



Commercial Revolution in the Central Eurasian Middle Ages: Tribute, Capital & Nomadic Aristocracy

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Abstract

Janet Abu-Lughod's Before European Hegemony remains a landmark in both World-Systems Analysis and global medieval historiography. The claim that the height of Mongol Eurasian hegemony c.1250-1350 formed an inflection point in Afro-Eurasian integration remains compelling after more than thirty five years, but many of the theoretical and empirical details can be revised. Theoretically, the long thirteenth century identified by Abu-Lughod saw the final coalescence of a world-market in a pre-existing Afro-Eurasian world-system, rather than a novel world-system as she had argued. This world-market was formed by the secular trend towards the interregional integration of capital circuits, as Abu-Lughod described, and constituted an Afro-Eurasian Commercial Revolution. Nevertheless the world-market spanned a world-system constituted by tributary rather than capitalist regimes of accumulation, resulting in distinct dynamics and tendencies from those theorised for the modern capitalist world-economy. This argument is developed empirically through analysis of the Mongol world-empire, the definitive development in Abu-Lughod's vision. Central Eurasian nomadism is presented as a variant type of tributary regime, which shaped the patterns and rhythms of the world-market at the height of commercialisation. Thus Abu-Lughod's overall vision is renovated but reinforced, establishing new claims to be tested in future research, especially the long history of capital accumulation in the tributary regimes that constituted the medieval Afro-Eurasian world-system, both sedentary and nomadic.

Keywords: Abu-Lughod, Capitalism, Central Asia, Afro-Eurasian world system, Capital Accumulation, Marxism, Mongol Empire, Nomads, Silk Road, Taxation



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Old Debates Renewed

The best part of four decades on, Janet Abu-Lughod's *Before European Hegemony* (1989) remains the sole monograph to evoke the totality of the Afro-Eurasian world-system in the Middle Ages.¹ The achievement is remarkable given the historiographies she combined to produce the compelling perspective of a critical "outsider".² Abu-Lughod's fundamental claim was that by the 'long thirteenth century' c.1200-1350 an integrated, highly commercialised world-system covered much of the eastern hemisphere. The narrative's specifics were, however, significantly conditioned by the historiographical limitations and historical conjuncture in which she wrote.³

In this article, therefore, I build on Abu-Lughod's arguments, and reinforce the overall vision, while theoretically and empirically renovating both. Theoretically, I propose a consistently historical materialist world-systems paradigm focused on the dynamics of the tributary mode of production, which was the prevalent political and economic configuration across the medieval Afro-Eurasian world-system.⁴ Consistent theorisation of tributary regimes and their inherent tendencies towards commercialisation is crucial to explain the phenomena Abu-Lughod identified and described. The distinct dynamics of tributary regimes have important implications for the now ossified debate over world-systems prior to the modern capitalist one.

¹ Other detailed accounts of world-systems before capitalist modernity tend to focus on the ancient world, e.g. Algaze (1993).

² The same point is made as part of a positive assessment of her work in Wickham (2023, 4). See also the endorsement of her work in Campbell (2016, xxiii).

³ The most obvious example is Abu-Lughod's account of the role of "China", arguing that the "failure" of the early Ming state to become hemispheric hegemon represents the 'fall of the East' *before* any detectable 'rise of the West'. This was intended in 1989 as an anti-Eurocentric argument but reads the opposite in 2025, especially after the impact of Pommeranz (2000), which convincingly argues against any such developments before 1750. Nevertheless Abu-Lughod sought to downplay the view that medieval European states and actors were already showing the shoots of future global hegemony in rapid development of political systems, commercialisation and expansionism. By arguing that no-one in 1400 would have predicted the 'rise of the West', that Europe remained comparatively undeveloped, couldn't compete with "China", and that European development in the Middle Ages had relied on participation in a wider Afro-Eurasian world-system, Abu-Lughod sought to directly challenge Euro-American chauvinism. Abu-Lughod's argument has been recently taken for granted in Campbell (2016, 18). A similar argument was earlier articulated by Eric Wolf (1982), but beginning in 1400 rather than building from the Middle Ages. On the kinds of arguments Abu-Lughod sought to challenge see: Blaut (1992). Andre Gunder Frank thought that Abu-Lughod's insight about "China" was her most important contribution, and sought to expand her explicitly "Sinocentric" model through modernity, in a manner that now appears the prophecy of a new Sinocentric common sense which historians will increasingly need to nuance and provincialise in coming decades, see: Frank (1998, xix). For a compelling revisionist account of the supposed "Ming retreat" see: Belich (2022). In world-systems analysis debate now focuses on whether the People's Republic of China is rising to global hegemony, as argued by Giovanni Arrighi (2007), or whether, as Wallerstein argued (e.g. 2010), the world-economy is going through a more fundamental restructuring.

⁴ As Glen Dudbridge (2018, 298) notes, WSA has always had a shared basis in Marxism or historical materialism. On the tributary mode of production, and distinct tributary regimes of accumulation, see below page 15.

Classically Immanuel Wallerstein argued that all world-systems fall into two categories, world-economies and world-empires. A world-economy is defined by an axial division of labour between regions hierarchically organised into hegemonic cores, subhegemonic semi-peripheries, and hegemonised peripheries. A world-empire, conversely, is a single imperial polity that functions as the organising principle for the system as a whole. According to Wallerstein (2006, 24), moreover, only the modern capitalist world-economy has lasted for a prolonged period without transformation into a world-empire. This claim caused significant debate in world-systems analysis (WSA) and the related field of world history. Some, such as Samir Amin broadly agreed with Wallerstein, and others, such as Christopher Chase-Dunn & Thomas Hall, Barry Gills & Andre Gunder Frank, and David Wilkinson, argued for a longer, single Afro-Eurasian world-system, pre-existing European hegemony and steadily expanding to encompass other world-systems and eventually most of the planet.⁵ Abu-Lughod, arguing against both, proposed the identification of distinct world-systems in existence over time and space, interrelated but discontinuous, some of which were or became world-empires, and the rest of which formed world-economies.

More rigorous engagement with the dynamics of tributary regimes allows us to conceive of world-systems that were neither world-economies, nor world-empires. Instead, we can conceive of a world-system in general: a set of regional circuits between state systems, integrated through rhythmically patterned political and economic, and so also cultural, interconnections. A world-system composed of capitalist regimes produces the rhythmical patterns so acutely analysed by Wallerstein and others, with the axial division of labour between cores and peripheries tending over time and space towards coalescence as a true world-economy. In a world-system largely composed of tributary regimes, conversely, we should expect different rhythmical patterns, reflecting the distinct political and economic motions of tributary accumulation and related commercialisation. Thus the systemic integration envisioned in the eight circuits making up Abu-Lughod's thirteenth-century world-system: there's no axial division of labour between the regional circuits, nor is hegemonic hierarchy primarily expressed in the core-periphery dynamics recognisable from the modern capitalist world-system. Instead, the more state-contained dynamics of tributary accumulation produced hegemonic hierarchies expressed primarily in political and cultural terms, with commercial hierarchy – including the classic dependency dynamic of exporting raw materials and importing finished goods – present but secondary as a marker of world-systemic subordination. Thus a general category of world-system allows for the analysis of integrative patterns constituted by tributary political and economic motions, rather than to tautologically dismiss these such dynamics for not being capitalist and so not constituting a world-economy.

⁵ See the respective contributions in Gills & Frank (1996).

A similar understanding is found in Philippe Beaujard's magisterial two-volume *Worlds of the Indian Ocean*.⁶ Beaujard shows how political, economic and cultural interconnections formed a world-system spanning key regions of Afro-Eurasia by the later centuries of the first millennium B.C.E. This Afro-Eurasian world-system continued to develop all the way to the fifteenth century, when it became the basis for the planet-wide "modern" world-system enforced through the colonisation of the western hemisphere.⁷ Adopting Beaujard's *longue durée* perspective, Abu-Lughod's 'thirteenth-century world-system' becomes the conjuncture when an integrated world-market definitively coalesced for the first time in the history of the Afro-Eurasian world-system. In contrast to world-economy, world-market doesn't imply a strong axial division of labour, only that integrated commodity circuits span the interconnected regions of the world-system. The pre-thirteenth century tendency towards a world-market is evident in how demand for Chinese ceramics in tenth- and eleventh-century Cairo-Fustat and Baghdad conditioned processes of production and aesthetic choices in the Tang and Song states (Wickham 2023, 42-43; Yue 2021). A world-market implies a tendency towards a world-economy; so, to extend the example, the necessity of importing Central Asian cobalt in large enough quantities for the production of blue-and-white porcelain in southern mainland East Asia. Yet world-economy indicates that different elements of single processes of commodity production are regularly taking place in different regions in an integrated axial division of labour. World-market, conversely, implies only the movement of commodities from one region to another through integrated exchange dynamics conditioned by fluctuations of supply and demand. This includes primary commodities like metals, minerals, grains, and raw cloth, commercially circulated to relatively discrete regional economies with autonomous divisions of labour producing finished commodities such as weaponry, ceramics, foodstuffs, and processed textiles, which may then circulate once more on the world-market.⁸

In short, therefore, Abu-Lughod described the formation of an Afro-Eurasian world-market in the qualitatively new level of specifically commercial integration between her eight circuits over the long thirteenth century. The development formed nothing less than an Afro-Eurasian Commercial Revolution, to follow Lorenzo M. Bondioli (2022) in adopting and generalising the

⁶ Original published in French 2011, and then in English translation in 2019, this two-volume study comes closest to providing an updated version of Abu-Lughod's argument, only limited by the fact that, by design, it focuses on the regions around the Indian Ocean, rather than taking Afro-Eurasia as a whole.

⁷ Similar but far less empirically substantiated arguments were made by Chase-Dunn & Hall (1991); Chase-Dunn & Hall (1997); Frank & Gill (1996), & Wilkinson (1996).

