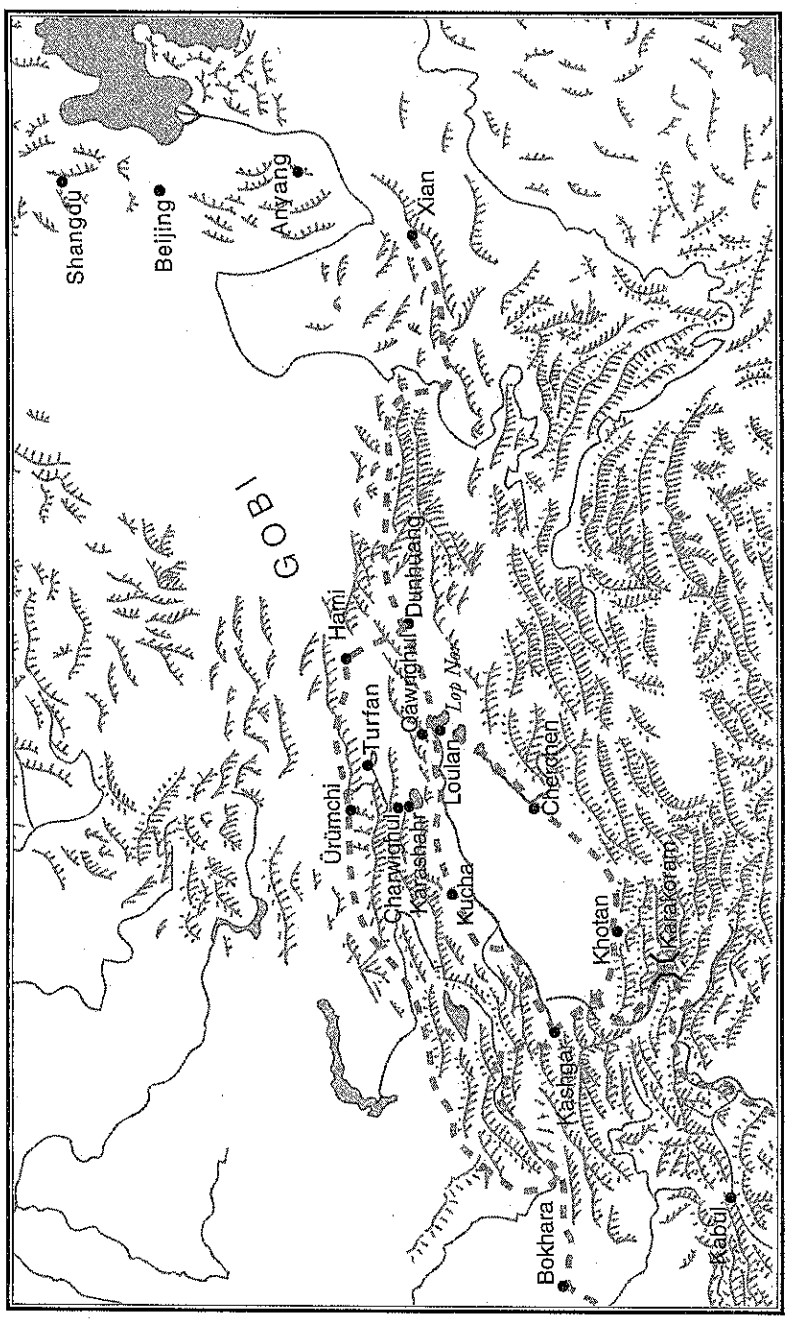


MAP 10.1

Barber, The Mummies of Urumchi

10

Sands of the Silk Road, Sands of Time

MANY CULTURES have come and gone in Central Asia in the last four thousand years, and not all the Ürümchi mummies come from the early sites around Loulan, Hami, and Cherchen. The sands enveloping later burials were just as thirsty, just as ready to preserve bodies and their clothing (map 10.1).

For example, deep in the Flaming Mountains above Turfan, amid the barren red hills of a Mars-like landscape, lie several ancient sites near the village of Subeshi (map 10.2, fig. 3.15) that date "merely" to 700 B.C. and later. (Thirty-five hundred miles away the Greeks were just emerging from their long Dark Age and starting to develop the ideas of art and politics that would so influence Western civilization.) One of these sites is a tiny village atop a steep, dusty-beige hillock. It overlooks the Toyuq River tumbling in the gorge at its foot, carrying ice-blue meltwater from the snowy peaks above to the gray-brown gravel flats, or *sai,* below. Stone grain grinders and fire-darkened hearths lie scattered about among small sections of house walls, and one can still make out and marvel at the long, steep path the inhabitants descended to fetch water every day. A small tributary stream bed cuts off the back side of the hillock; thick, hexagonal slabs of dried white mud pave its floor, like the tiled lavatory of a giant, evidence of

Opposite page: Locations of various ancient sites mentioned in Chapter 10, including Shangdu, the summer capital of the Mongol emperors of China, where Marco Polo claimed to have served Kublai Khan.

