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16 Constructing Ancient Central Asia's Economic History

I Introduction

In the global history of the ancient world, conceptions of Central Asia are entangled with ideas about long-distance transit trade. This is particularly true in respect to the Kushans and their pre-imperial predecessors, the Yuezhi.¹ Two excerpts from recent contributions make this clear. The first derives from Benjamin's treatment of the development of the Silk Roads from 100 BCE–250 CE, framed through the contributions of empires of Eurasia during this period:

Along with bales of Chinese silk, [the items in the Begram hoard] are examples of the sort of high-value trade goods that were passing back and forth along the Silk Roads during the height of their operation, through major commercial nodes such as Begram and the Kushan Empire. Although we lack many of the details about how that trade was actually conducted, its astonishing diversity and value, along with the critical role the Kushans played in it, is indisputable ... Despite the fact that the Kushans constructed an essentially land-based empire, at least two of the major trade routes that passed through their territory headed toward ports along the west coast of South Asia, some of which probably came under their direct control during the Great Kushans period.²

The second is Falk's philologically oriented paper, which proposes new locations for the realms controlled by the five *yabghus* of the Yuezhi:

The five *yabghus* were not the heads of five geographically divided groups of animal breeders inside northern Bactria, but commanded five trade routes also outside Bactria, starting in the middle of the first century B.C., at the latest. All five *yabghus* and their predecessors had been busy trading or protecting traders for a long time before Kujula took over the authority of the other four *yabghus* ... With these profitable "external" activities over a huge area and a long period, an assault by Kujula on Gondophares in the Peshawar Valley, blocking "free" trade, looks almost inevitable.³

Although very different in scope and method, it is remarkable that a particular long-standing topos can be clearly discerned in both works: the notion that external transit trade was central to the power and prosperity of the Kushan Empire (and now also the Yuezhi), a point largely attributed to the geography that they commanded, which putatively entailed control of important trans-regional and long-

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¹ For background information, see Morris, ch. 2, this volume.

² Benjamin 2018, 201–203.

³ Falk 2014, 34.

distance trade routes. More succinctly, we might refer to this postulate as that of 'Kushan middlemen.'

But what are the origins of this idea? It finds no explicit support in the textual or documentary evidence available to us, as compared to the parallel case of the fourth-century Sogdian letters and the concomitant conception of Sogdian traders.⁴ Instead, the present chapter proposes that the notion of Kushan middlemen – although emphatically not outright incorrect – has much less to do with reality than with the curious way the economic history of ancient Central Asia and its empires has been constructed. The roots of this run deep into the complex geopolitics of the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries in Russian Turkestan, Afghanistan, and northwest India. The limited scholarship that does exist constitutes occasional, disjointed perspectives produced across different scholarly spheres at the fringes of disciplines, which have difficulty talking to each other. This chapter thus addresses two related questions. First, I analyze the shape of various approaches to the economic history of ancient Central Asia, particularly under the Greek Kingdoms and the Kushan Empire, and inquire into why such little scholarship has been generated in this field. Second, I consider the origins, development, and critiques of the notion of Kushan middlemen, and ask why external, long-distance trade is still frequently framed as the source of economic growth during the Kushan Empire.

II Approaches

II.1 Geopolitical and Disciplinary Origins

As signaled above, little intensive scholarship has been generated on the economic history of ancient Central Asia, and even less so in respect to the Greek Kingdoms or the Kushan Empire. What does exist can hardly be referred to as a single field with clear discourses and disputes. This is obviously due in part to the limited evidentiary basis for such a project, particularly the paucity of transmitted textual evidence, which has long hindered the resolution of fundamental disputes about chronology and political history that continue to preoccupy many scholars today.⁵

However, the practicalities and ideologies of knowledge production about Central Asia have been shaped more decisively by its colonialist, imperialist, and nationalist geopolitical context during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. In the nineteenth century, the Punjab became a frontier province of the British Raj, and western Turkestan – roughly the later Soviet and now independent republics of Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Kazakhstan – lay within the Russian Empire. Influence in Afghanistan was contested between the British and

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⁴ See discussion in Morris, ch. 9, this volume.

⁵ See further in Morris, ch. 9, this volume.

Russian Empires during this century as part of a broader political and diplomatic struggle described by modern historians as the 'Great Game.'⁶ Concomitant with colonial control of the Punjab, vigorous research by (foremost British) Europeans was initiated into the campaigns of Alexander, Hellenistic and Kushan numismatics, and the archaeology, art, and epigraphy of Buddhism in Gandhāra.⁷ Russian Oriental studies was concerned especially with the history of Islamic Turkestan primarily through written sources, although burgeoning archaeological excavations at Afrasiab and collection of antiquities were also practiced.⁸

In the 1920s in independent Afghanistan, Amanullah Khan sought heightened diplomatic relations with France in the context of his modernization program. These relations were cemented with the establishment of the *Délégation archéologique française en Afghanistan* (DAFA) in 1922, which held a monopoly on archaeological research until the 1960s.⁹ After the Russian Revolution in 1917, Russian Turkestan was demarcated into new Soviet republics (between 1924–1936), which entailed the production of new histories to bolster their status. Indian independence and the partition creating Pakistan in 1947 resulted in the allocation of much of the Punjab to the new modern state, and scholars of both domains devised new histories of their past.¹⁰ The Soviet Union's invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 virtually halted archaeological research in the subsequent decade of conflict between the Afghan Mujahideen and Soviet Armed Forces. The collapse of the Soviet Union was followed by an upheaval in research in the new Central Asian republics, which was eventually followed by intensified international collaboration in archaeological research projects. Afghanistan suffered civil war throughout the 1990s, leading to the US-led intervention in 2001. These decades have been marked by devastating destruction and illicit excavation of cultural heritage.

The complex modern political history of this space has also clearly influenced scholarly disciplinary receptions of its ancient history. In particular, the contested claims as to the most correct historical approach to the easternmost Greek Kingdoms are well documented.¹¹ William Woodthorpe Tarn's monumental *The Greeks in Bactria and India* (1938) explicitly oriented itself against hitherto prevailing scholarly associations of Bactria with Indian history and culture, evidently born from the development of scholarly interest in the Greek Kingdoms of Central Asia in the context of British control of the Punjab. Tarn wrote: "It is unfortunate that in Britain,

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6 On the 'Great Game,' see Hopkirk 1990; Sergeev 2013.

7 The orientation of scholarship toward Buddhism was an innovation established by Alexander Cunningham. For more, see Dwivedi, ch. 15, this volume.