⁸ This understanding allows for Wickham's (2023, 621-662) arguments that all interregional circulation in the Middle Ages rested on coherent regional economies, while avoiding his dismissal of interregional circulation as 'marginal' to those regional economies, and asserting a stronger market structure than implied in his weaker term 'network'.

terminology of Robert S. Lopez's 1971 classic *The Commercial Revolution of the Middle Ages, 950-1350*.⁹ Lopez sought to explain European commercialisation in these centuries and explicitly argued that this was a self-generated process whereby 'an underdeveloped society succeeded in developing itself, mostly by its own efforts' (1971, vii). By applying "Commercial Revolution" across the landmass, European commercialisation is provincialised in wider Afro-Eurasian developments, which is already a trend in general literature (e.g. Stearns 2009, 29-57; Smith 2015; & Von Glahn 2019).

As ever, the key issue is causation. Abu-Lughod's main concern was to demonstrate the existence of her thirteenth-century world-system, locating but not overly emphasising an explanation for its emergence in the direct connectivity fostered by the Mongol conquests. For Lopez endogenous European 'growth' was a result of agricultural innovation increasing surplus in staple grains while reducing the required labour inputs, which could then be re-directed to market-oriented production. This functionalist argument is perhaps the most common in mainstream historiography; the same explanation is found in Mark Elvin's 1971 *Pattern of the Chinese Past*, which strongly influenced Abu-Lughod's presentation of "China", and proposed an East Asian 'medieval economic revolution' in the eleventh to thirteenth centuries. The underlying assumption is that "freed" agricultural labour would automatically result in a Smithian dynamic of growth: subaltern households could now focus more on producing non-staple, cash-crop agricultural goods for the market; on increasing manufactured commodity production in more complex divisions of labour; and, as part of both processes, increasing individuals' movement between city and country, where they took on other forms of labour often paid in wages, and so provided increased market demand met by larger supply in a self-reinforcing, self-expanding cycle.

Such developments certainly took place to varying degrees across the Afro-Eurasian world-system, especially in the southern regions of mainland East Asia that became the most productive parts of the Song state (Von Glahn 2016, 208-294), in the South Asian subcontinent (Beaujard 2019, 477-495), and in the core Islamic lands of Egypt, Mesopotamia and Iran (Bondioli 2021, 2022, 2023), before, somewhat belatedly, the European peninsula. They do indeed constitute the essential socio-economic transformations of the Commercial Revolution, so that by 1300 subaltern households were far more likely to use currency in everyday life, to produce and manufacture for markets, and even to experience some kind of subordination to merchant command. But there is no reason why increased agricultural innovation should have caused such developments. The assumption is grounded in the idea that as soon as agrarian households increased staple production, they would express a universal economic rationality by diversifying into market-oriented production, and so maximise wealth accumulation. Given the subsistence ethic central to peasant moral economies (Scott 1976), however, increased outputs

⁹ Lopez had adopted it from Raymond De Roover (1942), whose work also influenced Abu-Lughod, and who specifically applied "commercial revolution" to Latin Christian and especially northern Italian business innovations in the long thirteenth century.

based on potentially risky new practices and higher yield grains are much more likely to be outcomes of other drivers than the rational choices of millions of would-be Smithian entrepreneurs. While Chris Wickham (2021) is right to assert the centrality of subaltern demand in medieval commercialisation, providing the fundamental condition for the commodification of bulk goods, he still leaves unexplained why peasants should “choose” the vagaries of market access for basic materials and foodstuffs, or how and why those markets developed in the first place.

In a dynamic underlined classically by Eric Wolf (1982), more recently re-emphasised by Matthew Costa (2025), and given rigorous empirical underpinning in Bondioli’s (2021) pioneering work on Fatimid Egypt, high levels of commercialisation under tributary regimes is a result of demands made in currency.¹⁰ The tendency towards normative currency taxation in the imperial Caliphate and Tang from the late eighth century thus appears a crucial development. These are the “cores” of the Afro-Eurasian world-system in the early Middle Ages, generally hegemonic in that they set the political and economic rules and rhythms according to which wider political, economic and cultural patterns played out, and to which the (semi-)peripheral regional state systems mostly must conform. The almost simultaneous transition to currency taxation in both West and East Asian cores produced an explosion of capital accumulation from merchant-dominated relations of production and forms of exploitation, in patterns analysed by Jairus Banaji (2010; 2016; 2020) and Sven Beckert (2025) as part of a long history of capital accumulation. As circuits of capital accumulation spread and integrated, they formed a relatively coherent structure spanning the world-system, that is, they formed a world-market, linking together, in Beckert’s words, ‘islands of capital’. Taken together, the implication is that the Commercial Revolution formed an axial transformation in the Afro-Eurasian world-system over the *longue durée*, resulting in the potential for the eventual, but never inevitable, formation of a capitalist world-economy by the mid nineteenth century.

This argument has implications for other strands of WSA that have situated the beginnings of the modern capitalist world-economy in the Middle Ages, in a northern Italian dominated system developing in the thirteenth century and crystallising in the fourteenth. Classically argued by Fernand Braudel (1986) and Giovanni Arrighi (1994), and recently re-endorsed by Nestor Rodriguez (2023) and Şahan Savaş Karataşlı (2024), in this view characteristic core-periphery dynamics are already in place between, for example, the wool-producing island of Britain and textile-manufacturing in Florence, or gold and enslaved people trafficked through the Maghreb to Genoa, or the fibres, mordants, and agricultural surpluses transferred from Aegean islands to Venice. Certainly, these northern Italian polities were capitalist state systems, and these dynamics are reflected in their imperialist attempts at commercial hegemony and direct colonisation. But northern Italian commercial and financial hegemony was only operative within

¹⁰ The same drive to commercialisation on the basis of currency demands, in this case rents rather than taxes, is proposed in Hilton (1985, *inter alia* 128, & 154-155).

parts of the Mediterranean world-economy and Latin Christendom, and even then it was strongly circumscribed when facing powerful tributary regimes such as the Egyptian Mamluk state, which could dictate diplomatic and commercial terms to Genoa, Venice, and other actors such as Catalan and Provençal merchants under the Crown of Aragon, or even facing the comparatively weak English crown, which defaulted and bankrupted the wealthiest Florentine firms largely without consequence in the mid fourteenth century.

Northern Italian city-states were certainly not hegemonic at the level of the Afro-Eurasian world-system, or world-market as a whole, and historical actors' recognising dynamics of capital accumulation cannot be reduced to their presumed influence. Karataşlı is right, for example, that the fourteenth-century Maghrebi scholar-official Ibn Khaldun's (l. 1332-1406) labour theory of value demonstrates the existence of capital accumulation as such, but is wrong to attribute his understanding to the novel formation of a world-economy centred in northern Italy. Ibn Khaldun was not the first writer in Arabic to explore the origins of profit, nor were Arabic writers the sole voices to recognise the internal relationship between labour, value, and commercial profit, nor does his key theoretical work, the *Muqadimmah*, describe northern Italian dominance.

All this is found, for example, in the work of his slightly younger contemporary, the Constantinopolitan neo-Platonist philosopher Gemistos Plethon (l. 1355-1452) resident in the Peloponnese. Plethon lucidly described unequal exchange between northern Italy and the Aegean, which used to have significant centres for textile manufacturing but now produced raw materials for places such as Venice and Lucca, and so lost 'the added portion [of value] from the labour (to ek tis ergasias periseuma)' while having to pay a premium for the imported final commodities (Laiou & Morrison 2007, 192). Already in the eleventh century the Greek legal handbook known as the *Peira* (Simon & Reinsch 2023) showed full awareness of distinctions between the base value of a productive property and the added value created through labour, which, when legal ownership and usufruct differed, conferred differentiated property rights over the asset as such and its output; there is even an implicit understanding of idle versus active capital in the specification that profits made from properties held as surety for loans should be deducted from the interest.

Examples could be multiplied from across medieval Afro-Eurasia, the point is that, although Ibn Khaldun is uniquely extended in his discussion of capital accumulation, and much more precise than others in its theorisation within a political and economic totality, he was by no means alone or even the first medieval actor to recognise capital accumulation. Indeed, far from indicating the Maghreb's position in a world-economy centred in northern Italy, his theories underline the endogenous capital accumulation of Islamicate tributary regimes, a point underlined by Banaji, Bondioli, and Beckert. If anything, the extensive evidence for deep understanding of capital accumulation among Islamicate actors serves to underline the dependency of northern Italian merchant capitalists on a wider world-market in which the European peninsula was one province, rather than their general commercial hegemony. If there is a conjunctural particularity to Ibn Khaldun's theory of capitalist and tributary dynamics, then it is the fundamental role he attributes to nomadic elites.

These, therefore, are my theoretical proposals: that the transformations described by Abu-Lughod refer to the revolutionary commercialisation of a pre-existing Afro-Eurasian world-system. This was neither a world-economy nor a world-empire, but a world-system in general almost entirely composed by tributary regimes. Their various regional economies were integrated through a world-market that emerged tendentially from c.800, and definitively coalesced c.1200.¹¹ The phenomenon is marked by rising merchant classes increasingly autonomous from particular state-systems, and rapid urbanisation from the Atlantic, across the Mediterranean, Central Eurasia and the Indian Ocean to the Pacific. The Commercial Revolution didn't produce a capitalist world-system, i.e. a world-economy, by 1350 or 1400. But it did produce a range of tributary regimes across Afro-Eurasia in which capital accumulation was increasingly essential. In the central taxation regimes of the West and East Asian cores, capital accumulation provided the basis for the large revenues drawn from indirect taxation, which formed about 70% of state revenue in the southern Song state by 1200—such cases may even deserve a distinct category of *tributary-commercial* regimes. The term may apply to the lordship regimes of later medieval Latin Christendom, where indirect taxation on commerce was the primary source of royal revenue in the new tax systems developed from c.1250. And, of course, capital accumulation had conquered the mercantile city-states of northern Italy and the Low Countries, who provided the capital for Latin Christian monarchies to begin the first experiments in deficit-financing in the same period, although these weren't fiscally disciplined to finance capital until c.1500 and later. So, to the extent that capital accumulation was essential to the constituent polities of the Afro-Eurasian world-system, a world-market defined by capitalist dynamics of exchange was likewise essential to their existence, even if those polities were based on tributary rather than capitalist regimes.¹² A crisis in the world-market would necessarily become a crisis in their state system, exactly as happened in the fourteenth century.