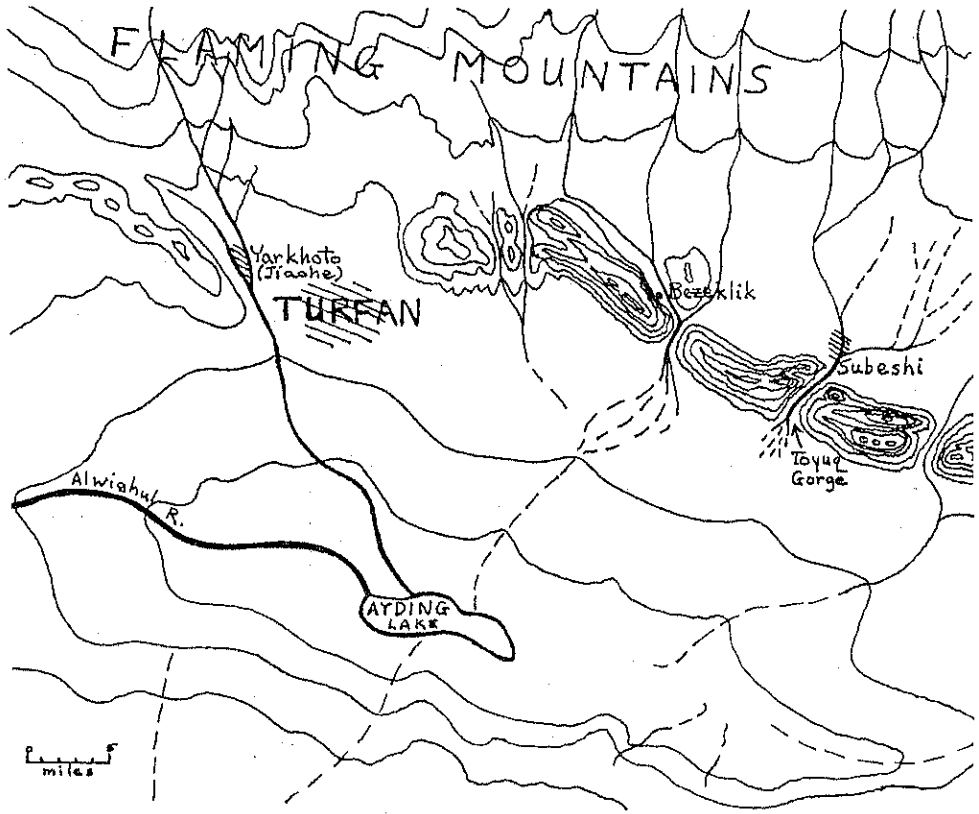


FIGURE 10.2

Map of the Turfan Basin, more than 500 feet below sea level at its lowest spot (the salt-water Ayding Lake). The mid-1st millennium B.C. sites near the village of Subeshi lie on the west side of the Toyuq Gorge. The Buddhist monastery of Bezeklik is cut into the west side of the next gorge to the northwest; the paintings in its caves date to the late 1st millennium A.D.

a flash flood from whenever the last hard rain fell—a decade or a century ago.

A short way upriver, on a flat terrace of barren, sandy gravel, lies a cemetery of the mid- to late first millennium B.C. (fig. 3.15). From its graves the Ürümchi archaeologists pulled several colorfully arrayed bodies. One woman (fig. 10.3) wore a copious woolen skirt striped horizontally in shades of red, yellow, and brown, with a dark felt hat rising high above her to two conical peaks like a twin-steepled church. The pelt used to make her long coat had the fur turned inside for warmth, and neat leather slippers protected her feet. A gigantic leather mitten encased her left hand, the sort of protection a falcon owner might wear,

FIGURE 10.3

Woman from cemetery at Subeshi, near Turfan, mid-1st millennium B.C. Note the twin peaked hat (the left point is partly lost), the leather mitten and slippers, and 2 sma pouches (below the hand without a mitten), one shaped like a chili pepper and the othe with a comb peeking from the top. (After Newbury.)

and she possessed two little pouches, one the shape of a long, narrow chili pep per and the other containing a round-topped comb.

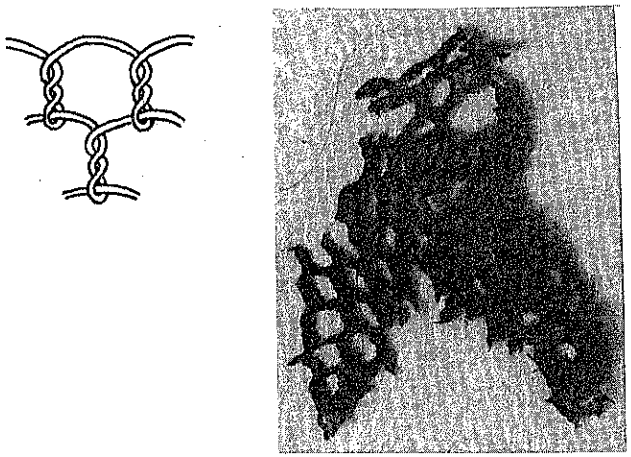


FIGURE 10.4

One of the types of woolen hairnets found at Subeshi, 1st millennium B.C.

Elsewhere a felt-hatted man lay dressed for the millennia in sheepskin boots and coat, while a second man displayed the most interesting sewing job yet dug up in the Tarim Basin. He had undergone chest surgery, and the two incisions were sewn up with horsehair.

Two other women had bound their long tresses into black hairnets made in either needle techniques or *sprang* (fig. 10.4).[1] Yet another female—her skeleton found beside the remains of a man—still wore a terrifically tall, conical hat just like those we depict on witches riding broomsticks at Halloween or on medieval wizards intent at their magical spells.

And that resemblance, strange to say, may be no accident. Our witches and wizards got their tall, pointy hats from just where we also got the words *magician* and *magic,* namely, Persia. The Persian or Iranian word *maguš (*cognate with English *might, mighty)* denoted a priest or sage, of the Zoroastrian religion in particular. The three Magi, or Wise Men, said by the New Testament to have followed an unusual star to Bethlehem at the time of Jesus' birth, received their name from this group. Magi distinguished themselves with high hats; they also

[1] Sprang is rather like playing cat's cradle with dozens of threads at once. You simply twist the tightly strung parallel threads around each other one after another, pushing the twists to both sides—as in cat's cradle—until there isn't room to do any more. Then you darn one thread in crosswise to hold the twists from unwinding, and there you have a nice stretchy net. The ancient Egyptians knew such techniques, as did Neolithic farmers in northern Europe. Elderly peasants in parts of Greece, Scandinavia, and Central Europe still ply these crafts.

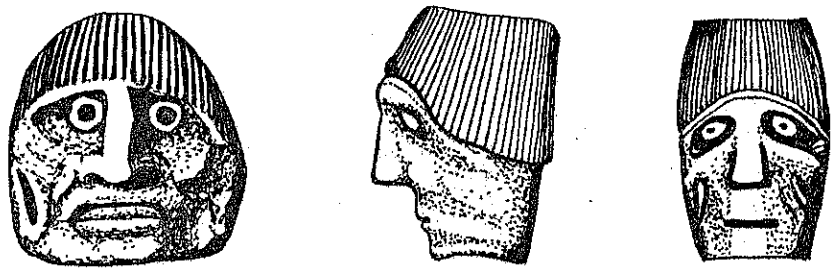


FIGURE 10.5

Early Chinese sculptures of "Caucasoid" facial types, with big noses, deep-set round eyes, and wide, thin mouths. *Left:* Bone carving from Anyang, capital of the Shang Dynasty (1500–1100 B.C.). *Center:* Two small carvings of mollusk shell used as tips of hairpins, ca. 780 B.C., from a palace 60 miles west of Xian. *Right:* Ancient Chinese character for **m^{y}ag* ("magician") incised on top of rightmost figure's hat, identical in form to the "Cross Potent" sign used by Western magicians in the Middle Ages. (After Mair.)

professed knowledge of astronomy, astrology, and medicine, of how to control the winds and weather by potent magic, and of how to contact the spirit world. We have already explored (in Chapter 8) the relation between the Indo-Iranians' knowledge of herbs—specifically harmel and ephedra—and their experiences of visiting the spirits. In the conical hats of Subeshi we have yet more evidence suggesting Iranians in the area. But at this date, late in the first millennium B.C., their presence is not surprising, since soon afterward we begin to get inscriptions along the south side of the Tarim Basin, some written in a provably Iranian dialect.