8 For further discussion on Russian Oriental studies, see Fabian, ch. 13, this volume. On early collecting practices in Russian Turkestan, see Gorshenina 2004. On archaeology of the period, see Gorshenina 2012.

9 On the political context of the formation of the DAFA, see Olivier-Utard 1997, 17–44.

10 See further discussion on postindependence scholarship in Dwivedi, ch. 15, this volume.

11 See discussions in Guillaume 1990; Mairs 2006, 22; and Holt 2012, 70–75.

and I think everywhere, the story of the Greeks in India has been treated as part of the history of India alone. For in the history of India the episode of Greek rule has no meaning; it is really part of the history of Hellenism, and that is where its meaning resides.”¹²

The implications of Tarn’s perspective are clear throughout his monograph, as he drew repeated links between the Seleukids and Graeco-Bactrian kings, to the extent of even claiming (for example) kinship between Eukratides and Antiochos IV. Yet, his approach proved influential in subsequent scholarship. Awadh Kishore Narain’s *The Indo-Greeks* (1957) was put forward as a rebuttal to Tarn, not only in points of reconstruction of political history, but in its central premise. Narain stated clearly that the history of the Indo-Greeks “is part of the history of India and not of the Hellenistic states.”¹³ Narain’s trajectory exemplifies the difficulties of viewing any individual scholar as the product of an essentialized intellectual tradition: he received British training in the form of his tutelage from R. B. Whitehead of the Peshawar Museum and held a doctorate from the School of African and Oriental Studies (SOAS) in London. Yet, it is difficult not to read a fundamental cultural-historical rift between the memory of British India and new Indian nationalism into the Tarn-Narain dispute.¹⁴ Other appraisals also existed, although they have featured less prominently in historiography. For example, in Soviet scholarship, the focus on autochthony in ethnogenesis led scholars to de-emphasize any contribution of the Hellenistic world to Central Asia. However, *Tadzhiki: Drevneishaia, drevniaia i srednevekovaiia istoriia* (1972) by Bobodzhan Gafurovich Gafurov¹⁵ criticized this approach, as well as the Western overemphasis of the contribution of the Hellenistic period to this space, arguing instead that the Graeco-Bactrian Kingdom is better assessed as part of Central Asia’s history.¹⁶

The modern reception of the Kushans has not been subject to a similar critical historiography. However, from the early twentieth century their rule was seen in many quarters as emphatically belonging to Indian history and associated with the spread of Buddhism.¹⁷ More recently, Rezakhani has presented the Kushans as part of the history of what he refers to as “East Iran.”¹⁸ Ultimately, the study of the Greek Kingdoms and the Kushan Empire has existed at the disciplinary fringes of Western scholarship on the Graeco-Roman world, Indian historiography, Soviet Oriental

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¹² Tarn 1938, xx.

¹³ Narain 1957, 18.

¹⁴ As put very firmly by Guillaume 1990, 475. Yet, as Holt (2012, 75) reiterates, Narain later considered the conflict between his own and Tarn’s approach to have been overstated.

¹⁵ In Tajik, Bobojon Ghafurov. As this chapter engages with Gafurov’s work in Russian, the Russian version of his name is retained here.

¹⁶ Gafurov 1989, 160. See further discussion below.

¹⁷ See, for example, Kennedy 1912a, 666, in embodying early scholarly receptions of Kanishka as a Buddhist king, even claiming that he “never reigned outside of India.”

¹⁸ Rezakhani 2017, 3–4.

studies, and Iranian studies, and this has affected how the economic history of Central Asia has been produced.

II.2 Western Perspectives

The most extensive explanation of the economy of Hellenistic Bactria from a 'Western' perspective remains its treatment in Michael Ivanovich Rostovtzeff's three-volume *Social and Economic History of the Hellenistic World* (1941).¹⁹ This was a work largely produced within an American academic context during Rostovtzeff's professorship at Yale, published by Oxford's Clarendon Press, and relying on Tarn's premise that the Graeco-Bactrian Kingdom should be seen within the framework of Hellenistic history. However, as Fabian makes clear, Rostovtzeff's work had an immense debt to his intellectual training and career under the Russian Empire.²⁰ In reference to Bactria, this is seen in his assertion of lively trade links with Siberia and South Russia, and his novel attribution of Hellenistic jewelry and metalwork found there by archaeologists of the Russian Empire to Bactrian manufacture.²¹ This case reminds us that intellectual traditions do not exist as reified and pure entities.

Nonetheless, Rostovtzeff's treatment was still relatively cursory. After the customary complaint about the source material, he described the rich natural resources of Bactria and Sogdiana known from Graeco-Roman sources, their agricultural and pastoral potential, and their poverty in precious metals (an assertion deriving from Tarn).²² He emphasized, however, that "Bactria's real source of wealth ... was the transit trade along the caravan roads that crossed the country, connecting India with the Iranian lands and brought them with Mesopotamia and Syria."²³ The Begram hoard was also cited as evidence for the persistence of terrestrial caravan routes between India and Syria, with Rostovtzeff also claiming that (Hellenistic) Bactrian coinage "was destined to become and did become the instrument of the caravan trade of Bactria and India."²⁴ This notion of caravan trade was connected to Rostovtzeff's 'modernist' ideas about supply and demand in the Mediterranean.²⁵

Today, the study of ancient Central Asia's economic history remains a virtual non-priority in Western scholarship, despite the creation of relevant new datasets through the archaeological study of irrigation²⁶ and renewed interest in agropasto-

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¹⁹ Rostovtzeff 1941, 542–551.

²⁰ Fabian, ch. 13, this volume.

²¹ Rostovtzeff 1941, 546.

²² Rostovtzeff 1941, 543.

²³ Rostovtzeff 1941, 545.

²⁴ Rostovtzeff 1941, 545–547.

²⁵ See further in von Reden and Speidel, ch. 17, this volume.

²⁶ See, for example, the results of the eastern Bactria survey (1974–1978) in Gardin 1998.

ral strategies in northern Central Asia during the Bronze Age.²⁷ With the gradual publication of Graeco-Bactrian documentary evidence excavated at Ai Khanum and from the antiquities market, scholars have recently (and appropriately) noted parallels with the financial administration of other eastern Hellenistic kingdoms,²⁸ but these are not extensive studies.²⁹ One helpful step forward is found in Étienne de la Vaissière's *Histoire des marchands sogdiens* (2002),³⁰ which also considered the earlier development of Sogdian merchant diasporas in China attested from the early fourth century CE.