For the remainder of this article, then, I want to flesh out these arguments empirically in the defining element of the long thirteenth century, and the facilitator of the world-market's final coalescence: the pan-Eurasian hegemony of the Great Mongol State (*Yeke Mongghol Ulus*). Mongol Studies forms perhaps the most radically transformed field in the decades since Abu Lughod wrote, allowing for a fundamental reconsideration of the Great Mongol State's role. In her narrative the Great Mongol State functioned to link together the various regional circuits, bringing together pre-existing processes of commercialisation into an integrated whole. It represents the major exception to the absence of world-empires in the historical development of

¹¹ These centuries are termed an era of both 'globalisation' and '(proto-)capitalism' by Beaujard (2019).

¹² Capital accumulation understood in the precise Marxian sense of Money used to produce and procure Commodities then sold on the market for Money with Profit, with a necessary portion re-invested to start the cycle again, described in the formula M-C-M'. As Abu-Lughod described, and Marx himself indicated, capital accumulation has existed in the 'most diverse economic formations of society' (Marx 2010, 588).

the Afro-Eurasian world-system. Even after the transformation of the unitary empire into a Chinggisid world-order after 1259, the constituent polities were self-consciously part of a single world-imperial interstate system with a relatively coherent political economy (Kalra 2018).¹³ Yet, as shall be seen, while the Mongol world-empire structured the final coalescence of the Afro-Eurasian world-market, pre-existing commercialisation was also a prerequisite for its political economy. The Mongol world-empire was thus both *cause* and *outcome* of the final coalescence of the Afro-Eurasian world-market.

Developing these arguments and their world-systemic implications requires two interrelated analyses, the dynamics of the Central Eurasian “Silk Roads”, and the drivers of nomadic state formation. Nomadic aristocracy is characterised as a particular kind of tributary regime, which produced political and economic motions that explain steppe nomadism as a vector of commercialisation, Central Eurasia as a connecting space, and so the Mongol world-empire’s role in the long thirteenth century. The argument is developed through a close critique of dependency models, whereby state formation among nomadic “tribes” is seen as a secondary phenomenon resulting from sedentary state systems. Such models form the dominant scholarly paradigms for nomadic states and societies, and reflect popularly held assumptions. In their place I propose a consistently historical materialist, world-systems perspective in which nomadic aristocracy is a form of lordship predicated on property relations particular to mobile pastoralism. Thereby it becomes possible to see both its similarity to territorial lordship regimes, and the distinctions which produced such different outcomes in the historical development of the Afro-Eurasian world-system – —not least the formation of the only true world-empire of the medieval millennium.

The first section below, therefore, provides a detailed critique of the primary theorists of dependency models, and establishes an alternative paradigm based on the tributary dynamics of nomadic aristocracy. The second section, then, provides an account of the Mongol world-empire’s formation, and its role in the final coalescence of the Afro-Eurasian world-market in the long thirteenth century. The last section, finally, moves beyond the Mongols, to propose that the ‘age of transregional nomadic empires’ c.1000-1500 is an expression of the Afro-Eurasian Commercial Revolution as it manifested in Central Eurasia.

Nomadic Aristocracy as a Tributary Regime of Accumulation

Central Eurasia is the home of the “Silk Road(s)”, the definitive term for (Afro-)Eurasian connectivity (e.g. Frankopan 2015), and the heartland of the Mongol world-empire. Yet for all its ubiquity in scholarship and popular imaginaries, Central Eurasia’s historical role as the “Silk Roads” is generally assumed rather than theorised. The standard image evokes the Central

¹³ I borrow world-order from Ayşe Zarakol (2023, 47-89) to describe the relatively conscious, subjective manner in which polities relate to each other according to certain hegemonic norms, in contrast to the more unconscious, objectively structural integration implied by the term world-system.

Eurasian routes between “China” and western Eurasia, supposedly “opened” by a Han diplomat c. 100 B.C.E. From this point the “Silk Roads” are in supposedly continuous existence, and enter a “golden age” whenever sedentary east and west Eurasian states established direct or minimally mediated contact (Liu 2010). The evidence for contact between sedentary states of the littoral indicates whether the “Silk Roads” are “open” or “closed” in a given period, and ‘[i]deas, products, and people’ (Chase-Dunn & Hall 1996, 151-152) could travel, always implicitly *from East to West*.¹⁴

Seen thus, however, the “Mongol moment” forms a paradox.¹⁵ Following the collapse of Tang and the imperial Caliphate in the ninth and tenth centuries, and the rise of nomadic polities across Central Eurasia, the “Silk Roads” are meant to have gone through a period of “closure” (Biran 2015, 575). The Song state, established in the second half of the tenth century, is supposed to have turned to the so-called Maritime Silk Roads through the Indian Ocean. Implicitly or explicitly, therefore, the three centuries between the end of the Tang state and the rise of Chinggis Khan are seen as a time when the “Silk Roads” closed *because* of nomadic state formation.¹⁶ Yet these same tenth- and eleventh-century nomadic states, including the Khitan Liao state in East Asia, the Qarakhanid state in Central Asia, and the Great Seljuq Empire in West Asia, mark the onset of what Jerry Bentley (1996, 766) termed the ‘age of transregional nomadic empires’. Lasting c.1000-1500, this was a period when the ‘migrations, conquests, and empire-building efforts of nomadic peoples guaranteed that cross-cultural interactions would take place in more intensive and systematic fashion than in earlier eras.’ There is an obvious contradiction: the period 900 to 1200 is somehow *both* one of world-historic shift from terrestrial to maritime routes because of the rise of nomadic states, *and* an era when those same states fostered ‘more intensive and systematic’ connectivity than ever before.

The imaginary of the so-called Silk Roads is predicated above all on the idea of *routes*, much as in *Before European Hegemony* where Central Eurasia appears as the ‘northeast passage’ (Abu-Lughod 1989, 153-184). So, according to Abu-Lughod, the Mongols’ ‘contribution was to create an environment that facilitated land travel with less risk and lower protective rent’ (Abu-Lughod 1989, 154). This is the classically passive image of the so-called *Pax Mongolica*, where the Mongols’ imperial peace created the conditions for dramatically increased commerce, but not actually driving commercialisation as such.¹⁷ Routes are defined in turn by their origin points

¹⁴ See, indicatively but most critically, Kalra (2018, 133): ‘The physical connectivity of Eurasia is best depicted through the ancient Silk Road which signified a complex network of roads and waterways to connect the different regions of Eurasia, from China through Central Asia, Iran and Iraq to Russia and the surrounding region.’

¹⁵ A paradox, that is, according to the ‘Sinocentric paradigm’ critiqued by Lhamsuren Munkh-Erdene (2023).

¹⁶ Even in her revisionist account of the “Silk Road”, Valerie Hansen (2012, 237-242) argues for a ‘reversion’ to small-scale trade following the retreat of the Tang after 755, and implies increased isolation of the Tarim cities following Qarakhanid conquest.

¹⁷ For an alternative vision of the so-called *Pax Mongolica* that places nomadic political economy at the centre see Favereau (2018).

and termini; in this case always assumed to be “China” and the “West”. Yet the connecting spaces that produce and sustain routes are *social* and *historical* rather than strictly *geographical* phenomena: the infrastructure and push/pull factors for movement at scale, formed by human social relations and institutions, are more important for defining the patterns of that movement than the lay of the land as such.

Instead of imagining oasis cities like pearls on a string, adorning the deserts and mountain ranges between the Gansu corridor and Transoxiana, each in semi-isolation from the next, ‘the Silk Road’ is best understood as ‘the entire political-economic-cultural system of Central Eurasia...[while i]n its more restricted economic sense, the Silk Road was the Central Eurasian economy’ (Beckwith 2009, 328; compare with Christian 2000; & Honeychurch 2014). The infrastructure for movement at scale in medieval Central Eurasia was *part* of this total system and economy, for the functioning *of* that system and economy, through the activity of *all* Central Eurasians, whether they lived in the northern forest taiga ecozone, the steppe, or the steppe-littoral transition zone, and including urbanites and sedentary agriculturalists as well as mobile pastoralists. All three ecozones and all three lifeways were interrelated within the whole, but ‘the center of the Silk Road system was the Central Eurasian aristocracy of the native states, in which most of the rulers were of steppe nomadic origin’ (Beckwith 2009, 321). Thus, nomadic state formation, and the dynamics of nomadic aristocracy, are central to explaining Central Eurasia’s historical role as a connecting space within the wider Afro-Eurasian world-system.

“Nomadic state formation” may seem a contradiction in terms.¹⁸ The socio-political units among Central Eurasian nomads are normatively termed “tribes” and subdivided into “clans”. In certain conditions “tribes” can form “confederations” that sometimes provide the basis for imperial projects, but the norm is supposed to be “tribal fragmentation”, so that state formation is the exception in need of explanation—if, indeed, a “tribal confederation” can be termed a state as such (e.g. Barfield 1989). For her part Abu-Lughod doesn’t pretend to explain either nomadic state formation in general, nor the emergence of the Mongol world-empire in particular, her aim is only to describe the world-systemic *effects* of the Mongol moment as she saw them: facilitating interconnection between regional circuits. Her analysis, however, prompted Frank and Hall to first attempt theorisations of Central Eurasian nomadism in world-systems (Frank 1992; Chase-Dunn & Hall 1996). To do so they turned to Anatoly Khazanov (1984) and Thomas Barfield’s (1989) then recent, now field-defining, studies of nomadism and nomadic state formation (cf. Lhamsuren 2023, 296-322). Both proposed variations on a dependency model, which, recent critiques and alternatives notwithstanding (e.g. *inter alia* Sneath 2007; Lhamsuren 2023; Atwood 2015; Miller 2024), probably remains the most common view in Central Eurasian

¹⁸ Hall’s world-systems theorisation (1991, 213) took it as axiomatic that to be nomadic is to be ‘nonstate’. For a highly thought-provoking theory of the nomadic origins of the state as such see: Lhamsuren (2023).

studies, and conforms to commonly held assumptions about nomadic society. Given this, a detailed critique of the dependency model is required to establish the necessity of an alternative paradigm.