In addition to first drawing international attention to the unexpectedly western mummies in Ürümchi, Victor Mair also surprised Orientalist circles by demonstrating that the Old Chinese word **m^{y}ag*[2] must come from the same source as *magic:* Persian *maguš.* Ancient Chinese **m^{y}ag* denoted powerful individuals at the Chinese courts who, according to Mair's researches, "were primarily responsible for divination, astrology, prayer, and healing with medicines"—pretty much the same list of specialties that the magi had. Furthermore, the Chinese references to and representations of such round-eyed Western "magicians" (fig. 10.5) considerably antedate the Subeshi conical hats

[2] The asterisk in front of the word indicates that its ancient pronunciation has been reconstructed by linguists from their understanding of the regular sound changes that have occurred over the centuries. A Chinese "character" denotes first and foremost the meaning of a word, and some characters consist solely of a meaning radical. Any further information about its pronunciation, included in some of the characters, was ambiguous even when originally encoded (chiefly of the sort used in charades: "Sounds like X") and has also undergone subsequent sound changes. So what we know about the sounds of an ancient Chinese word comes as least as much from other considerations as from its written form.

of the first millennium B.C. Some go back even to the Shang Dynasty (1500–1100 B.C.). If this were the only evidence of early contact between Iranians and Chinese, one might dismiss it, but Mair has also accumulated a long list of early linguistic borrowings from the West. Most interesting to archaeologists is the word for a chariot *(chē,* from something like **kl^{r}ag),* a prestigious device that also came into China during the Shang Dynasty. That word is Iranian too, and it gives some idea of how these Westerners managed to travel so far.[3]

The linguistic street may even have been two-way. Mair also suggests that the typical European words for silk (such as English *silk,* borrowed ultimately from Greek *sērikós* "silken; Chinese") are related to the oldest reconstructable Chinese word for silk, **s^{r}ə(g)-.*[4] That word too may have spread from the mouths of Iranians headed back west.

In fact, the ubiquity of Iranians across Eurasia becomes more and more striking as material accrues. When written records began in the Tarim Basin in the early centuries A.D., the whole southern chain of oases—the southern half of the basin—was occupied by speakers of Iranian, the most prominent being the Sakas of Khotan, who had climbed over the Pamirs from the west to get there. The northern string of oases (Aksu, Kucha, Turfan, etc.) teemed at that time with Tokharians, who, however, may have arrived only with the plaid twills late in the second millennium B.C. Well before that, to go by the loanwords and depictions of Big-Noses in China, Iranian magi had already ingratiated themselves into the courts of the Shang Dynasty in northern China, where the emperor and his nobles would hardly move without consulting diviners first. (William of Rubruck, A.D. 1250s, described this trait among the Mongol rulers also.) Even the name of Dunhuang, that ever-strategic site where the Gansu Corridor opens westward into the Central Asian desert basins (map 10.1), appears to be Iranian in origin. According to Mair's linguistic research, the name is related to a group of Iranian words for watchtowers, fortified posts, and means of holding a borderland. Moreover, the characters selected by the ancient Chinese scribes to denote *Dunhuang* include the radical for "fire." (The Iranians,

[3]With Old Sinitic **kl^{r}ag* compare Greek *kyklo-* ("wheel"), from which English has borrowed *(bi)cycle.*

Three graves excavated just north of Beijing, at Baifu, belong to a "northern" culture contemporary with the great Bronze Age cultures of China, about 1000 B.C. But this culture and its graves possess rather different characteristics from the Shang tombs, traits that link them with western horses and Caucasoid peoples.

[4]The presumed presence of a final velar stop (*k* or *g*) suggests that the Greek noun *Sēr* for "an Oriental" is a back formation from *sērikós* "silken; from the Orient" on the common model of Greek adjectives ending in *-ikos,* rather than the adjective coming from the noun as is usually supposed.

Greeks, Chinese, and others used fire signals to send long-distance messages from one watch post to the next.) The mesa sites on which Stein found so many remains of the Loulan/Qäwrighul culture—see Chapter 5—suggest in fact that an extensive watchtower system already existed in the eastern Tarim Basin long before the Chinese arrived. And the presence of ephedra, as we have seen, suggests the possible arrival of Iranians in the Loulan area as far back as 2000 B.C.

Yet other East-West connections turn up in the first millennium B.C. Excavations during the 1980s, carried out by Lü Enguo and others of the Xinjiang Institute of Archaeology at the Bronze and Iron Age site of Charwighul (just north of Karashahr: map 10.1; not to be confused with Qäwrighul, a millennium earlier and 180 miles southeast), revealed a series of large cemeteries containing some two thousand tombs, six hundred of which have been opened so far. They cluster near a circular altar of gravel placed at the highest spot in the area. Each stone-lined gravepit is enclosed by gravel: the earliest flatiron-shaped, younger ones stirrup-shaped, and the most recent circular. Near the tip of the flatiron-shaped enclosures, excavators usually found a sacrificial hole containing the skull and legs of a horse, a constellation reminiscent of the similar deposit above Cherchen Man's tomb (fig. 3.1). The Charwighul cemetery has been dated to 1200–400 B.C., so the early tombs, the flatiron-shaped ones, are contemporary with the great burial excavated at Cherchen.