II.3 Indian Perspectives

Although scholarship on the economic history of India has a rich tradition,³¹ few contributions deal specifically with the local impact of Greek and Kushan conquest and putative control in areas of northwest and north India. This point is not helped by the fact that the shape and extent of Greek and Kushan rule in this space remains obscure.³² Nonetheless, some currents can be highlighted. Narain's classic treatise on the Greek Kingdoms reiterated that the presence of Indo-Greek coins beyond the Punjab was evidence of their "commercial success" rather than evidence of Indo-Greek rule.³³ Concurrently, the 1950s–1990s was a period in which India's economic history was increasingly interpreted from a Marxist perspective, and dominated by state-centric and Eurocentric imperial approaches, with a broader aim of informing policymaking in independent India.³⁴ These trends frame the sole monograph that is dedicated to considering Kushan expansion into India from an economic perspective, Bratindra Nath Mukherjee's short *Economic Factors in Kusāṇa History* (1970). Here, Mukherjee criticized the prominence of the study of chronology in political history, aiming instead to analyze the motivation of Kushan expansion into India through "the prospect of economic gain, as the love for gain is an inborn instinct of man."³⁵ This was executed through two case studies. The first alleged that Kushan expansion into the lower Indus was motivated by a desire to control its coastal port, thus profiting from lucrative silk trade through the taxation of merchants and increasing the flow of international trade.³⁶ The second case study argued that Ka-

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²⁷ See, e.g., Spengler et al. 2014.

²⁸ For example, Aperghis 2004, 278, 282–283; Coloru 2009, 266–269.

²⁹ The most comprehensive discussion of trade, agricultural production, and crafts in contemporary Western scholarship on the Greek Kingdoms is Coloru 2009, 269–275.

³⁰ Published in English translation as de la Vaissière 2005.

³¹ See Dwivedi, ch. 15, this volume.

³² Morris, ch. 2, this volume.

³³ Narain 1957, 88–89.

³⁴ Dwivedi, ch. 15, this volume.

³⁵ Mukherjee 1970, 9.

³⁶ Mukherjee 1970, 11–21.

nishka's conquests in the Malwa region (central India) were motivated by the control of its diamond mines, due to their putative significance in Indo-Roman trade.³⁷ Although the factual bases of both arguments are dubious,³⁸ it is more interesting that Mukherjee's approach was not only influenced by developments in Indian historiography, but by another trend growing in importance in Western scholarship, that highlighted the putative role of the Kushans in long-distance Silk Road and Indo-Roman trade (see below). That Mukherjee studied at SOAS and Cambridge should reiterate that there is some artifice to assigning scholars to certain intellectual traditions.

Otherwise, in Indian scholarship, explanations of the Kushan Empire's impact on the economy of northwestern and north India manifested primarily in debates during the 1970s and 1980s about the nature and causes of urbanization in early historic South Asia. Buddha Rashmi Mani, for example, influentially attributed a phase of urban growth in northwest India to the Kushan period, detected especially by the appearance of baked bricks,³⁹ although the archaeological classification of such phenomena as explicitly 'Kuṣāṇa' has been since criticized.⁴⁰ In the last decades, state- or empire-centric approaches to the economy have fallen out of fashion in favor of studies of local processes and on the agency of regional actors.

II.4 Russian Perspectives

The intellectual tradition of the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union (here, glossed as 'Russian')⁴¹ has produced substantially more scholarship about ancient Central Asia's economic history than competing traditions.⁴² Yet, as academics under the Russian Empire in the late nineteenth century began engaging with historical socio-economic development, only medieval and later periods of Central Asia's history came onto the radar. This is because the discipline of Russian Oriental studies was foremost concerned with the analysis of written sources, which in the Central Asian context were primarily written in Arabic, Persian, and Turkic languages. During this

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³⁷ Mukherjee 1970, 22–36.

³⁸ There is still no strong evidence that the Kushans ever controlled the lower Indus. The Chinese toponym Shendu 身毒 is not stable; it may have originally indicated the lower Indus, but grew over time to refer to northern India (Hill 2015, 1: 368–371). The textual support for the Malwa proposition derives from a Tibetan Buddhist history written in the seventeenth century. The author (Tāranātha) stressed that the king 'Kanika' associated with the mines and Kanishka were not identical, which Mukherjee perhaps rightfully rejected. There is no other evidence for Kushan conquests or control over Malwa.

³⁹ Mani 1987, 40, 53–62.

⁴⁰ E.g., in Ray 2010, 7.

⁴¹ See further in Fabian, ch. 13, this volume.

⁴² The present discussion does not treat emerging post-Soviet perspectives, which are still crystallizing into an intellectual tradition distinct to that of the Soviet era.

time, important critiques of Euocentrism in European Oriental studies were fermented, particularly by Vasilii Vladimirovich Bartol'd (1869–1930).⁴³ Bartol'd also transformed the historical study of Central Asia. In his work, he eschewed the prevailing scholarly conception of a dichotomy of barbaric nomadic populations of the steppe and settled civilizations in southern oases. Instead, Bartol'd treated the development of Central Asian nomadic and sedentary worlds as syncretic, and advocated for a regional conception of Central Asia (i.e., of Turkestan) as a unit of historical analysis.⁴⁴ One important work of his in this vein was *K istorii orosheniia Turkestana* (1914),⁴⁵ which engaged with a range of ancient and medieval literary sources to survey the development of agriculture and artificial irrigation throughout this entire region up to the Russian conquest.

Scholarship of the decades following the 1917 revolution was shaped not only by wider debates in Soviet Oriental studies informed by nascent interpretations of Marxist ideology and applications of historical materialism, but also by characteristics specific to the space of Central Asia shaped by Soviet attempts to control it. National demarcation of Central Asia into republics was achieved between 1924–1936. Leningrad Orientalists were accordingly pressured to produce new meta-histories of the respective republics reaching back to prehistory in order to strengthen the historical validity of the new republics in place of a united Turkestan feared by the Bolsheviks.⁴⁶ These meta-histories came to serve as the primary vehicle for writing on ancient Central Asia's economic history in subsequent decades. For the present purposes, the most relevant works are those dealing with the peoples of Uzbekistan and Tajikistan. These include the brief monograph *Drevniaia kul'tura Uzbekistana* (1943) by Sergei Pavlovich Tolstov (1907–1976),⁴⁷ the multivolume co-authored *Istoriia narodov Uzbekistana* (1950),⁴⁸ and the multivolume works on the Tajik people by Bobodzhan Gafurovich Gafurov (1908–1877), the first being *Istoriia tadzhikskogo naroda v kratkom izlozhenii* (1947),⁴⁹ and the second being *Tadzhiki: Drevneishaia, drevniaia i srednevekovaia istoriia* (1972).⁵⁰ Short contributions of interest also appeared in journals, chiefly *Vestnik drevnei istorii*, and edited volumes.