The dependency model was framed against “internalist” explanations for nomadic state formation, both pseudo-Weberian charismatic leaders forming the nuclei of “supratribal” polities (e.g. Harl 2023; cf. Lhamsuren 2023, 11-15), and Orthodox Marxist arguments for incipient class relations within so-called nomadic feudalism (Sneath 2007, 124-131; Bold 2001, 15-24; Lhamsuren 2023, 128-136). At one end of the dependency spectrum is the idea of ‘predatory nomadism’ endorsed by Abu-Lughod, who assumes that nomads ‘prey on settled agriculturalists’, so that ‘[the Mongol] economy developed less *out of* mobile pastoralism than out of extraction from a new type of herd—human’ (Abu-Lughod 1989, 155). So for Abu-Lughod nomadic societies *ipso facto* could facilitate connectivity but never drive commercialisation in themselves. Predatory nomadism is much less common today, however.¹⁹ Most dependency proponents endorse some variation on Khazanov’s vision of the “needy nomad” (1984, 69-84), whose lifeway is insufficient for subsistence and forces them to “trade or raid” to survive; Barfield’s (2023, 118-151) conceptualisation of nomadic state formation as a means to extort wealth from sedentary states, since their socio-political complexity cannot be explained on the basis of ‘the needs of simple pastoral nomadism’ (Barfield 1989, 6-7); or Nicola Di Cosmo’s (1999) theory that the inherent ‘vulnerability and poverty’ of mobile pastoralism made nomadic society susceptible to ecological crises, which prompted militarisation, centralisation, and state formation in order to obtain external resources.

Di Cosmo (1994), whom Frank consulted as a then up-and-coming specialist for his world-system model of the ‘centrality of Central Asia’ (1992), certainly provides the most critical variation on the dependency model.²⁰ He undermined one of Khazanov and Barfield’s key premises by demonstrating that the nomadic diet was meat- and dairy-based, and only supplemented by grain, which was produced in sufficient quantities within Central Eurasia for nomadic needs. Indeed, the main focus of raiding, the steppe-littoral transition zone, had a mixed economy between mobile pastoralism and sedentary agriculture, and accounts of raids focus on the taking of people and livestock, not grains or luxuries (Di Cosmo 2002, 169-170). Nevertheless, Di Cosmo (1999, 14-15) smuggles dependency through the backdoor by arguing that mobile pastoralism engendered ‘chronic instability’ reflected in the steppe’s ‘tribal fragmentation’. Only environmental stress could produce the centralised militarisation necessary for state formation, usually focused on a charismatic member of the ‘tribal aristocracy’, and this state was formed for and survived on the appropriation of external wealth. Ecological crisis thus became the axial concept mediating a dialectic between ‘tribal fragmentation at the one end and centralised states at the other’ (Di Cosmo 1999, 38).

¹⁹ One recent proponent is the archaeologist Barry Cunliffe (2015, 151-202; & 2019).

²⁰ For a recent critique of his arguments see Lhamsuren (2023, 8-9, 62-63 & 68).

In seeming to explain nomadic state formation and an inherent need to trade for external resources, the dependency model might be thought to provide an answer for the emergence of the Mongol world-empire, and its role in the coalescence of the Afro-Eurasian world-market. Khazanov and Barfield (1989, 7) argued that obtaining goods and wealth produced externally to the steppe was essential for all nomads, from the subsistence of individual subaltern households to the very existence of an aristocracy, so that imperial confederations developed in order to extort ‘more highly organized’ sedentary states. The emphasis on the interrelation between nomadic and sedentary polities, as opposed to the internal development of nomadic society, is certainly appealing to world-systems perspectives. Yet without their key premise, the need to acquire basic goods as a result of the insufficiency of mobile pastoralism, Khazanov and Barfield’s strong dependency models lose their explanatory power. And, most pertinently, by Barfield’s own admission (1989, 187-228), the model *never* explained the historical conjuncture when a nomadic polity concretely attempted to realise itself as a world-empire, ruling both steppe and sedentary littoral, instead of simply extorting.

Di Cosmo’s (1999, 2024) weak dependency model, on the other hand, explicitly framed in dialogue with world-systems analysts and world historians, has the benefit of providing an apparent explanation for the Mongol moment: although the result of a pluvial rather than droughts, it forms an acute example of an ecological conditions enabling large-scale centralisation and state formation, and forms the broad transition from dual administration of nomadic and sedentary populations as the primary method of accumulating external wealth, to the direct taxation of both. Nevertheless, Di Cosmo also preserves a separation between mobile pastoralism as a lifeway and nomadic state formation, since the latter is the response to the ‘vulnerability and poverty’ of the former, which reveals itself in ecological crisis. So, his typological periodisation of nomadic state formation is entirely defined and structured around the strategies of wealth appropriation from the sedentary agrarian world.

Both strong and weak dependency models are only tenable if it is true that mobile pastoralism is an inherently vulnerable and poor lifeway, qualitatively more so than sedentary agriculture. Increasingly, however, this appears to not be the case. Against the dependency model there are a growing number of Central Eurasian specialists led by David Sneath, and historians of the Mongols in particular, most prominently Christopher Atwood and Lhamsuren Munkh-Erdene, who take a completely different view of nomadic state formation, focusing precisely on Christopher Beckwith’s ‘center of the Silk Road system’, the *nomadic aristocracy*.²¹ Sneath’s monograph, *The Headless State*, critiqued the social evolutionary models that imagines humanity progressing *from* kinship-based tribes *through* chiefdoms *to* centralised states (2007, 1-38). Prevalent in a number of fields as well as in popular assumptions, the same common sense

²¹ See, *inter alia*, Sneath (2007); Atwood (2015); Lhamsuren (2023); Daniel Roger (2019); Honeychurch (2013).

assumes social evolution from mobility to sedentarism, conflating lifeways as different as mobile pastoralism and hunting-and-gathering at the “primitive” end of the scale. So Central Eurasian nomadism has been almost uniformly presented as an instance of kinship-based “tribal society”, and mobile pastoralism cast as a simple lifeway, with both undergirding the assumptions that produced the dependency model.

For example, the widespread attestation of genealogies has been taken as key evidence that kinship formed the dominant political idiom among Central Eurasian nomads, and so that their social structure was “tribal”. However, as Sneath underlines, these genealogies aren’t those of “peoples” but rather *aristocratic lineages*—Chinggis Khan’s claimed descent from a she-wolf doesn’t refer to all “Mongols”, noble and commoner, but to his own Borjigin house (Atwood 2023, 3-16). Likewise the colour symbolism prevalent in nomadic Central Eurasia refers to aristocratic class hierarchies, with the highest noble lineages positioned as “white bone” and the lesser as “black bone”. Evidence for dominant aristocratic houses and their lineage claims abound from the earliest attestations of steppe nomadism in the first millennium B.C.E.; already in the fifth century Herodotus (IV.20) noted the ‘Royal Skythians, who ‘view[ed] all other Skythians as their slaves’. Dependency proponents have recognised the existence of nomadic aristocracies, but downplay their position and role: for Khazanov (1984, 159) incipient social differentiation among nomads only crystalised in control over non-pastoralist means and processes of production; likewise for Barfield (1989, 7) nomadic aristocrats don’t represent class relations since all mobile pastoralists had access to pasturage and animals, their fundamental means of production, through ‘tribal affiliation’; while Di Cosmo (1999, 38) argues that the ‘fragile and vulnerable’ mobile pastoralist economy left little surplus for the formation of a class not directly involved in production, which could only truly emerge in the conditions of a centralised state able to obtain external resources.

Recent studies have, however, fundamentally undermined the tenets behind these arguments. Mobile pastoralism increasingly appears no less fragile or vulnerable than, which is to say, just as robust and resilient as, sedentary agriculture (e.g. Honeychurch 2014; Shultz & Costopoulos 2019; Wilkin et al. 2020). Indeed, one recent monograph (Miller 2024, 6) argues that ‘[h]erds of livestock were managed just as fields of crop were, with long-term strategies of material and labor investments, organized partitions and rotations, and harvests with larger labor pools organized for maximum profits.’ The key distinction is the mobility of livestock versus sown crops, which in fact makes it *more* possible to concentrate wealth, not less. The remarkable productivity of steppe nomadism was recognised by a Persian historian writing in the 1250s, Ata-Malik Juvaini (1997, 30), who described Mongol forces as an ‘army after the fashion of a peasantry’ and ‘a peasantry in the guise of an army’, which could be extensively exploited through various forms of labour service and taxation, and remained productive even on campaign through a gendered division of labour between fighting and herd management. Concentration is only possible as long as there’s sufficient pasture, but owners of larger herds made agreements to lease out livestock to poorer households grazing elsewhere for agreed shares of the fruits of their labour (Sneath 2007, 17). Over time such agreements evolved into institutionalised labour dues

within a stratified social structure. Mobile pastoralism was thus a perfectly capable basis for wealth accumulation, property differentiation, and an extensive division of labour, which is to say, *class relations*. Justified by noble genealogies, the dominant households formed aristocratic houses to which subaltern households were attached, reinforced by control of grazing circuits, demand for labour services, and the taking of tax in the form of livestock and provisions.

So there is no reason to look beyond the steppe for the origins or causes of nomadic class stratification, complex state articulation, or any other aspect of social organisation seemingly beyond the ‘needs of simple pastoral nomadism’. Likewise, mobile pastoralism is no more ecologically fragile than agrarian production. It is true that herds may die from disease and cause serious stress to their owners, but equally the impact of successive bad harvests is well known: a peasant household may be able to weather a single bad harvest better than a mobile pastoralist one suffering from a single year of animal epidemic, but a peasant household may become unsustainable from permanent ecological change while a mobile pastoralist household can move with their herds rather than starve. Neither is more or less vulnerable in general. Finally, there are various essential and desired raw materials and processed goods not produced within a given agrarian society, from textiles to timber, precious stones, metals, and minerals – notably salt – that the elite and subaltern classes of that society may have to seek “externally”, through raiding, political relations or commerce; these are not dynamics unique to mobile pastoralism. Which is not to say that Central Eurasian nomadism either did or could have existed in splendid isolation from the sedentary littoral, or that climatic variations and ecological stress have no role in historical transformation. Steppe nomadism and sedentary agriculture developed as part of a whole within the Afro-Eurasian world-system, with emerging core/periphery relations that varied over time and space. The fundamental point is that neither sedentary nor nomadic state formation can be functionally tied to agrarian or pastoralist processes of production.²²

So we return to the political economy of nomadic aristocracy. This can be defined with the same term world-systems analysts have long applied to the majority of pre- or non-capitalist state systems, the *tributary mode of production*.²³ This describes the fundamental relation of exploitation through which a subordinated class’s labour reproduces the position of a dominant class: an elite class’s demand for *tribute* from a subaltern class, whether that takes the form of tax to a central authority or rents and dues to a lord, and whether it is paid in kind, currency or labour service.