Such sacrifices of horse skull and legs have come to light rather earlier and farther west. Earliest are those from the Srednij Stog culture (central Ukraine), 4500–3500 B.C., and its successor the Yamna culture (extending from western Ukraine to the southern Urals), 3600–2200 B.C. Both cultures are strong candidates for gestating the proto-Indo-Europeans. At 2600 B.C. we find the skulls and forelegs of cattle positioned around the gold-filled "royal" tombs of Alaca Höyük in central Anatolia, among people argued to have arrived recently from the Pontic steppes. Then, around 2000 B.C., head and foreleg sacrifices of horses turn up at Krivoe Ozero and other sites of the Sintashta-Petrovka culture on the border between eastern Russia and Kazakhstan (map 10.6). Exactly at these sites too the earliest evidence for the development of spoke-wheeled chariots occurs. Solid-wheeled carts are too heavy for horses to pull, especially with inefficient harnessing. Until people learned to hold the harness low on the horse's chest, the breastband that takes the weight would slide up and squeeze the horse's windpipe and neck veins when the animal pulled hard—counterproductive, to say the least. Greek paintings from 500 B.C. show uncomfortable ways of holding the breastband low, but the efficient "modern" traction harness took over in Europe only in the twelfth century A.D.

So the Eurasian invention of lightweight spoked wheels—an outgrowth, it seems, of experimenting with bending wood for making a more efficient bow—

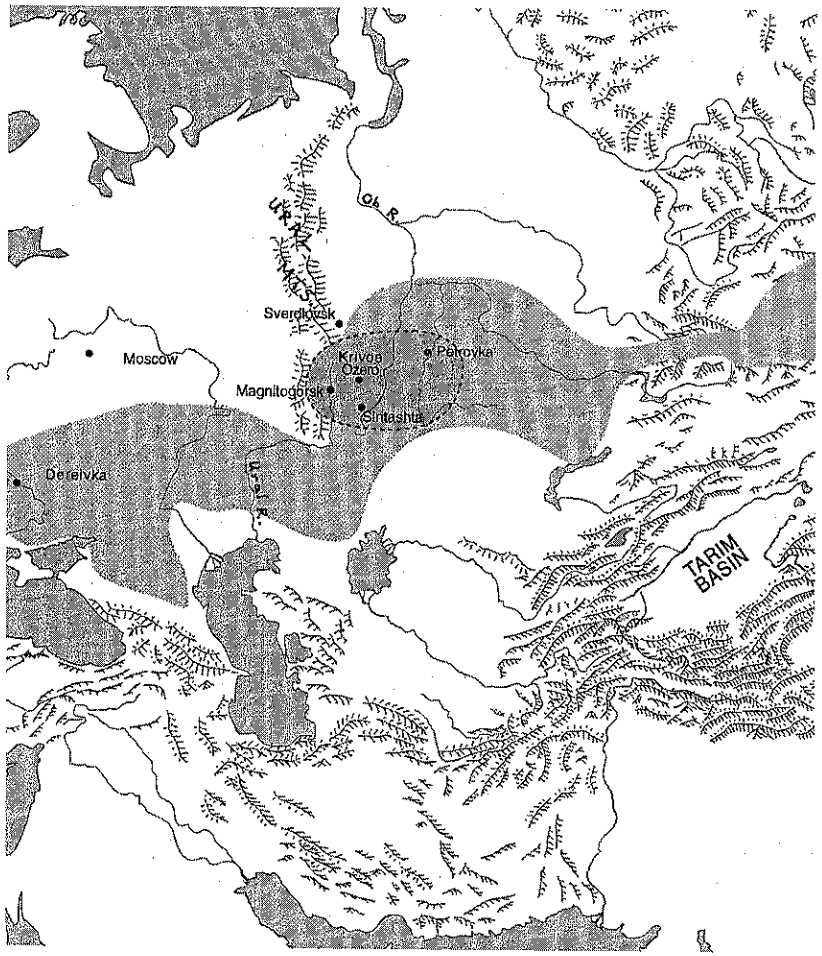


FIGURE 10.6:

The earliest evidence for spoked wheels, about 2000 B.C., has turned up at sites like Sintashta, Petrovka, and Krivoe Ozero, in the steppe area just east of the southern Ural Mountains.

revolutionized transportation and warfare all over the ancient world during the second millennium B.C. Numerous features directly paralleling peculiarities of the early Indo-Iranian culture suggest that these northeasterly people, the inventors of the spoke-supported rim, were Indo-Iranians too.

The various mummies and their belongings thus show us that people in general and Iranians in particular had long been moving through Central Asia by

several paths, living along the trackways, and leaving their dead to mummify in the sands beside them.

The first history books indicate much the same. The Greek writer Herodotus led the way, coining the very term *history* in the fifth century B.C. while researching the course of the wars between the Greeks and the Persians.[5] He mentions the vast eastward extent of the Persian Empire, which King Darius himself boasted as extending to Gandhara, the modern plain of Peshawar in northwestern Pakistan. Although hostilities kept Herodotus from going to Persia—he did visit as many places important to the war as he could—he reported all he could hear tell of it. Unfortunately for our purposes, that was far more about customs than about the geography. But Herodotus was an excellent observer. At one point he remarks in disgust at the glee the Persian magi seemed to take in killing victims for their famous divinations, but then he concludes philosophically, "But as for this custom, let it be as it was established long ago; I will return to my narrative."

Alexander the Great, who lived a century later, did not let others stand in his way. He went to Persia himself. In 334 B.C., having subdued his enemies in Macedonia, Greece, and the Balkans (receiving, among others, a warily friendly embassy of Celts), he set out to conquer Asia and "the barbarians" who had attacked Greece 150 years before. Landing first at Troy, on the northwest tip of Anatolia, he sacrificed to the gods who had helped the Greeks conquer that corner of Asia 900 years earlier. He had studied Hellenic history well—his tutor none other than Aristotle. By 331 B.C. Alexander had fought his way across Anatolia, Syria, and Babylonia to the Tigris River and beyond (map 10.7). Upon entering one conquered city, he found a famous Greek statue of two tyrant slayers, an artwork carried off by the Persian king who sacked Athens in 480 B.C. Delightedly he sent the piece back home to Greece—both because he admired Greek art and as a political statement. The next year, moving into what is now Iran, he captured the royal city and palace at Pasargadae, called Persepolis ("Persian City") by the Greeks, and put such a hoard of gold from its royal treasury back into circulation that the "world" gold market got its first Black Monday. Then, after some moving about to secure his flanks, he marched east again.

