

THE GEOGRAPHY OF THE REGION

*The deficiencies of the land
explain the scarcity of the population
and the necessity of nomadism*⁷

We must begin with a necessary clarification of several geographic terms whose usage is not consistent either in Hungarian or in international studies. The labels Central and Inner Asia are often used interchangeably and inconsistently, both in Hungarian and English-language research, and, more recently in Russian and Ukrainian research as well (Средняя and Центральная Азия), without an exact explanation of which region is meant by the label. The German terms *Zentralasien* and *Mittelasien* more or less correspond to the regions discussed here. The French *Asie Centrale* is used to denote both Central and Inner Asia. In the American usage, Inner Asia is a far broader geographic region, incorporating Central Asia and Siberia. Regarding the peoples of present-day Inner Asia, they have by and large adopted the modern European and, principally, Russian usage⁸.

The main reason for this terminological confusion can be found in the fact that the peoples, and the political and historical events of Central and Inner Asia are bound by many strands⁹, while the differences between the two regions can be found in the diversity of their physical geography (fig. 2).

It seems to us that an overview of the main features of the regions discussed here will not be a useless exercise, in part owing to the terminological confusion described in the above, and in part owing to the geographic misconceptions encountered even in the archaeological literature. The easternmost region discussed here is Inner Asia, while Central Asia lies to its west. The European grassy steppe (fig. 3) will also be described briefly, similarly to the Caucasus and its broader region, as well as the Crimean Peninsula.

INNER ASIA

Inner Asia (fig. 4) extends over some 8 million km² across modern China and Mongolia. Its northern and western boundaries coincide roughly with the border between these countries and Russia; in the south, it is bounded by the Upper Indus and the Tsangpo (Brahmaputra), while in the east by the southern foothills of the Hingan Mountains and the large Ordos bend of the Huang He (Yellow River). Inner Asia is a huge, undrained basin. Although the headwaters of several major rivers flow along its margins, the rivers either empty into undrained lakes or lose themselves in the desert.

Inner Asia can be divided into three major regions: Hsin-chiang (Xinjiang/Sinkiang) (fig. 2, F1), the region of primary interest here; Tibet (fig. 2, F2), a peripheral region in terms of this study; and Outer and Inner Mongolia (fig. 2, F3). Hsin-chiang, known also as eastern or Chinese Turkestan, extends over a vast territory of some 1.5 million km². The Tien Shan Mountains divide the region into two large basins: the roughly triangular Dzungarian Basin in the north; and the Tarim Basin in the south, which stretches for some 1,400 km and covers 530,000 km². The Dzungarian Basin is bounded by the Mongolian Altaj Mountains in the north-east, the Tien Shan Mountains in the south, and the Dzungarian Alatau and the Tarbagatay ranges in the

⁷ Balbi 1897, 134.

⁸ www.indiana.edu/~rifias/RIFIAS_and_Inner_Asian_Studies.htm (1.1.2012).

⁹ It must be emphasised that we are speaking of similar, but not identical traits. The history of the two regions is far from identical.

