 Thus his benevolent

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54 *Yuanshi* [History of the Yuan Dynasty], compiled by Song Lian et al. (Beijing: Zhongghua Shuju, 1976), pp. 3063–3070.
administration has been well remembered by the peoples of Yunnan, even until the present day. The Central Asian Muslim scholars, traders, generals, and officials who traveled to and sometimes settled in India, China, Turkey, and Iran during Mongol times left records of their lives in which they provide much information about Islam in Central Asia. Furthermore, their activities outside Central Asia also tell us something about Islam in their homeland. On the one hand, most of the Muslims in Transoxiana and Tukharistan were dedicated to the study of the Qur’an, as well as many secular topics, and they sought to follow all the disciplines of Muslims. On the other hand, they were also shrewd merchants, savvy politicians, and grape growers, and some of them were wine drinkers. Most of them were adept at surviving and flourishing in the constantly changing political environment of their homelands. And those who practiced sama’ in the sufi orders were also good musicians and whirling dancers who spread their cultural traits all over Eurasia. As Central Asian people have survived numerous calamities and thrived in a constant changing environment, as demonstrated in the transitional phase from a Buddhist religious domain to Islamic countries, there is a reason to expect that they will continue to do so.

55 For specific policies adopted by Sayyid Ajall to pacify rebellions of Mongol nobles and bring the many ethnic groups of Yunnan under a civilian administration, see Bin Yang, Between Wind and Clouds: The Making of Yunnan (Second Century BCE to Twentieth Century CE) (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008), pp. 112–116.