The content of these works were informed by scholarly debates of the 1920s and 1930s about the nature of socio-economic formations in prerevolutionary Oriental

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⁴³ Tolz 2011, 88–91.

⁴⁴ Bustanov 2015, 37.

⁴⁵ Reprinted in Bartol'd 1965.

⁴⁶ On the production of Soviet nationalist meta-histories in Central Asia and the competing (but ultimately unsuccessful) regional histories, see Bustanov 2015, 36–88.

⁴⁷ Tolstov 1943.

⁴⁸ Trever, Iakubovskii, and Voronets 1950.

⁴⁹ First published in 1947 in Tajik, followed by an expanded Russian translation in 1949, with a second edition in 1952 (Gafurov 1952), and a third edition in 1955.

⁵⁰ First published in Moscow, with a second edition published in Dushanbe, as Gafurov 1989.

societies and their development.⁵¹ When it became widely agreed that ancient Oriental societies could fit into the scheme of five formations (*piatichlenka*) – primitive communism, slavery, feudalism, capitalism, and communism – scholars asked if this applied to nomadic societies too. When Tolstov argued in 1933 that nomadic societies of Central Asia from the second century BCE did indeed pass through the slave-ownership phase,⁵² this became widely accepted. Additionally, burgeoning autochthonous explanations of ethnogenesis conceptually grounded the inclusion of the study of prehistoric and ancient societies into Central Asian republican meta-histories. Drawing on Marr's "Japhetic theory" for the Central Asian context, the Orientalist and historian Aleksandr Iur'evich Iakubovskii (1886–1953), in a commissioned brochure *K voprosu ob etnogeneze uzbekskogo naroda* (1941), asserted that the conditions of the formation of a people do not begin with the historical appearance of their contemporary name.⁵³ This postulate was taken up in other republican meta-histories which located the origins of contemporary peoples in antiquity, such as in Tolstov's pamphlet on Uzbekistan, and Gafurov's writing on the Tajiks.⁵⁴

In the postwar years, scholars refined their ideas about the specifics of ancient Central Asia's slave-owning formation and its development, also touching on questions of production and monetary circulation. Although archaeological research had been undertaken on amateur and professional levels since the late nineteenth century, the 1937 initiation of the multidisciplinary Khorezmian Archaeological-Ethnographic Expedition led by Tolstov produced a vast amount of new archaeological data about this region that could be drawn upon to solve problems of the past.⁵⁵ It was particularly the project's documentation of historical irrigation that allowed the study of the creation and maintenance of irrigation canals to take a more central role in explanations of socio-economic development.

Tolstov drew on data from the project combined with written evidence to forward the first in-depth explanations of ancient Central Asia's supposed slave-owning system.⁵⁶ In light of extended archaeological work, he developed several influential ideas in the monograph *Drevnii Khorezm* (1948). This included the periodization of 'Antichnyi Khorezm' that extended from the mid-first millennium BCE (beginning with the construction of large irrigation canals, the origin of the state, and Chorasmia's inclusion into the Achaemenid Empire) to the mid-first millennium CE (the 'Kushan-Afrigid Culture,' ending with a crisis of the slave-owning formation in a parallel fashion to Europe).⁵⁷ This periodization, which was subsequently ex-

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51 See the discussion in Fabian, ch. 13, this volume.

52 Tolstov 1934, 179, 185.

53 Iakubovskii 1941. On ethnogenesis in Soviet historiography of Central Asia, see Laruelle 2008.

54 Tolstov 1943, 5; Gafurov 1989, 173.

55 For this expedition and its political implications, see Arzhantseva 2015.

56 Tolstov 1938a, 182–187. See also Tolstov 1938b, 47–49.

57 Tolstov 1948, 32–33.

tended to the rest of Central Asia,⁵⁸ was accompanied by presumptions about its slave-holding socio-economic formation. Paraphrasing Engels's claim of the crucial contribution of slavery to Greece and Rome in antiquity, Tolstov wrote, "we can say that if there were no slavery, the rich irrigation culture of the East could not have come about."⁵⁹ This thesis became a formula adopted by subsequent research: "once there was irrigation – there was slavery."⁶⁰ More immediately controversial was Tolstov's claim that free or serf labor did not contribute to the mass of labor required in the construction of large canals, which he thought were solely constructed and maintained by a specialized "huge mass of slaves" not otherwise engaged in other agricultural labor.⁶¹ By the mid-1950s, a number of scholars had questioned the factual basis of such claims. Foremost, Belenitskii cast doubt on the specific contribution of slaves to irrigation in this period, underlining the overlooked role of the community.⁶²

Although it remained widely accepted that some form of slave-owning formation characterized ancient Central Asia, scholars asked more specific questions about economic development and the extent of monetization. Trever's contribution to the history of the Uzbek peoples described the existence of a developed monetary economy by the end of the first century BCE,⁶³ while Gafurov underplayed the existence of such, pointing instead to small-scale trade in kind.⁶⁴ A specialist numismatic study by the prominent archaeologist Vadim Mikhailovich Masson added some concreteness to the debate. Although conceding that subsistence farming was the basis of the economy throughout Central Asia's ancient period, Masson highlighted the widespread and early use of silver *tetradrachms* after the Seleukid period, explaining this as a high value coinage used for expensive foreign trade items. He also interpreted the more widespread circulation of copper coinage during the Kushan period as evidence for small-scale 'retail' trade in domestic markets. Finally, he suggested with reference to Engels that commodity exchange and 'monetary relations' developed from outside inward.⁶⁵

In scholarship of the decades following the death of Stalin, a tangible opening of ideas can be detected, combined with more rigorous analysis of sources and application of Marxist theory. For one, critiques of the slave-holding society formation of the ancient Near East and Orient had finally established that subdivisions of this formation were necessary, and that slave-holding should be framed as part of a

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58 This periodization was criticized in E. V. Zeimal' 1987 for presuming a certain set of socio-economic factors and not appreciating the uneven development across Central Asia during this period.