First Alexander swung northeast into the area of Bactria, on the Oxus River, which he conquered with little fighting but much hardship in the cold mountains. The Greek colonies he set up in this province were they that two centuries later recorded the arrival and eventual departure of the Tókharoi (i.e., the Greater Yuezhi chased out of the Tarim Basin by the Xiongnu; see Chapter 6).

[5] The Greek word Herodotus used is *historia,* meaning "research, a seeking out." The Persians of course are Iranian, and what today is called Iran was still called Persia when I was a child.

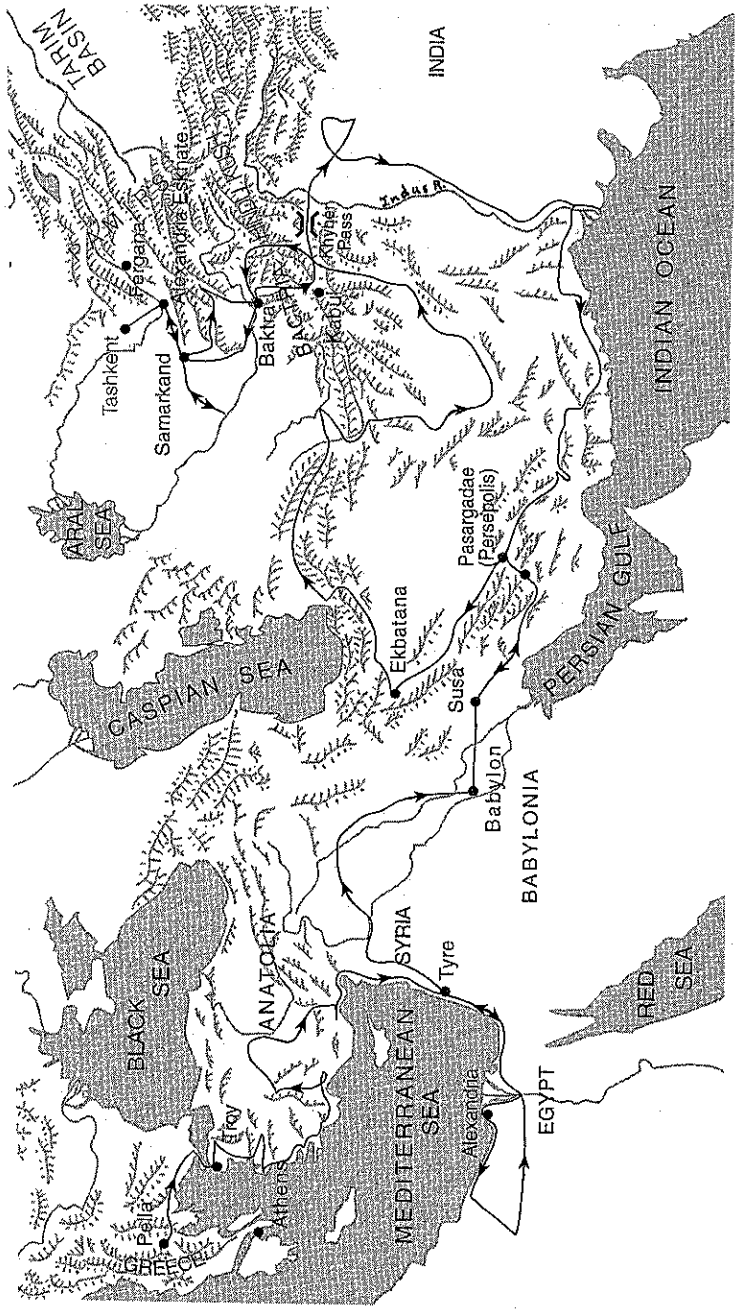


FIGURE 10.7

Map of Alexander the Great's route through the Middle East, 334–323 B.C., ending in Babylon, where he died at age 32. Although he never reached the Tarim Basin, the trail of Hellenic culture that he left, especially in Bactria and the upper Indus Valley, had considerable effect on the Tarim cultures of the next millennium.

Alexander himself got as far northeast as the point where the Syr-därya flows out of the Fergana Valley into the desert plains. There in 328 B.C. he founded one of many towns he built along the way and named after himself, this one Alexandria Eskhate—Alexandria the Farthest.

After many adventures in Bactria, including his marriage to a beautiful captive named Roxane, Alexander turned south in 327 B.C. to conquer the Indus River valley, today's Pakistan, entering via its northwestern tributary, the Kabul River, and the Khyber Pass. In Gandhara (Peshawar), as elsewhere, he built cities on the Greek model and moved on. By 325 he and his army had reached the mouth of the Indus, and, after a brief sail in the Indian Ocean, he began to work his way overland back toward home, some three thousand miles away to the northwest. He got as far as Babylon before falling sick of a fatal fever, and in June of 323 B.C. Alexander the Great died at the age of thirty-two. According to one tradition, his body was encased in honey to preserve it for the long journey back to his beloved city of Alexandria in Egypt, where he wished to be buried.[6]

Alexander was dead, but Greek influence in Central Asia was not. In Bactria in particular, Greek rulers and colonists remained and spread their canons of art among the other inhabitants. Thus when the Greater Yuezhi, or *Tókharoi,* originally from the Tarim Basin, eventually left Bactria for northern India, they took Greek ideals with them to their new kingdom of Gandhara, where the Kabul and Swat rivers flow together into the upper Indus (maps 10.1, 6.1). Converted to Buddhism, the Yuezhi/Tókharoi merged the Greek and Indian traditions into the delicate style known today as Gandharan or Greco-Buddhist art, which came to flower early in the first millennium A.D. Then they carried it north with their Buddhist teachings over the Karakoram Pass to Khotan and the other oases of the southern Tarim Basin, where Stein was so startled to find it when he arrived and began excavating in 1900.

Back and forth, to and fro. The passing of ideas between East and West clearly has a long history, and dry, sandy Central Asia served as the main corridor until quite recently. Some have tried to wish away the evidence for such transcontinental contacts, believing that independent invention confers the greatest glory. But global research shows that isolation, not contact, is enemy to a progressive and vibrant civilization. The Tasmanians, for instance, cut off for several thousand years from the rest of humanity, not only made no progress but actually backslid, losing one important skill after another, such as how to make bone tools (including needles for sewing clothes—an inconvenient loss) and how to haft handles to stone blades (to make tools capable of felling trees

[6] Honey contains so little water that it dehydrates to death any bacteria that try to live on it. Like dry sugar, it can be used as an emergency antiseptic and/or preservative.

and hollowing out boats—a fatal loss). New contacts among diverse peoples, on the contrary, spark creative new ways of looking at things. For example, every major improvement in writing systems came when new arrivals said, in effect, "This is wonderful—but there must be an even better way. . . ."