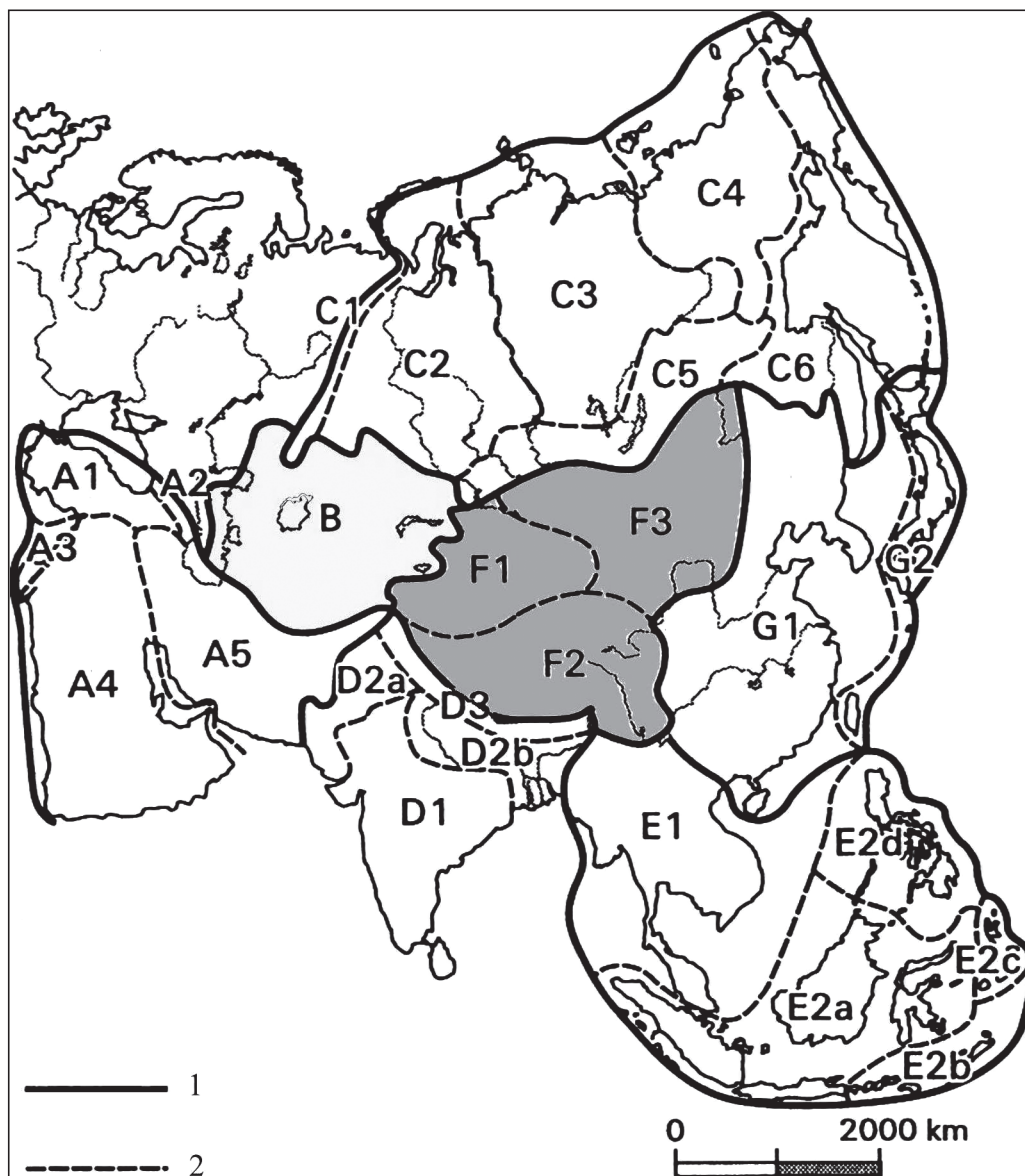


Fig. 2 Regions of Asia. **1** boundary of region groups. **– 2** boundary of region. A: South-West Asia; A1: Asia Minor; A2: Caucasus; A3: Syrian Ditch; A4: Arabian tableland; A5: Iranian Basin; B: Central Asia; C: Northern Asia; C1: Urals; C2: Western Siberian Plain; C3: Central Siberian Plateau; C4: Eastern Siberia; C5: Altai-Baikal; C6: Far East; D: Southern Asia; D1: Deccan; D2a: Indus Plain; D2b: Hindustan Plain; D3: Himalayas; E: South-East Asia; E1: Indochinese Peninsula; E2: Malaysian Islands; E2a: Greater Sunda Islands; E2b: Lesser Sunda Islands; E2c: Maluku Islands; E2d: Philippine Islands; F: Inner Asia; F1: Hsin-chiang; F2: Tibet; F3: Outer and Inner Mongolia; G: Eastern Asia; G1: the »inner and middle step«; G2: the »outer step«. – (After Horváth 1998, fig. 5).

north-west. Wide passes lead through the latter two towards Central Asia; the most famous among them being the Dzungarian Gate, the major thoroughfare followed by nomadic peoples.