59 Tolstov 1948, 173.

60 As put in T. I. Zeimal' 1971, 176.

61 Tolstov 1948, 173; and more explicitly in Tolstov 1958, 115.

62 Belenitskii in Tolstov 1955, 506–508.

63 Trever, Iakubovskii, and Voronets 1950, 107.

64 Gafurov 1952, 89.

65 Masson 1955.

larger economic system.⁶⁶ In the 1960s too, scholarship of selected prerevolutionary Orientalists began to be rehabilitated through recognition of their empirical significance. This occurred, for example, in Bartol'd's case with the publication of the nine volumes of his reprinted *Sochineniia* ('Writings,' 1963–1977). The study of historical irrigation also increased in sophistication during this period, notably with work on Khorezm and the Bukhara oasis.⁶⁷

Gafurov's *Tadzhiki* (1972, 2nd ed. 1989) is emblematic of the state of knowledge production in the late Soviet period.⁶⁸ A classic in Tajik history, the paradigmatic quality of this work is underlined in the dispute about its authorship.⁶⁹ Gafurov, a statesman and scholar, is representative of the specific marriage of politics and history found in the Soviet intellectual context. Born in Tajikistan, he studied at the Moscow Institute of Journalism and the Institute of History of the Soviet Academy of Sciences before returning to Dushanbe to take up party administrative positions. He became first secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Tajikistan, established Tajikistan's first State University (1948), inaugurated its National Academy of Sciences (1951), and also served as the director for the Institute of Oriental Studies in Moscow, all the while publishing historical scholarship.

Outwardly, *Tadzhiki* still looks and mostly reads like a nationalist meta-history, but its preface did note Central Asia's historical cultural unity,⁷⁰ hearkening back to Bartol'd's ideas and reflecting the tentative shift in the administration at the time toward regionalist histories.⁷¹ The section of *Tadzhiki* of interest here is "Predki tadzhikov v epoku razvitiia rabovladel'cheskikh otnoshenii" (The ancestors of the Tajiks in the era of the development of slave-holding relations), which covers Central Asia under the Achaemenids to the Kushans. Like its intellectual predecessors, this section came after a treatment of prehistory as a primitive communal system, and before another on the supposed emergence of feudal relations in Late Antiquity (ca. fourth century CE).

Some points in Gafurov's treatment of the Greek Kingdoms are remarkable.⁷² First, he seriously engaged with Western research and historical scholarship, including the scholarship of Tarn and Narain, and the DAFA excavations at Balkh and

⁶⁶ D'iakonov 1966, 47–52.

⁶⁷ See, respectively, Andrianov 1969; Mukhamedzhanov 1978.

⁶⁸ Gafurov 1989.

⁶⁹ Foremost debated on digital platforms in the last decade. The archaeologist Boris Anatol'evich Litvinskii was credited as editor of *Tadzhiki*, but in a memoir published online on Fergana.Ru in 2009, he indicated that he and numismatist Elena Abramovna Davidovich (also Litvinskii's wife) actually authored the text. Although explicit statements to this effect were later removed from the article (see now Ianovskaia 2009), the claim was criticized by Tajik academics (see, for example, Ikrami 2009).

⁷⁰ Gafurov 1989, 3–10.

⁷¹ Bustanov 2015, 70–76.

⁷² For the following, Gafurov 1989, 158–160.

Ai Khanum. Although Gafurov considered that Western scholars had exaggerated the role of ‘Greek-Hellenistic’ culture in Central Asia’s development, he also criticized Soviet scientists for denying that it had any impact at all. He found a middle ground by suggesting that a new impetus was given to Central Asia’s slave-holding system due to close contacts with the Hellenistic world, but underscored that the origins and development of the Graeco-Bactrian Kingdom were due to the historical and geographical conditions of Central Asia. Further specific points of historical interpretation can also be highlighted.⁷³ For example, Gafurov asserted that the description of Sāgala in the *Milindapañha*⁷⁴ constitutes evidence for a developed craft industry under the Greeks, with craft and commerce mainly in the hands of the local population. Gafurov also associated the Graeco-Macedonian conquest of Sogdiana with increased production and quality of crafts through a “mutual enrichment of cultures,” and highlighted the importance of agricultural production. Additionally – clearly influenced by Masson, although he is not cited – Gafurov regarded the abundance of coinage of the Greek Kingdoms as evidence for developed commodity circulation through high-volume international trade (especially with the Hellenistic world) and smaller scale domestic trade.

Gafurov was able to draw on much more archaeological data for his synthesis of the economy under the Kushans.⁷⁵ Acknowledging that the main agricultural regions had already been developed prior to the advent of Kushan power, he noted the construction of new canals along (for example) the Vakhsh River. Development was highlighted in several arenas: in the technology of agricultural production, in craft production, and in the monetary system. Unusually, in comparison to other intellectual traditions (see below), it was taken as self-evident that mining was carried out on a large scale under the empire, and that Central Asian mines were the main suppliers for the gold ore used for Kushan coinage.

Most interesting is Gafurov’s treatment of Central Asia’s role in external long-distance trade.⁷⁶ Although the idea of the Silk Road is mentioned in passing as “flowing through” this space, Gafurov proposed that raw metal ore and metalwork may have been exported. He also emphasized Romano-Central Asian ties through (limited, contested) finds of Roman products and coins, and asserted that Central Asian exports to China were significant. He also interpreted the possible presence of Bactrian merchants in Alexandria (like Sogdians in Dunhuang) as indicative of the establishment of trading posts, pointed to possible trade with the Ural-Volga and Sarmatian tribes, and the export of Bactrian textiles. Ultimately, Central Asia was not seen here as a thoroughfare, but an active locus of importing and exporting, with its own merchants traveling great distances.

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⁷³ For the following, Gafurov 1989, 143, 147–148.

⁷⁴ Discussed further in Morris, ch. 9, this volume.

⁷⁵ Gafurov 1989, 201–206.

⁷⁶ Gafurov 1989, 205–207.

Gafurov's concluding discussion represents a nuanced perspective on the slave-holding formation of this period.⁷⁷ Against Tolstov, he pointed to the unevenness of slave-holding and economic development across Central Asia during antiquity. The oases of Sogdiana, Chorasmia, Bactria-Tokharistan, and Ferghana were seen as relatively developed (compared to mountainous areas), and accordingly engaged more in slave-holding. He also emphasized the contribution of free commune members to labor, especially in agriculture. A class struggle was envisaged as emanating from the rich military nobility and priesthood, putatively owning slaves, large tracts of land, and trading caravans.