There was, in fact, an amazing amount of traffic all over Central Asia long before the Silk Road came into being. That great east-west passage became established as a trade route only during Roman times, concurrent with China's Han dynasties (202 B.C. to A.D. 220). And trade flourished. Chinese silk became the envy of upper-class ladies of the Roman Empire while Central Asian costumes and dances became the rage among ladies of the Han court, along with Roman glass.

The Mesopotamians had first managed to produce glass back around 3000 B.C. The making of glass from scratch requires melting silica, traditionally in the form of quartz sand, at a temperature of around 3000° F and then cooling it slowly to form a noncrystalline solid. The temperature can be dropped a full thousand degrees by adding an alkaline flux (such as soda, lime, or potash) to the quartz and going through a two-stage firing process, although the second firing must be held at 2000° F (1100° C) for many days. Such a feat was so difficult with the primitive furnaces of ancient times that it almost certainly happened only once to begin with, presumably by accident. Once the first glass had been produced, however, more glass could be made by using old pieces of glass as a catalyst for speedy fusion, so the furnace stokers didn't have to maintain the high temperature for very long. (Collecting broken glass, or *cullet,* for this purpose became a regular occupation in the ancient Near East. Recycling is an old idea.) The Mesopotamians kept the secret of glass close for many centuries, making and exporting finished objects and also glass ingots for remelting and shaping elsewhere. In fact glass ingots molded into round buns and colored cobalt blue to imitate the sacred lapis lazuli were found recently in a shipwreck of about 1300 B.C. off the south coast of Turkey. By that time the Egyptians too had become skilled glassmakers. With the invention of glass-blowing in the first century B.C., the Romans and others in the West came to excel in creating dainty vessels of multicolored glass, giving full value for the delicately colored silks of China.

The term *Silk Road* is actually quite modern, originally coined in German *(Seidenstrasse)* in the late nineteenth century by Ferdinand, baron von Richthofen, a German scholar, explorer, and geographer (and a relative of the "Red Baron," Manfred, baron von Richthofen, famous flying ace of World War I). This handy label for the important arteries bringing silk westward soon settled specifically onto the braided cable of roads that passed through today's

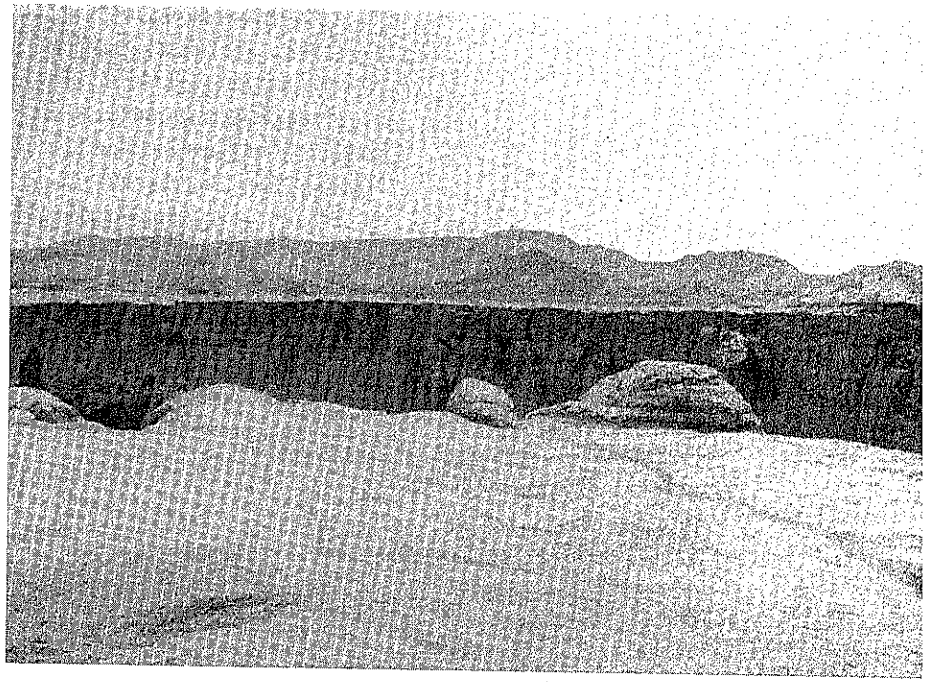


FIGURE 10.8

View from the ancient ruined city of Yarkhoto across one of the 2 deep gorges that nearly surround it and make it a natural fort. The ruins date largely from the early 1st millennium A.D., but the highly defensible mesa had been occupied well before that. The cliffs, which cut down through the barren terrain a full 100 feet (30 m) to the greener riverbeds, give a good idea of the terrific erosion typical of the area.

Xinjiang. There, in the first millennium A.D., the Chinese already occupied key fortified towns like Yarkhoto (also called Yarghul or Jiaohe: fig. 10.8, map 10.2) to protect the merchants who connected China with Bactria, Syria, and the Mediterranean as well as with the Indus Valley. Richthofen preceded Hedin and Stein into Central Asia, and the later explorers often relied on Richthofen's maps.[7]

In Western lore the most famous of all travelers along the Silk Road was Marco Polo, the Venetian trader who composed a book about going to China and back in the thirteenth century A.D. In fact, his father Nicolo and his uncle

[7]The Qilian Mountains south of the Gansu Corridor are also known as the Richthofen range, in his honor.

Maffeo had made the trip earlier, in the company of emissaries returning from Bokhara to the court of Kublai Khan, the brilliant Mongol ruler who had finally conquered China for the Mongols in 1260. The elder Polos visited Kublai during that same decade, impressing him with their culture, it is said. Kublai even gave them letters for delivery to the pope, requesting a delegation of learned men from the West to instruct him in Christianity and Western knowledge.