²² For a highly thought provoking exploration of the boundaries, or lack thereof, between the “nomadic” and the “sedentary” see Standen & White (2018).

²³ Developed by heterodox Marxists in debates across the second half of the twentieth century, this broad understanding of the tributary mode is sometimes referred to as ‘feudal’, but given the overdetermined nature of that term I follow Samir Amin, John Haldon and others in preferring ‘tributary’, see: Amin (1976); Haldon (1993); & for a different formulation which has fundamentally influenced my own: Banaji (2010).

This is, however, a very high level of abstraction for historical analysis; it goes without saying that the configuration of tributary accumulation varied widely between the diverse historical state systems reproduced through tributary demands. At a lower level of abstraction, therefore, the term *regime of accumulation* differentiates the varying ways in which subaltern activity is disciplined into property relations, and the appropriation and distribution of tribute is articulated for overall systemic reproduction. In the Tang state and the imperial Caliphate, for example, the regime of accumulation took the form of *central taxation*, appropriated by and distributed through a state elite, who thereby developed a particularly close bond with the core state apparatus and had a concrete interest in its reproduction. The state elite *produced territory* in order to effect taxation, creating particular property relations that enclosed and defined subaltern activity in the form of districts and provinces represented in cadastral surveys and other administrative documents. In other tributary regimes, for example in Latin Christendom and the Japanese archipelago, the regime of accumulation took the form of *lordship*: the articulation of property relations in diverse, more-or-less fragmented and individualised holdings, metabolically related to the reproduction of more-or-less individualised aristocratic households.²⁴ In such regimes the dynamics of appropriation and distribution functioned to reproduce an internally fractious lordly class, with less interest in the reproduction of the core state apparatus than a state elite, except to the extent that it guaranteed their holdings and offered the potential for further property accumulation.

In the historical development of the Afro-Eurasian world-system, (semi-)peripheries tended to be characterised by lordship regimes,²⁵ while central taxation tended to characterise the hegemonic cores. These tendencies are results of interstate and intra-elite competition. By binding the state elite closely to the core state apparatus, state systems reproduced through central taxation are able to compete more effectively with other polities: internally fragmenting the elites of the hegemonised state systems through “divide and conquer” policies in the interest of the (would-be) hegemonic core; including certain aristocratic houses into the state elite of the (would-be) hegemonic core; and providing a tax salary to bind their class (re)production to the (re)production of the (would-be) hegemonic core.²⁶ Conversely, as semi-peripheral lordship regimes attempted to establish themselves as new hegemonic cores, the central state apparatus would attempt to discipline the fractious lordly class into a state elite through both violence and reward, the latter largely through tax salaries. Finally, as formerly hegemonic state systems disaggregate and become semi-peripheries, forms of lordship tend to appear as a result of the same dynamics in reverse, with former members of the state elite seizing holdings in lieu of guaranteed tax salaries.

²⁴ This definition of lordship is developed out of Jairus Banaji’s (2010, 72-93) discussion of ‘feudalism’, which he sees as distinct from the tributary mode.

²⁵ This framing is inspired by Amin’s (1976, 16) arguments for ‘feudalism’ as a degraded form of the tributary mode characteristic of the (semi-)periphery.

²⁶ See, for example, the process of Qing expansion into the eastern steppe in Munkh-Erdene (2022).

Nomadic aristocracy was, then, a form of lordship—and medieval actors recognised it as such. The Oghuz epic known as the *Book of Dede Korkut*, for example, was written by the fifteenth century, on the basis of oral stories with roots in tenth-century conflicts between the nomadic Pecheneg, Qipchaq, and Oghuz polities of the West Asian steppe (Sümer et al. 1972), but recast as clashes between the Oghuz lords and the nobles of the Georgian kingdom in south Caucasia. Although emphatically nomadic in outlook, *Dede Korkut* does not position Georgian lords as sedentary inhabitants of a radically different culture: they are religious enemies, but otherwise remain *beys* (lords), have the same heroic martial ethos, raid Oghuz camps for captives and livestock, and happen to live in fortified sites rather than mobile camps. Likewise, Marco Polo saw no issue in describing Mongol lords and their lordships in identical terms to those used for the socio-political system of Latin Christendom (Rugoff 2004).

Nomadic aristocracy is, however, a form of lordship with particular dynamics that emerge from the conditions of mobile pastoralism. Property relations are organised around the grouping of subaltern households into units of people and livestock into defined holdings. Termed ‘appanage communities’ (Atwood 2012), these are the social units of tributary accumulation related metabolically to the lordly household’s reproduction much as estates in territorial lordship. This does not mean that land is somehow unimportant, in the medieval steppe all pasturage was accounted for and understood as tied to particular aristocratic houses who granted access rights to their appanage communities, often with animals leased from the lord’s herd—the practices that Barfield mistook for guarantee of pasturage and livestock by ‘tribal affiliation’. But the logic of property relations focused on the exploitation of people and livestock by land, rather than land by people and livestock. This sidesteps the apparent problem of identifying incipient territorial fiefdoms that paralysed the Soviet debate over nomadic feudalism (Vladimirtsov 1948), which, albeit compelling in many respects, was hamstrung by the reified dogmatism of Orthodox Marxism (Munkh-Erdene 2023, 128-136). These formed the Soviet iteration of social evolutionism, predicated on mobile pastoralists’ “territorialisation” and “sedentarisation”, conceptualisations that fed directly into the Soviet state’s enormously damaging regional policies (Sneath 2007, 125). Instead, nomadic aristocracy is a form of lordship regime predicated on distinctly mobile pastoralist property relations, similar to territorial lordship but with key differences that aggregated into a distinct role in the historical development of the Afro-Eurasian world-system.

Just as territorial lordship, nomadic aristocracy functioned through the tributary exploitation of productive holdings metabolically related to lordly households. The result in both cases was an exceptionally fractious lordly elite engaged in more-or-less constant internal competition. Mistaken and misrepresented in Central Eurasia as ‘interclan and intertribal struggles’, this ‘tribal fragmentation’ has the same quality as the intra-elite conflicts that plagued regions dominated by territorial lordship, for example the high and late medieval kingdoms of France and England. What differed, of course, was the nature of the property over which they competed. Even the most powerful territorial lord cannot literally gather their estates together in one place—they might be as dispersed as the distances between Cornwall, Norfolk, Cumbria, and

Brittany, so that even tribute concentration presented profound logistical challenges. But, as long as there's sufficient pasturage, concentrating their appanages is precisely what a nomadic lord *can* do. This is why nomadic aristocracy was so productive of large, imperial state systems while retaining the underlying logic of lordship, in contrast to territorial lordship regimes, which, to the extent that they developed into hegemonic cores, tended to also develop into central taxation regimes—thus the development of public taxation and “royal absolutism” in late medieval and early modern Europe.

As happened many times over the sixth to late twelfth centuries, therefore, a nomadic aristocratic house might, on the basis of success in intra-elite competition, establish itself as hegemonic over other lordly households and form an imperial state system. The households of former ruling lineages became the newly dominant lineage's property, and they went to great lengths to maintain and control this population and their livestock. The Mongols' pursuit of their would-be Cuman-Qipchaq subjects across the Pontic Caspian steppe and into the Balkans mirrors how the earlier Türk had pursued their would-be Avar subjects across Eurasia in the sixth century, both reflections of steppe statecraft's focus on control of population and livestock rather than territory as such. But to the extent that the new state system remained a nomadic aristocracy, with subaltern households and livestock distributed as appanages to lineage members and other lords for their class reproduction, the same dynamics of intra-elite competition obtained. New appanages might be created through conquest, and these might consist of sedentary households or even whole cities—hence the often remarkably rapid expansionism of new nomadic empires—and this might offset lordly competition for a time. The hegemonic house might also develop an administration that tendentially evolved the state system towards a central taxation regime, with tax revenue distributed in shares to lords and followers, tendentially transforming them into a state elite. But to the extent that this *did not* take place, and the nomadic elite's reproduction remained tied to the appanages holdings, or the revenue shares become normalised to a logic of lordship, the state system contained an inherent centrifugal tendency.

So the oft-commented tendency of so-called “nomadic confederations” to fragment into “tribal conflict”, now appears as the general tendency for lordship regimes to generate intra-elite competition through their fragmented articulation of appropriation and distribution of surplus product and labour. The key difference between territorial and nomadic lordship is the scale of property concentration possible in moments of “centralisation”, and the extent of fragmentation possible in moments of “decentralisation”. The central dynamic in either moment remains, however, intra-elite competition. The fundamental drive in all accumulation is less “wealth acquisition” as such, than the reproduction of an elite class position.²⁷ The exploitation of

²⁷ This point, which is essentially about the increased ability to exercise power, may provide a resolution between the historical materialist perspective presented here, and the avowedly idealist argument put forward in Lhamsum Munkh-Erdene's groundbreaking monograph, *The Nomadic Leviathan*, which asserts the primacy of the political in state formation. This may be broadly true in the initial “moment” of state formation, but the political and the economic are dialectically interrelated, with the latter conditioning the operation of the former in key ways.

productive labour directs subaltern activity towards the elite class's reproduction, both in order to exercise power *over* subaltern classes, and in order to compete more effectively *against* other elites. Given the constant struggle against subaltern classes attempting to minimise their exploitation, and the constant need to compete against other elites, the result is that all tributary regimes have a drive to expand accumulation. Expanded accumulation was particularly important for elites to maintain forces for internal and external coercion—in Central Eurasia the institution of sworn warrior-bondsmen termed the *comitatus* by Beckwith (2009), who received wealth, positions and appanages from their lord.²⁸ Forming the core of military forces, attracting and supporting *comitatus* members was essential for effective exploitation and domination of subaltern households, and for effective competition with other elites, much as the retinues and retainers of Latin Christian lords in the Eurasian Far West. In the right circumstances, a large *comitatus* could become the embryo of a state elite in a nomadic central taxation regime, and so the basis for a world-imperial project.