In sum, the Russian intellectual tradition has made a comparatively substantial contribution to the study of ancient Central Asia's economic history. Certainly, early postrevolutionary scholarship was almost purely ideological and theoretical, as it grappled with the interpretation and application of Marxist doctrine. However, as scholarship became more empirically rigorous, its strength lay in synthesis and explanation, asking unique questions of economic development from a localized bottom-up perspective. This intellectual tradition later produced more nuanced understandings of what a slave-holding formation really looked like in ancient Central Asia. It emphasized the importance of developments in artificial irrigation and agricultural production, syncretism between nomadic pastoralists and oasis-dwelling agriculturalists, the extent of monetization and its implications for the development of commodity exchange both within and external to a state, advances in craft production, and entertained the possibility of Central Asia's mineral resources. Ultimately, Central Asia under the Kushans was framed as an active agent in the external importation and exportation of raw materials and finished products, with its own highly mobile merchants.

III On the Origins of Kushan Middlemen

As we have seen, limited scholarship has been generated on the economy of ancient Central Asia. Yet, certain assertions are frequently made about the role of the Yuezhi and Kushans as traders or middlemen, appearing both in scholarship on Silk Road and Indo-Roman trade (mostly produced from a Western Romano-centric perspective), as well as specialist treatments of the Kushans. Seeking the origins of the notion of Kushan middlemen, the following examines two highly visible bodies of material culture repeatedly mobilized in this discourse: Kushan gold coinage and the Begram hoard.

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⁷⁷ Gafurov 1989, 232–240.

III.1 Roman *Aurei* and The Secret of Kanishka

In the late nineteenth century, Alexander Cunningham of the Archaeological Survey of India published a set of influential observations about Kushan gold coinage, which was struck to a weight standard of ca. 8.0 g. Having studied the weights of all such coins available to him and noticing a general metrological similarity with Roman *aurei*, he posited that Kushan gold coins had been restruck on Roman *aurei*, and that the heavy use of gold in Kushan coinage derived from heightened commerce between Rome and India at the time of the Roman Empire. Cunningham did, however, suspect that the weight standard of Kushan gold coinage was fixed by the internal economics of their own empire, through a ratio relationship to silver coinage of pre-Kushan rulers, presumably remaining in circulation.⁷⁸ Finally, he proposed that, although the name of the Kushan gold unit was not known, because gold coins of the Gupta Dynasty (ca. 320–550 CE) were referred to in epigraphic evidence as *dinars*, it was thus likely that Kushan gold coins had the same name as they preserved the weight of early Roman imperial “denarii aurei.”⁷⁹ Cunningham’s ideas were quickly taken up by other numismatic authorities of the time and further elaborated. For example, Robert Sewell suggested that this theory also explained the paucity of Roman coin finds in northern India in comparison to the south.⁸⁰

A paper published in 1912 by James Kennedy, a historian and member of the Indian Civil Service, took these ideas into some wild new directions.⁸¹ In *The Secret of Kanishka*,⁸² Kennedy explained that the new gold coinage putatively introduced by Kanishka (in fact introduced by Vima Kadphises) was part of the history of long-distance silk trade, relying on many complex, if now clearly erroneous, conceptions of Kushan and regional chronologies, socio-linguistics, religious practice, and numismatics. Still, it is worth outlining Kennedy’s central ideas.⁸³ Arguing that Kanishka struck gold coins “not to supply local wants, but for the purposes of foreign trade,” he correctly disputed the precise metrological cohesion between Roman *aurei* and Kushan *dinars*, but suggested Achaemenid and Macedonian precedents for their weight standard instead. He further claimed that the gold used for Kushan *dinars*, “certainly not indigenous,” was brought by Messenian merchants, and that the use of Greek in Kushan coin legends (in fact, Bactrian, from early in the reign of Kanishka) was intended as a *lingua franca* for foreign traders.

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⁷⁸ Cunningham 1888, 219.

⁷⁹ Cunningham 1888, 218.

⁸⁰ Sewell 1904, 596. This frequently-discussed discrepancy may have been caused by many other factors.

⁸¹ Kennedy 1912a; Kennedy 1912b.

⁸² The titular secret being that Kanishka’s gold coinage proved that he ruled in the mid-first century BCE, which has been thoroughly proven false by subsequent research (see Morris, ch. 2, this volume).

⁸³ For the following, see Kennedy 1912b, 983–984.

Scholarship of the next decades, particularly written from a Romano-centric perspective, disputed Kennedy's metrological arguments, but further developed his emphatic link between Kushan *dinars* and external long-distance trade, in addition to claims as to the foreign origins of Kushan gold. Warmington's classic monograph *The Commerce between the Roman Empire and India* (1928) cited the similarity of the weight, metal, and purity of Roman *aurei* and Kushan *dinars* as "a very test of a lively commerce."⁸⁴ Although he rejected a Roman origin of the gold and conceded that some might have come from India, he suggested that the majority of Kushan gold used for coinage derived from gold exported from Arabia and was imported in the form of bullion via Barygaza.⁸⁵

Similar ideas were also expressed in one of the first specialist monographs on the Kushans, van Lohuizen-de Leeuw's *The "Scythian" Period* (1949).⁸⁶ Van Lohuizen-de Leeuw maintained that the Kushan gold standard derived from that instituted by Augustus, encountered via contact with Roman *aurei* seen during Vima Kadphises's (historically dubious) expansion to coastal harbors that was putatively motivated by "trade considerations."⁸⁷ This argument was based on the incorrect assumption that Vima Kadphises (ca. 110–127) ruled prior to the Neronian reforms of 64–68 CE, after which otherwise the metrological correspondence between the coinages certainly could not tally.⁸⁸

Only in 1960 was the question of the metrological correspondence between the Roman *aureus* and Kushan gold *dinar* seriously addressed again. Numismatist Malcolm MacDowall agreed with Kennedy that there was never a precise correspondence between the two coinages. He pointed out that even in the case of pre-Neronian *aurei*, the seemingly small weight difference of 0.4 g was significant in the case of gold coinages (equivalent to more than two days' pay for a Roman soldier in the first century CE). MacDowall thus argued that the coinages did not freely circulate together, and that Kushan *dinars* were probably "exchanged principally in large scale commercial transactions by international traders."⁸⁹ Ultimately, he interpreted Kushan *dinars* as introduced as multiples of preexisting copper denominations for large-scale commercial transactions to replace local silver coinage that had eventually collapsed prior to Kushan rule.⁹⁰

III.2 Explaining the Significance of the Begram Hoard

The discovery of the Begram hoard by archaeologists of the DAFA during 1937 and 1939 was a turning point for Kushan archaeology. Begram is a partially excavated

⁸⁴ Warmington 1928, 298–299.

⁸⁵ Warmington 1928, 270, 298–299.

⁸⁶ For the following, see Van Lohuizen-de Leeuw 1949, 365–366.

⁸⁷ Van Lohuizen-de Leeuw 1949, 365–366.