The Dzungarian Basin lies in the temperate steppe and the desert zone. Winters are harsh, summers are hot, and the region receives no more than 200-300 mm of precipitation. The Black or Kara Irtyš flows through its northern part, but otherwise the basin is undrained. The principal body of water is Lake Ebi Nor covering 1,040 km² at the foot of the Borohoro Mountains, branching off from the Tien Shan Mountains. In the south, the basin is bounded by one of the Earth's largest ranges, the Tien Shan Mountains, whose length from the Kyzylkum to the Gobi Desert is 3,000 km.

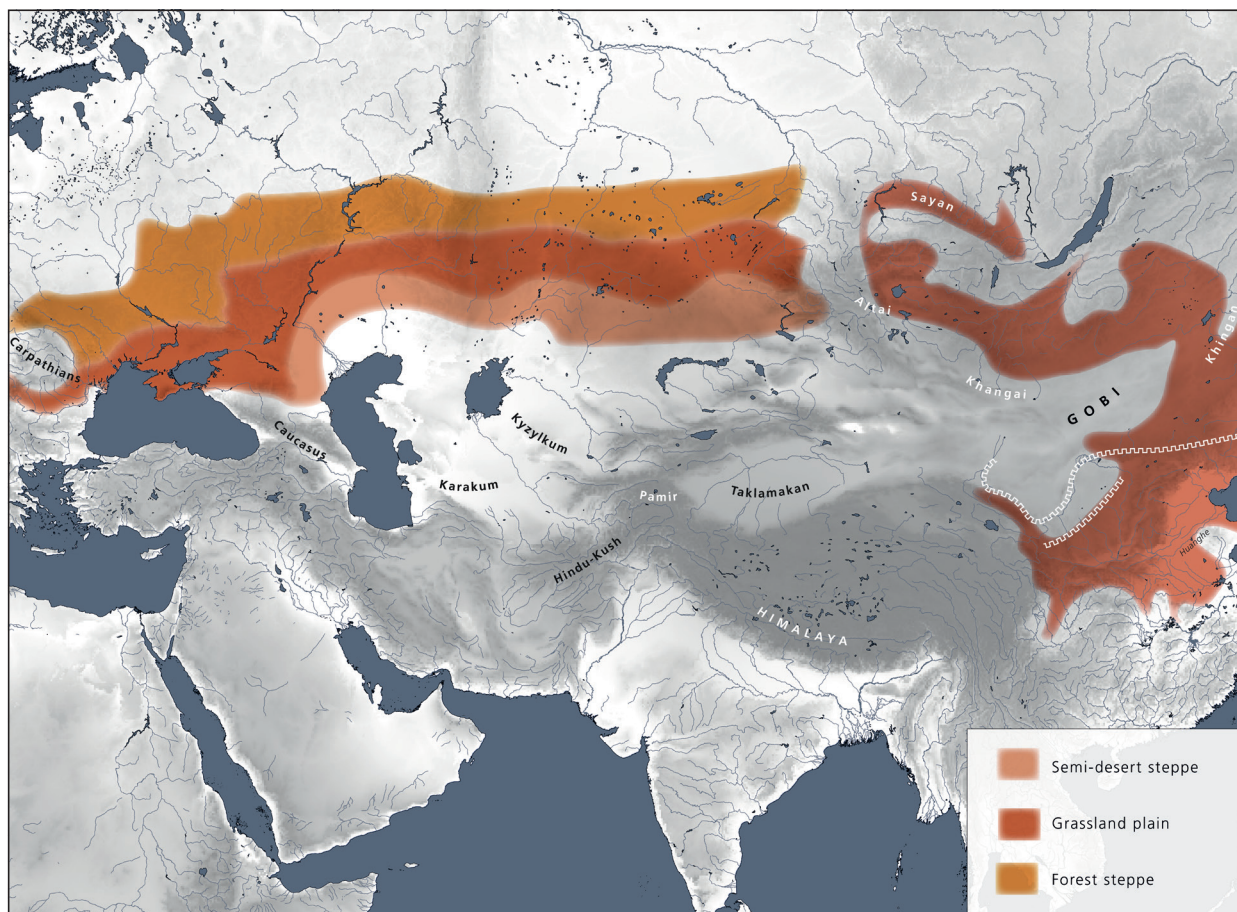


Fig. 3 The Eurasian steppe belt. – (After Lebedynsky 2003, map on p. 7; map M. Ober, RGZM).