The Mongol World-Empire & the Afro-Eurasian World-Market

The proof of a tributary model for nomadic aristocracy is its explanatory power. This section, therefore, frames the formation of the Great Mongol State, and its role in the final coalescence of the Afro-Eurasian world-market, in the political and economic dynamics laid about above.²⁹ By the twelfth century Central Eurasia had a long-term history of nomadic aristocratic regimes stretching back nearly two millennia,³⁰ and a steppe imperial tradition likewise more than a thousand years old (Miller 2024). These regimes had long been based on property relations that decimally grouped subaltern households into units as small as ten and as large as ten thousand, although hundreds and thousands appear the most consistent and definitive groupings, already attested in the Khunnu state (Xiongnu) of the third century B.C.E. The imperial tradition centred on the Orkhon valley, and an ideology of divine mandate for universal rule is again attested at least from the Khunnu state onwards (Golden 2003, 2006), and perhaps earlier in the eight- and seventh-century Skythian polities (Beckwith 2023). The Khunnu imperial moment may have produced an elementary top-down administrative division that tendentially became lordships (Lhamsuren 2016). But aristocratic lordship is attested from the earliest evidence for Central Eurasian nomadism in the early first millennium B.C.E., so it does seem to have preceded the first imperial state systems in the steppe.³¹

²⁸ Munkh-Erdene (2023, 436) interprets the formation of the warband-*comitatus* as ‘the invention of a military-political authoritarian structure of command and obedience, the state’.

²⁹ The narrative presented is adapted from a series of articles by Munkh-Erdene (2011; 2016; & 2018), on the basis of the model here proposed. For an alternative account based on the “tribal” paradigm see Michal Biran (2004).

³⁰ The exact dating depends on how one interprets the pre-Khunnu Central Eurasian nomadic polities, especially the Skythians, see: Cunliffe (2019) & Beckwith (2023).

³¹ The Arzhan kurgans of the tenth-eighth centuries B.C.E. are the best evidence for the emergence of a military aristocracy among the earliest Central Eurasian nomads, see Cunliffe (2019).

In the medium term, the most important precondition for the Mongol world-empire was the formation and dissolution of the Khitan Liao state (916-1125). Liao was founded in the early tenth century by the Yila lineage, which overthrew the formerly dominant Khitan houses and embarked on a process of expansion across the eastern steppe and into the sedentary littoral, conquering sixteen administrative prefectures formerly ruled by Chinese states in the Beijing region (Standen 2005). Liao pioneered a form of dual administration for its steppe and sedentary holdings, administering the sixteen prefectures through sedentary-style central taxation in the Chinese imperial tradition, but subordinated to an overall system of nomadic aristocracy based on appanages (Wittfogel & Feng 1949; Twitchett & Tietze 1994; Standen 2006). In the steppe, conversely, the empire was administered through nomadic aristocracy as such, directly ruling through instituted divisions among aristocrats in the east, and maintaining hegemony over relatively autonomous nomadic polities in more distant western regions (Lhamsuren 2016, 644-650). So the Khitan ruler was both the Chinese imperial son of heaven ruling a state named Liao, and the nomadic universal sovereign (*Gür Khan*) of the Great Khitan State.

In the short term, therefore, the conditions for the rise of Chinggis Khan came with the loosening of Khitan Liao control of the steppe in the late eleventh century, amid conflicts with the subordinate western nomadic polity, the so-called Zubu-Kereit, before the Jurchen Jin conquest of the core regions in 1125. The eastern steppe fragmented into numerous competing lordships on the basis of earlier administrative divisions, including the Mongol khanate. Nevertheless the idea of a single nomadic kingdom remained ('the felt-tent *ulus*'), as did the decimal system of organising subaltern households and the resulting military units, traditions of dual administration, and recognition of an august imperial tradition. Temüjin was one of several aristocrats competing for the rulership of this kingdom, and his great-grandfather as Mongol khan had for a time established himself as regional hegemon against incursions from Jin. By Temüjin's time the hegemon was Tughril Ong Khan, ruler of the Kereit polity. Ong Khan was overlord both to Temüjin and his ally-cum-rival Jamuqa, but the latter eventually claimed the title *Gür Khan* for himself in a play for rulership of the *ulus*. Temüjin eventually defeated both Jamuqa and Ong Khan in 1203/4, and so took over the Kereit polity, its institutions, notably the khan's large *comitatus*, laying the immediate basis for the realisation of the *ulus* in a newly christened Mongol state—a development exactly described as such by Marco Polo (Da Pisa 2004, 78-83).

So Temüjin's eventual victory followed intense, violent intra-elite competition, and the subaltern households claimed from defeated and absorbed polities enabled dramatic property concentration. He developed his *comitatus* into a ten-thousand strong unit named the *keshigten*, divided into the day group (*Torguud*, the same name as the earlier Kereit had used) and the night group (*Khebtuul*), and this formed the basis for a state elite in the developing imperial administration—the earliest secretaries (*bitikchi*) were *keshig* members taught to read and write an adapted version of the Uyghur script in 1204. New appanages were distributed by the new Chinggis ("oceanic") Khan, in a redefinition of aristocratic status by his own lineage and those

loyal to him. As the *Secret History of the Mongols* describes in the voice of Chinggis Khan's adopted son (Atwood 2023, 101-102):

‘Now when protected by Eternal Heaven we are rectifying the entire kingdom, you have become eyes for seeing and ears for hearing. And give shares in the whole kingdom to Mother, to us, to the junior kinsmen, and to the princes, and for each separate folk by name sort out allotments of the felt-walled people and divide up assignments of the plank-door people.’

Far from a “revolutionary” reorganisation of the “tribes” of the eastern steppe, therefore, the fragmentation and intense lordly competition that both augured and followed the collapse of the Liao state had allowed for the extreme centralisation of property under Chinggis—including Khitan dual administration in referring to both mobile pastoralists (‘felt-walled people’) and sedentary agriculturalists (‘plank-door people’). Di Cosmo (2024) may be right that a pluvial episode c.1210-1225, unprecedented before and unequalled since, massively increased biomass, increasing the carrying capacity of the grasslands and agricultural potentials in the steppe while reducing animal mortality, but these conditions were only impactful insofar as they were socially mediated through the political economy of nomadic aristocracy in a conjuncture where high levels of intra-elite competition resulted in high degrees of property concentration and tributary accumulation.

This provided the basis for a rapidly expanding imperial state system, concatenating across Central Eurasia in a manner unprecedented for a single nomadic polity. Yet every region conquered in Chinggis's lifetime had been previously ruled by one or another transregional nomadic empire in the immediate or recent past, and every institution in the expanding state system had an analogue in those earlier empires too. The political economy of nomadic aristocracy thus proves better able to account for the formation of the Great Mongol State than the variations presented on the basis of the “tribal” dependency model (e.g. Biran 2004). Most importantly, there's no residue of the “great man”: there were several aristocratic competitors for rulership of the ‘felt-walled kingdom’, any one of whom was in a position to achieve what Temüjin did.³²

What about the other side of the problematic, then, Central Eurasian nomadism as a vector of commercialisation, and the place of the Mongol world-empire in the Afro-Eurasian Commercial Revolution? The answer is straightforward: commercialisation emerges from the same dynamic of intra-elite competition and class struggle. For example, to meet the cost of a *comitatus* nomadic lords and rulers might diversify tributary accumulation, developing central taxation as well as labour services and dues, or they might choose to collect in currency rather than concrete product and labour, allowing more flexible exercise of power by accumulating in an abstracted

³² For an alternative understanding based on a re-reading of Weber's Charisma see Lhamsuren (2023, 111-119).

and reified form of value. Or they might choose to augment tributary accumulation with that other relation of exploitation attested historically and dominant today, *capital accumulation*.

As Wolf, Costa, and Bondioli have established, the key vector for commercialisation under tributary regimes is the normative assessment and often also collection of demands, with such developments taking place in the Caliphate and Tang by the ninth century, the empire of New Rome by the tenth, and Latin Christendom and the Japanese archipelago by the twelfth. The reason is simple: subaltern classes have to obtain money to meet their obligations. They might commodify produce or manufacture goods for the market, they might turn to cash crops, they might take on debts to merchants and officials, or they might take on forms of wage labour (Bondioli 2021); if their demands were assessed in currency but collected in produce or manufactures then they also must take account of prices even when paying in kind. Historically all these responses occurred, with the result that increasing scales of capital accumulation emanated from the central taxation regimes that formed the East Asian and western Afro-Eurasian cores. Embodied in autonomous merchant classes, capital did what capital does and scoured near and far in its constant need to commodify goods and productive activity for self-valorisation. As these commercial networks spread and interconnected at both the capillary level of a subaltern household's everyday life, and in interregional commodity circuits, they formed the concrete expression of the tendentially forming world-market. Medieval merchant classes were often organised in well-defined, largely ethno-religiously coherent merchant diasporas, Armenian, Jewish, Persianate Muslim, Uyghur, and so on, and managed commerce at large spatiotemporal scales through deeply interwoven networks of trading colonies. In Banaji's words, 'for centuries the circulation of capital presupposed the physical movement of commercial agents', so that the long history of capital accumulation forms 'a rich tapestry of trading colonies that spanned the entire globe, wherever this was accessible' (Banaji 2020, 15).

For lords then, whether territorial or nomadic, the expanding circuits of capital accumulation, embodied in coherent merchant class diasporas, presented a clear opportunity to augment tributary accumulation by commercialising a portion of appropriated tribute. The tribute might be collected in livestock, increasing the general wealth the lord could then commercialise, it might be taken in the form of a directly commodifiable good like textiles, or it might be the labour to harvest the lords' herds for marketable skins and fibres. The commercialised tribute might then be directly sold so that the lord becomes a merchant-lord, or the lord may have merchants attached to his household who operate enterprises on his or, indeed, *her* behalf (May 2016; De Nicola 2017, 145-149). However a commodifiable portion of tribute was achieved, the more lords could commercialise for capital accumulation, the more effectively they might compete with other lords and dominate over subaltern classes. The result was a secondary and complementary vector of commercialisation to currency demands, emerging from *within* the dynamics of lordly competition and class struggle.