⁸⁸ Under Nero, the weight of the *aureus* was reduced from 40 to 45 *aurei* per Roman pound.

⁸⁹ MacDowall 1960, 67–68.

⁹⁰ MacDowall 1960, 74.

(1936–1942; 1946) urban site located around 60 km north of Kabul, which was the location of the regional capital of the Paropamisadai (variously, Alexandria in the Caucasus and Kapisi), and located in the ancient microregion of Kapisa. At the so-called ‘New Royal City’ (a southern fortified area dominated by habitations), excavations revealed two sealed rooms in the center of a repurposed elite residence. In these rooms, over 400 individual objects were recovered, which originated from across Afro-Eurasia.⁹¹ Objects from the Roman Mediterranean included elaborate glass vessels of numerous different manufacturing and decorative techniques,⁹² bronze basins, technologically elaborate bronze ‘aquariums’ with mobile elements, figurines, plaster casts produced from high-relief metalwork with Graeco-Roman imagery, and vessels of alabaster, porphyry, and rock crystal. From the Indian subcontinent (the precise place of manufacture remains disputed)⁹³ were footstools, furniture legs, and panels from chairs that had been adorned with elaborately carved decorative ivory and bone panels. From China, lacquered boxes and cups produced in both private and state workshops dating to the late Former Han and Xin dynasties were also found.⁹⁴

The finds from the first hoard room in 1937 were rapidly published. However, the deaths of the three main archaeologists – Joseph Hackin, Ria Hackin, and Jean Carl – in 1941 led to the posthumous publication of the finds from 1939 only in 1954, and ultimately caused many significant documentation problems that hinder a precise appraisal of the hoard’s archaeological context and chronology. This central problem has shaped most of the subsequent debate about the find.⁹⁵ Joseph Hackin’s interpretation of the nature and wider significance of the hoard was very cautious; in his last writing, dated to 1940, he remarked simply that this find was evidence for wide connectivity under the Kushans during the first to second centuries CE.⁹⁶ It was his colleagues and successors at the DAFA who explicitly suggested that the Site II structure was a palace, and that the hoard objects were the abandoned and concealed precious possessions of a Kushan king or lord fleeing a Sasanian invasion.⁹⁷

Archaeologist Mortimer Wheeler’s interpretation of the find in *Rome Beyond the Imperial Frontiers* (1954) was even bolder. He asserted: “the easiest explanation is doubtless the correct one. The store was probably a Customs depot for the receipt of dues in kind collected by the kings or viceroys of Kapisa from the caravans which traversed the adjacent highway in the luxury traffic of Orient and Occident.”⁹⁸ Al-

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⁹¹ For the primary publications of the hoard finds see Hackin 1939; Hackin 1954.

⁹² See conveniently the survey in Whitehouse 2001.

⁹³ See the discussion in Rosen Stone 2008.

⁹⁴ For the most recent survey, see Zhang 2011.

⁹⁵ Discussed at length in Morris 2017.

⁹⁶ Hackin 1954, 11–15.

⁹⁷ Ghirshman 1946, 28; Foucher 1954.

⁹⁸ Wheeler 1954, 163–164.

though not usually directly cited,⁹⁹ Wheeler's general supposition that the Begram hoard is symptomatic of wider patterns of long-distance trade rather than a phenomenon of consumption specific to the Kushan context has come to resonate in subsequent scholarship. Indeed, although numerous scholars of the latter twentieth century still more prudently considered the hoard as broad evidence for the prosperity and cosmopolitanism of the Kushan Empire and the nature of goods acquired through trade,¹⁰⁰ this has been widely supplanted by Sanjyot Mehendale's reinterpretation of the find, which is in fact not entirely distant to that of Wheeler.

Mehendale has argued that the hoard objects were not especially precious in the sense that they could only be associated with royal wealth, that the hoard objects all date to the first century CE, and that the hoard itself may have been a traders' stock accumulated for commercial purposes (or impounded) awaiting further distribution. She has also suggested the possible inclusion of unworked material in the hoard was indicative of local craft activities.¹⁰¹ Ultimately, Mehendale cast Begram as a commercial transit and manufacturing center "at the heart of the Silk Roads."¹⁰²

III.3 Crystallization into Doctrine

From the 1960s to the present, certain interpretations as to the origins and metrology of Kushan *dinars* and the significance of the Begram hoard have crystallized (despite the scholarly non-consensus seen above), establishing a historiographical doctrine about the economic significance of external transit trade for the Kushan Empire. For example, Robert Göbl – the leading specialist on Kushan numismatics during his lifetime – accepted the Roman origin of Kushan gold, in addition to his well-known arguments for typological links between Roman and Kushan coinage.¹⁰³ Likewise, John Rosenfield's groundbreaking monograph, *The Dynastic Arts of the Kushans*, repeated the assumption that the Kushan gold derived largely from melted-down Roman *aurei*.¹⁰⁴ He also stated clearly: "much of the prosperity of the Kushan Empire must have rested on its trade with the West, for its merchants served as middlemen taking cargoes coming from China when they entered the Kushan-shahr from the Tarim Basin."¹⁰⁵

Similar assertions were made in generalist discussions of Silk Road and Indo-Roman trade, produced in increasing volumes in the latter half of the twentieth

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⁹⁹ See however, Thorley 1979, 187–188.

¹⁰⁰ For example, MacDowall and Taddei 1978, 257; Raschke 1978, 632; Frye 1984, 284.

¹⁰¹ Mehendale 1996; Mehendale 1997, 6.4; Mehendale 2011.

¹⁰² Thus the title of Mehendale 2011.

¹⁰³ Already in Göbl 1960.

¹⁰⁴ Rosenfield 1967, 19–23.