In 1271 the elder Polos set out for China again, this time with young Marco and two Dominicans. The Dominicans soon turned back, daunted by the hardships, but the Polos, according to Marco's later account, continued eastward, crossing the Pamir range to Kashgar and the Tarim Basin. From there they followed the Road of the South through Khotan to Cherchen, then toiled northeast across the deserts surrounding the Lop Nor and Turfan, and finally across the forbidding Gobi Desert to the corner of northern China where the khan held court—in the summer at Shangdu and in the winter a little farther south at what is now Beijing (map 10.1). (Shangdu is immortalized in poetry by Samuel Taylor Coleridge as Xanadu: "In Xanadu did Kubla Khan / A stately pleasure dome decree. . . .") There Marco says he entered the service of the khan, diligently studying the principal languages of the khan's domain and acting as his envoy all over eastern Asia for seventeen years. The khan, he explained, was an anthropologist at heart and particularly enjoyed hearing about the customs of his far-flung subjects. So Marco enterprisingly took notes wherever he went, to edify his royal patron with a full report upon returning from a mission.

In 1295, after two dozen years away, the Polos finally returned much travel-worn to Venice, where, as with Odysseus long before them, their own household did not recognize them. During a year of enforced leisure, the result of capture by the Genoese in a Venetian-Genoese battle in 1298, Marco Polo finally dictated a "Description of the World" to a fellow captive, one Rusticiano of Pisa, who apparently took down the original manuscript in a dialect of French. Translated then into Italian and finally into other languages, this book became the first description of the Far East widely read in the West, and Marco Polo became known as Marco Milioni—Marco of a zillion tales.

Recent scholarship questions whether Marco Polo ever reached China at all. His account contains errors, certainly; but more to the point are major omissions that ring false, such as his mentioning Chinese block-printed money while giving no description of printing. In Marco's day, 150 years before Gutenberg and several centuries before paper money in the West, such technology was revolutionary. Nor does he mention Chinese calligraphy, the Great Wall of China, tea drinking, bound feet, or a host of other things that virtually every

other Western traveler has rated high among the noteworthy sights and customs. Surely someone who spent seventeen years living there and running errands for the king could hardly have missed them. His text in fact reads more like an account pasted together from others who had been there, while he himself sat somewhere in the Middle East.[8] (Most of his terms for things Chinese are actually Persian words or words filtered through Persian. What happened to all those principal languages of the khan's domain that he said he studied?) The book is certainly not organized as a viable itinerary, rather—as its title says—as a "description." Moreover, if you were the khan, with half the world groveling at your feet, would you have instantly picked some young whippersnapper—and a foreign devil at that, just arrived from parts unknown—as your most trusted envoy?

But Marco wasn't the only source of questionable tales. Later writers have credited him with introducing many important Chinese inventions into the West, such as gunpowder, magnetic compasses, noodles, ice cream, and ravioli (Chinese *jiaozi*), even though we have no evidence whatever that he brought them. In ancient Greece every story of an event requiring prodigious strength gravitated to Herakles (Hercules), and so it was in early Renaissance Europe, where Marco Polo's name attracted everything thought to have come from China.

Whoever did introduce them to Europe, these and other Oriental inventions and commodities had tremendous impact on Western culture, and they came largely by way of the Silk Road. In the early period that we've explored in this book, most of the movement was west to east, but later the flow largely reversed, and China's influence on Europe became enormous. Chinese gunpowder alone forever changed the Western way of life and death. The reverse flow shows clearly among the Tarim mummies too. Between 2000 and 1000 B.C. they are entirely Caucasian in their features, whereas by 300 B.C. bodies with Mongoloid features mingle with the Westerners—e.g., at Charwighul. The Tokharian paintings of A.D. 600 to 1000 show Buddhist devotees of many races—Chinese, Indian, Mongol, and Turkic types, as well as fair-haired, blue-

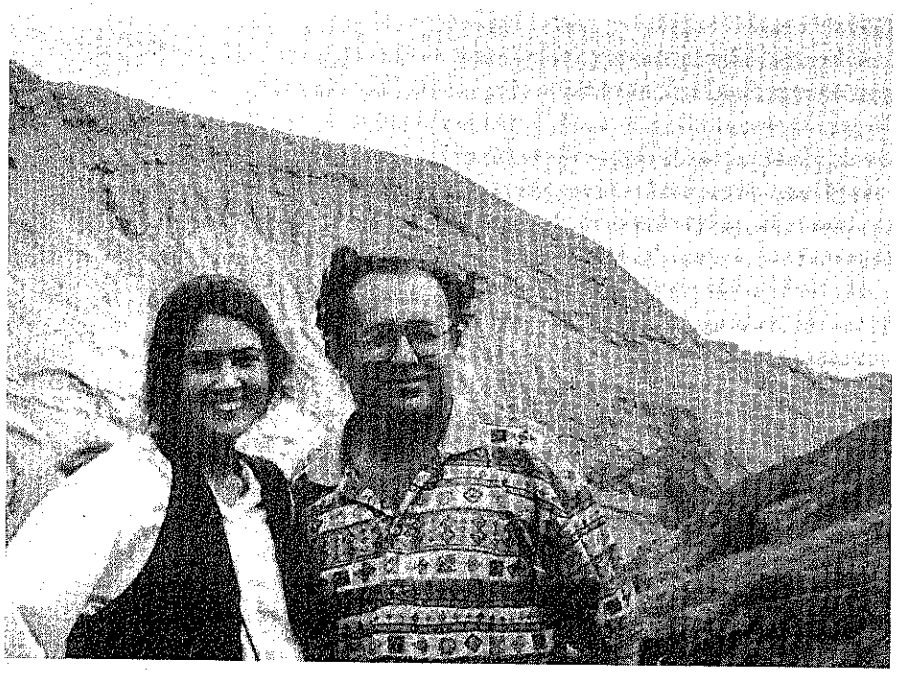
[8] Some of his sources were excellent; the book is not totally fabricated. Various archaeological findings corroborate one passage and another. But other sections throw doubt either on whether he visited these places himself or on his truthfulness. For example, he claims that the Polos were the first "Latins" the khan had seen (although William of Rubruck, two decades earlier, had found the khan's court fairly crawling with Westerners, including several native speakers of Latin-derived languages) and that the Polos designed catapults to help Kublai Khan win a siege that took place well before they could have got there. (Mongol historical sources say the khan brought in two famous Persian engineers specifically to make such machines.) But intellectual imperialism was a common enough custom in Europe at that time.

eyed, white-cheeked Caucasians. The mummies tell the same tale, with ever-increasing percentages of Turkic, Mongol, and finally Chinese types. In fact the last mummy in the Ürümchi Museum gallery is that of a Chinese general. He is far smaller than Cherchen Man, with a very different facial structure.