In the earlier Middle Ages commercialisation among territorial lords in the Eurasian Far West manifested as the commodification of tribute appropriated in kind (Wickham 2005), but between the eleventh and thirteenth centuries territorial lordships in Latin Christendom also

tended towards currency rents, producing the same dynamic that had been taking place in the West and East Asian cores from the eighth and ninth centuries (Spufford 1988, 240-263). Likewise, merchants were attached to nomadic lords and rulers—Di Cosmo’s second type of nomadic state formation is, after all, ‘trade-tribute empires’, beginning with the Türk of the sixth century and their agreements with Iranian-speaking merchant class diasporas under their rule. Likewise in *Dede Korkut* the Oghuz khan complains of a poor subsidy from Georgia, meaning he lacked the ‘gold and silver’ he had customarily received and given out to his ‘warriors and nobles’ to keep them ‘happy’. Part of this distributed gold and silver would have been commercialised; in a story concerning one of the khan’s lords it is assumed that a *bey* would have merchants to operate enterprises (Sümer et al. 1972, 41 & 134),³³ an assumption also found in a tenth-century Greek text’s description of a nomadic polity that moved between the Pontic Caspian steppe, the Balkans, and the West Asian steppe and Transoxiana, kept in contact by the merchants attached to the respective parts (Porphyrogenitus 1976, 172-175). Chinggis Khan himself formed a partnership with a Muslim merchant as early as 1203, while the Khwarazmian campaign, which brought the Great Mongol State into western Eurasia, was prompted by the imprisonment, dispossession, and execution of a large commercial delegation (Allsen 1989, 87-90).

So interstate subsidies, commerce, and direct taxation aren’t different stages in the internal development of nomadic states as Di Cosmo argued, but different strategies of accumulation that co-existed, alternated and co-articulated each other in pursuit of the same interrelated aims: class struggle and intra-elite competition. Tendencies towards one or another strategy at different chronological points says more about the possibilities within the Afro-Eurasian world-system as a whole in a given conjuncture, than the development of “higher” state capacities. Interregional commerce was far more developed by the second half of the medieval millennium, so that capital accumulation brought more benefits relative to extracting subsidies from sedentary empires, while direct taxation of mobile pastoralist subaltern households was a constant feature throughout. Similarly, ‘dual administration’ is as much about the application of nomadic norms of taxation to agrarian subaltern households, as nomadic states “learning” from sedentary statecraft.

This is seen in the development of the Great Mongol State between the 1230s and 50s, which saw the crystallisation and rapid expansion of the *ortoq* system. Meaning ‘partner’ in Turkic languages, the *ortoq* system’s origins lay in the practices of Central Eurasian merchants forming combined enterprise agreements, including some, probably Uyghur speakers in particular, entering the steppe to do so with nomadic lords (Allsen 1989). Similar to the Latin

³³ See the discussion of ‘happiness’ as crucial to Mongol perceptions of political economy in Favereau (2018, 54-58).

Christian *commenda* and the Islamic *qirad* contracts discussed by Abu-Lughod (1989, 216-224; Lopez 1971, 73-79), an investor would provide some or all of the initial capital to a factor for a pre-agreed share of the profits. Under Chinggis' successors the practice was expanded into a highly developed art of statecraft, aggregating Eurasia's various relatively autonomous merchant class diasporas into a commercial behemoth more than the sum of its parts – one Georgian document of c.1259 refers to a mixed Armenian, Jewish, and Persianate Muslim *ortog* consortium – all directed at first towards the reproduction of the Mongol world-empire, and then the autonomous but interrelated states of the Chinggisid world-order (Dolidze 1965, 57-70).

The result was spiralling scales of both tributary and capitalist accumulation—not least as *ortog* merchants also took on roles as tax farmers and fiscal administrators, and lent to taxpayers at exorbitant rates of interest, so that they essentially became part of the state (Allsen 1989, 102). Nevertheless, tributary accumulation remained firmly hegemonic over capital, and, importantly, *ortog* merchants had no interest in changing this situation: the capital for their enterprises was directly drawn from taxation. In a story from Ögedei's reign merchants are described arriving at court and saying 'we'll take bars [of silver from tax] and make a profit on them' (Rashiddudin 2012, 337). Likewise, for the Great Khan at least, the importance of increased commercialisation was the increased tributary accumulation drawn from taxing capital accumulation. In another story attributed to the reign of Ögedei, he justified continuing to support a spectacularly wasteful *ortog* on the basis that 'inasmuch as the bars remain the same, and those who take them are our subjects, they remain in our hands' (Rashiddudin 2012, 333). Nothing escaped tributary accumulation, even if particular merchant enterprises didn't prove profitable the revenues were recuperated through customs and sales tax. More humble members of the Chinggisid elite did of course care about their *ortogs'* profitability, and they competed with each other for the most effective partners. But for them too the basis of the system wasn't capital accumulation as such, but the commercialised tribute from appanages and revenue shares (*qubi*) they received through the nomadic aristocratic regime of accumulation.

The fundament of the system was, therefore, tributary accumulation, based on the maintenance of pre-existing taxes in the sedentary littoral, coupled with the imposition of initially irregular adaptations of nomadic taxes—especially the 1% herd tax (*qubchir*), implemented as a proportional wealth tax on households and eventually a kind of "progressive" poll tax, and the requirement to provide provisions (*ulafa*).³⁴ This development took place in lockstep with the Great Mongol State's evolution into the Afro-Eurasian core in both East and West; which is to say, in lockstep with the Chinggisids' concrete attempt to transform the Afro-Eurasian world-system into a true *world-empire* in which the Eurasian steppe was central in every sense. By the 1250s an emergent central taxation regime within the world-empire was regularising impositions and carrying out the largest exercise in the entire history of premodern

³⁴ For classic studies of Mongol taxation see: Schurmann (1956); Smith Jr. (1970), 46-85; & Allsen (1987, 144-188).

statecraft: a census of the entire subject population across Eurasia, recorded in Arabic, Armenian, Chinese, Georgian, Persian and Slavonic sources (Allsen 1987, 116-188). The nomadic aristocratic logic remained, this was a census of population, their livestock and their productive activity, not a cadastral survey on land, and the Central Eurasian decimal system now extended deep into sedentary West and East Asia. But the principle was central taxation, collected in currency, and producing new spirals of capital accumulation as a result.

At the same time, the appanage and revenue system now spanned Chinggisid Eurasia, so that aristocratic households in what's now southern Russia and Ukraine were metabolically related to holdings in former Song lands of what's now southern China (Favereau 2018). The transferral of this wealth presented a profound logistical problem, and the solution had a profound effect on the final coalescence of the Afro-Eurasian world-market. As Akinobu Kuroda (2023) has demonstrated, the Mongol moment saw the emergence of a single standard of value recognised across the Afro-Eurasian world-system for the first time in its history: the silver ingots known as *balish* in Persian, *ding* in Chinese, and *somo* in Latin Christendom. These are the 'bars' in the stories of Ögedei's *ortoqs*, and their acceptance as the standard of commensurability, expressed in a single store and representation of value, and recognised means of exchange, which is to say, as a single recognised *currency*, is symptomatic of the final coalescence of the Afro-Eurasian world-market under the Chinggisids' imperial aegis. Most importantly, Kuroda identifies the origin of this single standard in the enforcement of census-based currency taxation in silver across the world-empire in the 1250s, especially the universal implementation of the *qubchir*. Likewise, he identifies the origins of huge silver circulation in the transfer of wealth from appanages and revenue shares in the former Song lands to their holders across Eurasia. So, if Kuroda's hypothesis is correct, *both* the currency standard *and* the bullion itself are inextricable from the political economy of nomadic aristocracy, now manifest as a true world-empire.

The effect of this tribute-enforced silver standard and currency circulation rippled out from the Mongol world-empire, and into external regions of the Afro-Eurasian world-system internally related to the Chinggisid states through the world-market. Silver from ingots given as capital investment to *ortoq* merchants and used to mint coins in the West Eurasian Chinggisid states, circulated as far as the kingdom of England, where the records of the Royal Mint show dramatic peaks in this period, reaching nearly 60,000 kilograms in 1280-1 and 40,000 in 1300-1, levels not seen again until the Napoleonic era (Kuroda 2023, 493). Which is to say, the currency rents and, increasingly, royal taxes implemented in late-thirteenth and fourteenth century England depended to a significant degree on the silver used to transfer wealth held according to nomadic aristocratic principles, nomadic elites' provision of that bullion as capital investment for their merchant partners, and the minting of coins used to pay taxes of nomadic origin. Diverse merchant class diasporas, from the Muslim *Hui* of Quanzhou to the Venetian Polo family (Di Cosmo & Pubblici 2026), were now integrated into a highly commercialised central taxation regime functioning on nomadic aristocratic property relations, which self-consciously sought to

invest in and extract from capital accumulation, and so to realise the world-imperial project—an explicit ideological aim (Allsen 2023).

Far from passive images of the *Pax Mongolica*, therefore, the scale of tributary accumulation and its attendant driving of commercialisation emerged entirely from the logic of nomadic aristocracy, as this had developed out of lordly competition, and into a world-imperial central taxation regime. The many Chinggisid institutions that facilitated connectivity emerged from the same process, from the famous *jam* “postal” communication and distribution system (Favereau 2018; Kalra 2018), widely used by *ortoq* merchants, to the forced movements of people-as-property (Biran 2021). All these institutions were organised and effected through the decimal system, as were all tributary demands, mobilisation of resources, and military service. Throughout the entire process, therefore, nomadic aristocracy remained the organising principle, forming a contradictory centrifugal tendency within the world-empire even as the scale of tributary and capitalist accumulation continued to grow.

Organised on the basis of the same institutions, all these dynamics continued into the autonomous states making up the Chinggisid world-order after 1259, the East Asian Yuan, the Central Asian Chagataid *ulus*, the West Eurasian Jochid *ulus* (“Golden Horde”), and the West Asian Ilkhanate.³⁵ Each Chinggisid state was driven to raise accumulation by competition, both against each other and against their remaining non-Chinggisid competitors, especially the Mamluk state, which maintained control over an Afro-Eurasian core in Egypt, and Song, which held the most populous, productive and commercialised regions in East Asia until the 1270s. Within each Chinggisid state the property relations characteristic of nomadic aristocracy continued to prevail, laying the basis for the eventual emergence of post-Chinggisid lordships in the Ilkhanid lands in the fourteenth century. Likewise, in Yuan the central taxation regime was based on households rather than the land tax that had been standard in Chinese states, and households were also organised into an occupational caste system, not least to maintain military numbers, together producing, among other things, a dramatic transformation of gender relations (Birge 2002). By the early fourteenth century the scale of capital accumulation had reached the point that commercial taxation formed the main source of revenue for the imperial household in both the Ilkhanate and the Jochid state (Vásáry 2022; Lambton 1986-1987), so that they might be considered tributary-commercial regimes of accumulation. A negotiated peace between the Chinggisid states in the early fourteenth century stipulated the transfer of outstanding revenues from appanages and shares held in their various territories, which had been calculated and collected even in the years of conflict (Favereau 2018).