Lying south of the Tien Shan is the Tarim Basin, ringed by mountains whose highest peaks rise to over 5,000m (the Kunlun Mountains and the Altyn Tagh in the south, and the Pamir Range in the west). In the east, the Pei Mountains, a lower range, separate the basin from the Gobi Desert. Lying in its interior is the immense Takla Makan Desert and the smaller, 260 km long Lop Desert of salt and clay, to its east, with the Lop Nor, a »wandering« lake formerly occupying roughly 20,000 km², lying at an altitude of 780 m. The lake was originally fed by the Tarim and the Konche Darya rivers, often modifying their beds. The Tarim Basin is a temperate desert zone, with cold winters and hot summers, often with absolute annual temperature fluctuations of over 70°C. Annual precipitation remains below 100 mm. A ring of oases developed on the fringes of the basin. Major trade routes passed through the oases and along the shores of Lake Lop Nor. The Silk Road, one of the vital arteries of the ancient world, reached the Great Wall of China some 350 km east of the lake, the swiftest route to China (fig. 5)¹⁰.

CENTRAL ASIA

The term Central Asia, occupying a key position in Sarmatian studies, is here used for the undrained basin extending across Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, central and southern Kazakhstan, and

¹⁰ The geographic description of Inner Asia is based on Balbi 1897, 195-201, and Horváth 1998.