If you walk the streets of Ürümchi today, you will see mostly Chinese faces—except in the bazaars. There amid the babble of spice sellers, noodle vendors, and cloth merchants you will still hear many varieties of Turkic languages, Uyghur and Kazakh being the most prominent (fig. 9.7), and see many non-Chinese faces and modes of dress. And here and there you will spot someone with honey blond hair, perhaps even blue eyes. Dolkun Kamberi himself is such a one, a full-blooded Uyghur with light brown hair and a European-looking face (fig. 10.9). One day, when Victor Mair had stuffed me and Irene and Dolkun into a cab to go to the museum, we heard Dolkun chortling in the front seat

FIGURE 10.9

Dolkun Kamberi and Irene Good in the desert hills near Subeshi. Kamberi, like many other Uyghurs, still shows Caucasoid genetic traits (round eyes, high-bridged nose, light brown hair) like those of the early mummies in Ürümchi.



after giving directions to the driver. When we asked what was so funny, Dolkun replied that the driver had just asked him how he came to speak perfect Chinese since he was obviously a foreigner. "I grew up in Ürümchi!" he exclaimed. But he looked like us, not like the driver.

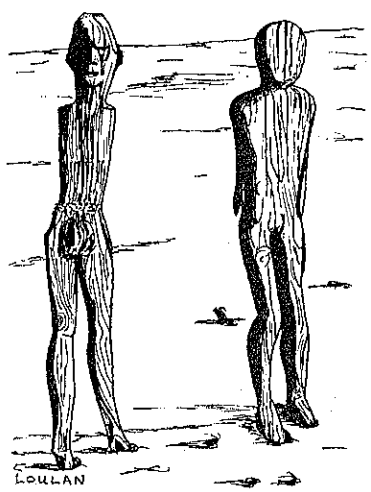
From 1924 to 1928 the Russian-American painter and philosopher Nicholas Roerich traveled from India through the Tarim Basin and Mongolia. His log of that difficult journey, published in 1929 as *Altai-Himalaya,* afforded me my first glimpse of Chinese Turkestan when I encountered it, with its yellowed paper and intriguing end map, in my father's library when I was a child of fourteen. I still find Roerich's description of the Tarim Basin impossible to put down: how he struggled over the eighteen-thousand-foot passes northward from "India" (now Pakistan) into the Tarim Basin—from blizzardy passes as high as the highest mountain in Europe down to the edge of the worst desert in the world—and finally dragged gratefully into the market city of Khotan, only to be put under house arrest by its preemptory and suspicious ruler. Escaping eventually from the dark and airless little hovel where he was detained, he made his way along the caravan road north to Kashgar, with its colorful bazaar filled with merchants, camels, horses, and textiles.

Road? Calling the Silk Road a road is like calling a strand of spider silk a rope. The fabled Silk Road, one learns, consisted of no more than a dusty and evanescent track skirting the oval of the terrible Taklamakan Desert, where mere humans and animals have no chance against the searing heat and landmarkless wastes of traveling dunes that make up its interior. Instead of cutting across that impassable center, the track skittered by two-, five-, and fifteen-day marches from one water source to the next, whether brackish wells or bright streams of meltwater tumbling down from the surrounding ring of mountains. In either case, at these life-giving spots one could refill the precious canteens of water for both people and pack animals before toiling onward. The dusty traveler could often see the oases miles ahead, splashes of emerald green against the monotonous gray-brown wasteland (plate 15b). Khotan to Kashgar constituted the north-south leg of the journey skirting the west end of the basin. From Kashgar the track turned east across the north side of the basin, heading toward Kucha, Karashahr, and Turfan, centers of the ancient Tokharian kingdoms.

Hidden from the rest of the world for a thousand years, the Tokharians had come to light a scant two decades before Roerich's journey. Most spectacular of the remains he saw were the magnificent frescoes in the Buddhist monastery of Bezeklik near Turfan (plate 15b), found by the German explorer Albert von LeCoq. As he visited these painted cells, perched in the ocher-red rocks above an emerald gorge, the artist Roerich looked with wonder on ancient portraits

of these forgotten people (plate 16), with their often light brown beards and elegant mustaches, their blue eyes and white skin, proudly donating bags of money to the Buddhist monasteries for good works. Musing on their fortune, Roerich wrote into his diaries: "So, before the eyes of history has come a nation, from whence is unknown; nor is it known how it scattered and disappeared without a trace."

The mummies lying in state in Ürümchi are making that story known again. And Dolkun, pointing to his own Caucasian face and pale brown hair, answers when his audience asks why all those early Caucasians disappeared: "We are not gone—we are still here. . . . *I* am still here!"



Notes on Sources

FIVE OF the color photographs—plates 1, 5a, 9, 10b, 11a—were taken by Jeffery Newbury/©1994 and reprinted with permission of *Discover Magazine*.

For complete bibliographical information, see the Bibliography. What follows is a list of specific page references to the sources of quotations, drawings, and other information, together with some brief explanatory descriptions of sources that may be helpful to the curious reader.

CHAPTER 1

Evan Hadingham's April 1994 *Discover* article "The Mummies of Xinjiang" includes full-color photographs by Jeffery Newbury. Victor Mair's article in *Archaeology* "Mummies of the Tarim Basin" (1995) also contains some of Newbury's photos (printed backwards) as well as some of Mair's. In 1996 *National Geographic* published Thomas Allen's article "Xinjiang," including in its last section, "The Silk Road's Lost World" (pp. 44–51), Reza's photos of some of the mummies, sites, and artifacts.

Konrad Spindler tells the story of the prehistoric Ice Man, found mummified in an Alpine glacier in 1991, in his book *The Man in the Ice* (1994).

For the origin and development of textiles as a key industry in early times, see my two earlier books: *Women's Work—The First 20,000 Years* (1994) and *Prehistoric Textiles* (1991). The latter also gives a full account, with photographs, of the ancient European plaid twills (pp. 166–69, 186–95).

CHAPTER 2

The slashed cloak from Gerumsberg, Sweden, is further described in my book *Prehistoric Textiles*, pp. 192–94, with references to the original Swedish publications.