¹⁰⁵ Rosenfield 1967, 21.

century. Boulnois's monograph on the Silk Road and Miller's on the spice trade of the Roman Empire both characterized the Kushans as middlemen.¹⁰⁶ Srivastava's study of trade and commerce in India claimed that the initiation of Kushan gold coinage on a Roman pattern was to "encourage traders" and was aimed at an "international market" of (especially Roman) merchants.¹⁰⁷ John Thorley's articles in *Greece and Rome* about the development of trade between Rome and China described the Kushans as middlemen,¹⁰⁸ and again considered Kushan gold coinage as intended to facilitate trade with Rome. Following Wheeler's interpretation of Begram as a customs post; Thorley even went so far as to speculate that the Kushans had a government monopoly on silk trade via a center such as Begram.¹⁰⁹

Finally, in 1978, Manfred G. Raschke (an economist and ancient historian) decisively confronted several of these ideas, explaining the economy under the Kushans and their role in long-distance trade in an entirely different manner. Raschke pointed to the Begram hoard as evidence for luxury imports under the Kushan period, describing Central Asia and northwest India as particularly suitable markets for Roman goods due to the region's Hellenistic heritage.¹¹⁰

Even more significantly, Raschke also considered the various 'middlemen' of Rome's eastern trade, including Chinese agents, Parthians, Sogdians, and the Kushans – "the middlemen par excellence." He attacked underlying assumptions about the role of these agents in long-distance trade:

A most delicate subject this, and one which calls forth liberal and Marxist scholars' deepest economic prejudices. It is accepted doctrine that the middlemen were the villains in Rome's Eastern trade. Simple drones who contributed nothing to the value of the product, they used their geographic position to sap the financial strength of the Roman Empire and by the products they sold they corrupted the morals of its nobility. This picture bears little resemblance to the evidence.¹¹¹

Acknowledging the evident prosperity of the Kushan period, Raschke however pointed out that the basis of this was not transit trade, but rather advanced irrigated agricultural production, acknowledging the contribution of Soviet research to this issue.¹¹²

Yet, only Raschke's criticism of the villainous casting of middlemen seems to have been taken up in subsequent scholarship, as later contributions nonetheless increasingly emphasized the significance of the Kushan contribution to transit trade. For example, Xinru Liu's study of Yuezhi-Kushan migration and settlement

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106 Boulnois 1966; Miller 1969, 234–235.

107 Srivastava 1968, 179–191.

108 Thorley 1969; Thorley 1971.

109 Thorley 1979.

110 Raschke 1978, 632–633.

111 Raschke 1978, 637.

112 Raschke 1978, 640.

in Bactria attributes the Kushan's capacity as the "cosmopolitan broker of Eurasian trade" to their Yuezhi heritage and "trading skills," for which the Begram hoard is also mobilized as evidence.¹¹³ Similarly, in *The Silk Road in World History* (2010), she claimed that the Kushans became prosperous from the geography of their empire as trade passed through their territory, in addition to their patronage of Buddhist institutions, and (the old story) that the Kushans had based their gold *dinars* on the Roman *aureus* to accommodate their Roman trading partners.¹¹⁴

At the beginning of this chapter, we have already seen the idea of the Yuezhi desire to control "trade routes" as a "profitable" activity in Falk's study.¹¹⁵ It is also worth emphasizing that Benjamin's appraisal of the Kushans' contribution to Silk Road trade, cited also at the beginning of this chapter, depended heavily on Mehendale's interpretation of Begram as a commercial node and point of redistribution.¹¹⁶ The same is true for Graf's recent coverage on the Silk Road within the edited volume *Trade, Commerce, and the State in the Roman World* (2018).¹¹⁷

IV Conclusion: Beyond Transit Trade

As we have seen, the notion of Kushan middlemen originated in precarious hypotheses that became crystallized in both generalist treatments of long-distance trade and specialist studies of the Kushans. Although this notion ought to be further critically reassessed, it should suffice to note for now that factual problems continue to undermine its basis. For example, recent analysis of the trace elements in Kushan gold coinage has finally ruled out the theory that they were produced from melted down Roman *aurei*.¹¹⁸ A study of some overlooked coins found in the Begram hoard has demonstrated that the assemblage must have been deposited after the mid-third century CE, which means that the chronological foundation of Mehendale's argument is no longer valid.¹¹⁹ Furthermore, scholars of Han lacquerware (such as those found at Begram) continue to emphasize the limited range of circulation and extremely high value of this class of material objects in Chinese and foreign diplomatic contexts.¹²⁰

Yet, scholarly discourse is not simply driven by evidence, and it is worth finally considering why the notion of Kushan middlemen – certainly a historiographical

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¹¹³ Liu 2001, 272–276.

¹¹⁴ Liu 2010, 42–61.

¹¹⁵ Falk 2014.

¹¹⁶ Benjamin 2018.

¹¹⁷ Graf 2018.

¹¹⁸ Blet-Lemarquand et al. 2009, 51.

¹¹⁹ Morris 2017.

¹²⁰ Pirazzoli-t'Serstevens 2001; Pirazzoli-t'Serstevens 2009; Zhang 2011.

construct, if not wholly fictitious – continues to retain such appeal when other explanations of economic development under the Kushans and their participation in long-distance trade might be proposed. For this, I offer three concurrent explanations.

The first is that scholars now recognize the centrality of the space of the Kushan Empire within the Eurasian landmass, their location between the well-documented empires of Rome and China, and their significance for global history despite major documentary difficulties. Accordingly, the ever-increasing emphasis placed on the “critical role” played by the Kushans in long-distance transit trade¹²¹ may be explained as an attempt to account for the power, prosperity, and importance of this mysterious empire in some way; in the end, it is best to have the pivotal Kushans in the Silk Road story somewhere, rather than not at all. The second explanation is, as clarified above, two particular classes of material evidence – Kushan gold coinage and the Begram hoard – have long remained extremely visible in scholarship, and traditional interpretations of their significance appear to support the notion of Kushan middlemen.

However, the final, most significant reason why this notion continues to hold such appeal is because there is no highly developed discourse on the economic history of ancient Central Asia and its empires, and accordingly a broader lack of engagement with the relevant knowledge produced by Soviet scholarship. I emphasize the significance of Soviet research here because anyone seeking to obtain a different perspective on economic development under the Kushan Empire would need only to look in this direction. Of course, this can be forgiven in some part due to linguistic boundaries and the frequent difficulty of obtaining Soviet-era scholarship; although this task can remain difficult even today, before the fall of the USSR it could be insurmountably so. Nonetheless, Soviet scholarship characterized the Kushan period of Central Asia by agricultural prosperity through artificial irrigation, advances in technologies of agricultural and craft production, expanding urbanization, highly developed monetization and commodity exchange, the exploitation of local mineral resources, and the active importation of foreign commodities and exportation of their own. Naturally, these claims need to be reassessed and further nuanced as research progresses, but the fact remains that Soviet scholarship produced a completely different vision of the economy of the Kushans, which could certainly challenge and nuance prevailing narratives in Western scholarship.

Ultimately, the truth probably lies somewhere in the middle: the prosperity of the Kushan Empire, although in need of better quantification, is likely entangled between all of the factors raised in this chapter. Only once the origins, life, and persistence of the many disparate relevant ideas are clearly spelled out, can specialist research reassess their veracity.

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121 Benjamin 2018, 202.

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