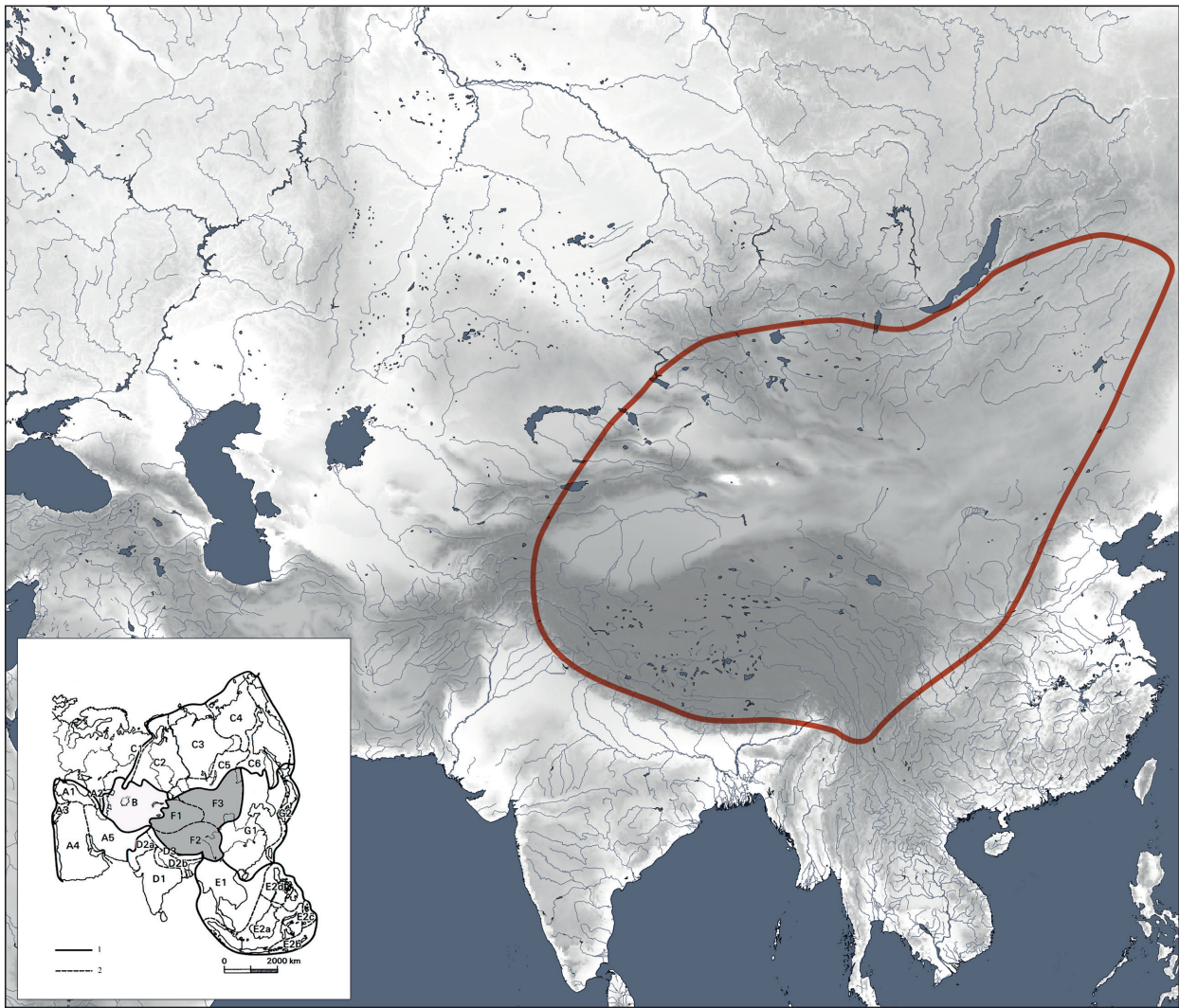


Fig. 4 Inner Asia. – (Map M. Ober, RGZM).

northern Iran and northern Afghanistan (fig. 6). Its geographic features have much in common with those of Inner Asia.

The labels Central and Inner Asia might seem arbitrary, especially in view of the fact that the two regions were not defined according to clear-cut geographic criteria and because the boundaries of the »adjacent areas« often shifted during the course of history. This is the main reason for the confusion in the use of the term in archaeological and historical studies, as previously mentioned.

A very small portion of the area [of Central Asia] is habitable, and thus the deficiencies of the land explain the scarcity of its population and the necessity of nomadism. Nomadism is bound to the desert. Civilisation, on the other hand, clings to river waters, humidity of the air, accessibility, moderate elevations of the soil, a vegetation cover and the distribution of warmth – exactly the opposite is encountered in the heartland of Asia. Oases are essential to travel and accessibility. No more than the fringes of Eran, Arabia and Asia Minor are cultivated and the cramming of the population can here be seen to an even greater extent. The tribes pressed