It is clear, therefore, that the Mongols’ role in the commercialisation of Afro-Eurasia in the long thirteenth century was far more direct than Abu-Lughod could describe on the basis of Central Eurasian and Mongol studies in 1989. While the formation of the Mongol world-empire no doubt facilitated connectivity and lower protective rent, the most important vectors were a

³⁵ See the discussion of the Chinggisid world-order in Zarakol (2023, 47-88).

result of the state system's regime of accumulation, an iteration of a much longer lasting political economy of nomadic aristocracy. The potential role of nomadic aristocratic regimes in pre-Mongol commercialisation will be addressed in the final section, but it was one element among others in the ninth- and tenth-century beginnings of the Commercial Revolution. In the long thirteenth century, however, the formation of the Mongol world-empire brought about the final coalescence, shape, and rhythms of the Afro-Eurasian world-market, functioning as its organising principle in the provision of both the currency and the commodities essential for capital accumulation.

This is self-evident from the “coincidence” of fourteenth-century crises in the Chinggisid world-order and the Afro-Eurasian world-market. Within the Chinggisid states the crisis appears to have been undergirded by a crisis of accumulation, as rising levels of tributary and capitalist exploitation undermined their own bases in the subaltern households' (re)productive activity. Beyond the Chinggisid world-order similar dynamics characterised the ‘crisis of rents’ in Latin Christendom and attempts to introduce flat-rate taxation compounded the problem and engendered large scale subaltern resistance. At the same time the second plague pandemic, better known as the Black Death, further destabilised political economy across the world-system. Recent work has argued for an earlier spread of *yersinia pestis* through the institutions and statecraft of the Mongol world-empire, not least massive circulation of people, livestock and foodstuffs (Fancy & Green 2024). While not reducible to a single cause, these various elements coalesced into a single crisis-inducing dynamic. The sudden drop in silver circulated through the nomadic aristocratic regime of accumulation fundamentally destabilised both commerce and taxation from Korea to England. At the western end of Afro-Eurasia the result was an attempted social revolution in the most commercialised regions of England, prompted by continuous attempts to raise further flat-rate taxes in the form of silver currency—the so-called Peasants' Revolt of 1381. At the other end of the landmass the Ming Revolution saw the introduction of some of the lightest taxation in the history of the Chinese states, eventually including the total abolition of currency taxation and its replacement with collection in kind and labour dues, until new sources of silver appeared from the Japanese archipelago and western hemisphere in the early sixteenth century.

Age of Transregional Nomadic Empires, or Central Eurasian Commercial Revolution?

The political economy of nomadic aristocracy thus provides a more compelling account of the Mongol moment's relationship to commercialisation than its dependency model alternatives. In the longer term, it also accounts for why Central Eurasia became such a central connecting space in the Afro-Eurasian world-system: nomadic aristocracy structured regional political economy. Indeed, the “opening” of the so-called Silk Road by the Han diplomat Zhang Qian c. 100 B.C.E. can be recast as marking the moment when Central Eurasia was politically and economically integrated as a connecting space, first around the nomadic aristocratic regimes of the Skythian polities and then through the Khunnu imperial state, as part of the general cohering of the Afro-

Eurasian world-system in this conjuncture. The final question, then, is the extent to which the almost entirely contemporaneous ‘age of transregional nomadic empires’ and the Afro-Eurasian Commercial Revolution formed interrelated phenomena. Or, to put it another way, can it be a coincidence that a transregional nomadic aristocracy, manifest as a world-empire, formed the organising principle of the Afro-Eurasian world-market’s final shape and dynamics over the long thirteenth century?

The key problem in recognising the transcontinental integration generated by nomadic aristocracy is empirical demonstration. For the crucial period *circa* 900 to 1200 very few written sources survive from within Central Eurasia, so that its history must be pieced together from a combination of Islamicate and Chinese works. Recently Dilnoza Duturaeva (2022) has combined both with material culture and archaeology, to produce highly suggestive material for the scale of Central Eurasian commerce in this period. For example, huge quantities of amber from the Baltic region reached East Asia, where, among many other places, it is found extensively in Khitan Liao tombs and on Song imperial dress (Duturaeva 2022, 178-188). This trade was directly driven by the Qarakhanid state, a transregional nomadic empire that dominated the Central Asian steppes between the Aral Sea and the Tarim Basin, under a ruling house that claimed descent from the Türk Ashina lineage. The amber must have been mined by people in the forest *taiga* zone, and notably the other major Eurasian traders in amber were from the Uyghur-speaking cities of the Tarim Basin, sometime vassals of the Qarakhanid state and probable pioneers of *ortoq* capital concentration partnerships (Allsen 1989). In short, then, we have a pre-Mongol nomadic aristocratic state directly driving commodity exchange and capital accumulation, and including all the peoples of Central Eurasia’s ecozones and lifeways to do so.

Frankincense is an even more telling example. Originating in the southern Arabian peninsula, East Africa and parts of the Indian subcontinent, frankincense is often described as a definitional Indian Ocean commodity (Kearney 2004). This fits mainstream economic common sense, with heavy weight incurring high transaction costs, so that maritime transit appears necessary. Yet frankincense reached East Asia through Central Eurasia in such large quantities that Song sources assumed it originated there—single transfers could reach as much as 50,000 kilograms at a time (Duturaeva 2022, 191-192). This cannot be explained by economic models focused on the most “efficient” transport from point of production in southern Arabia and East Africa, to point of consumption in East Asia: the shape of the commodity circuit presumes a huge demand *within* Central Eurasia. Rulers and aristocratic elites of the Qarakhanid state seemingly sought frankincense as a key commodity for capital accumulation, orchestrated by their Uyghur merchant partners. Frankincense was obtained through subsidies paid by the Iranian and South Asian Ghaznavids – another polity with steppe roots – and then commercialised for exchange in East Asia, so much so that the Song state attempted to exclude Qarakhanid merchants from internal private markets (Duturaeva 2022, 193). The potential revenue from 50,000 kilograms of frankincense was as much as 140,000,000 Song coins. This might seem unbelievable, but even more dramatic numbers were accrued through the Qarakhanid sale of

horses to Song, in one instance some 12,000 for a reported 1,200,000,000 coins (Duturaeva 2022, 197).

Although none appears as dramatic as the Great Mongol State, therefore, transregional nomadic empires prior to the long thirteenth century acted as vectors of high levels of commercialisation. These semi-peripheral states may not have formed the original drivers of the Commercial Revolution in the ninth century, but they provided conduits for compounding scales of commodification as capital accumulation embodied in merchant classes emanated from the cores, without which incipient commercialisation may never have encompassed the landmass and coalesced into a world-market. The greater levels of capital accumulation spreading *from* the cores provided greater potentials for competition *among* nomadic aristocrats, who then, forming increasingly large state systems, provided in turn greater potentials for capital accumulation *within* the cores themselves, as commodities came through and from Central Eurasia. The result appears to have been an increased ability of nomadic states to compete against the central taxation regimes of East and West Asia, so that, increasingly, those regions were directly subordinated to nomadic aristocracies.

By 1100 a line of state systems ruled by nomadic aristocratic houses stretched from the Asian Mediterranean coast, across the Great Seljuq Empire of West Asia, through the Qarakhanid state of Central Asia, to Khitan Liao of the eastern steppe and East Asia, ending on the Pacific coast. All these states had the flexibility of nomadic aristocratic tributary accumulation, and all likewise showed the centrifugal tendency embedded in lordly competition. Whether their conditions of possibility required pre-existing commercialisation emerging from the tributary cores, or if the truly revolutionising levels of commercialisation attained in these cores could have taken place without transregional nomadic empires, must rely on future research. Wherever the point of emphasis falls, as scholars since Abu-Lughod have underlined, and the Central Eurasian specialists upon whose work they rely have demonstrated, steppe nomadism was an agent in its own right, interconnected with other processes but no more dependent upon them than any other parts of the world-system as a whole. The story in the long thirteenth century has already been described, as has the final proof in the combined general crisis of the Chinggisid world-order and Afro-Eurasian world-market in the fourteenth century.

Yet this was not the end of the story. While they were semi-peripheral to the cores of tributary and capitalist accumulation in the Mongol world-empire, in this position the Italian city-states achieved higher levels of capital accumulation than ever before (Di Cosmo 2010; Favereau 2021, 206-246; Di Cosmo & Pubblici 2026). Among other places, this capital went into the trade in enslaved people from the Black Sea (Barker 2019), the first experiments with enslaved-labour worked plantations on Mediterranean islands (Arbel 1993), and, eventually, investment in the first Atlantic expeditions in collaboration with the Iberian monarchies (Arrighi 1994, 111-129). These processes culminated in the colonisation of the western hemisphere, and Europeans used the silver they extracted to buy their way into the tributary-commercial state systems of a still largely Afro-Eurasian world-system (Frank 1998). As recent historiography has underlined, the Chinggisid effect on the Afro-Eurasian world-system didn't end in 1400 (Zarakol

2023). The Ming and their successors the Qing, the Timurids and their successors the Safavids and the Mughals, the Ottomans, and the Muscovite-cum-Russian Empire, all formed a post-Chinggisid world-order and fiscal ecumene (Russell 2026), still ruling one third of humanity in 1700. On both counts, therefore, the lineages of the eventual European capitalist conquest of Afro-Eurasia's highly commercialised central taxation regimes, as well as the origins of those regimes themselves, stretch back into the revolutionary commercialisation of the medieval world-system, and its apogee in the formation of a nomadic world-empire and landmass-spanning world-market, crystallised in the period described by Abu-Lughod.

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