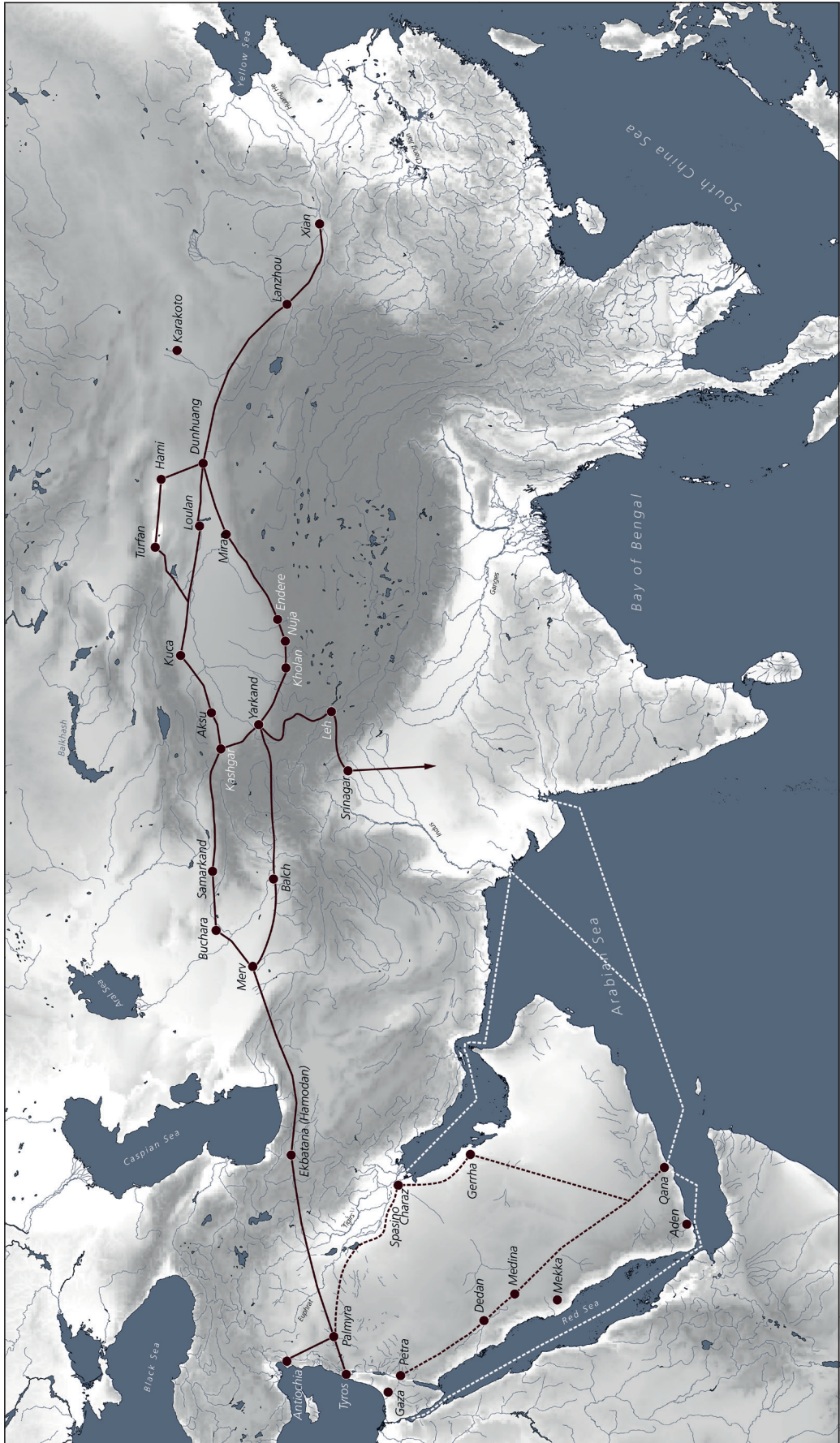


Fig. 5 The Silk Road. – (After Wehrauch 1996, fig. 1; map M. Ober, RGZM).



Fig. 6 Central Asia. – (Map M. Ober, RGZM).

forward from here, on occasion toward the north, and on occasion toward the south, and because they encountered dense populations and immense obstacles to the south, the waves of population migrations flowed toward the west and east¹¹.

No better or more concise description of the region can be given, and thus we shall here merely complement Balbi's words with some concrete data. The region is bounded by the Kopet-Dag Range, the Hindu Kush Mountains and the Pamir Range in the south, by the Tien Shan Mountains in the east, the northern margin of the Kazakh Uplands and the Ural Range in the north and by the Ural River and the Caspian Sea in the west. Central Asia covers an area of c. 3 million km², about one-third of which is a barren desert today. Extending between the Amu Darya and the Caspian Sea is the Kara-Kum (sand) Desert, some 300,000 km² in area, while the smaller Kyzylkum Desert lies between the Amu Darya and the Syr Darya Rivers. It must be borne in mind, however, that the region is strongly varied, not least owing to the creation of artificial irrigation canals¹². The climate is characterised by extreme temperature fluctuations. Summers are long and very hot, and annual precipitation is below 200 mm. Lacking a continuous vegetation cover, the region is dotted with oases. The Ustyurt Plateau is a dry steppe lying between the Aral Sea and Caspian Sea.

¹¹ Balbi 1897, 134.

¹² This is similar to the Great Hungarian Plain, where the landscape was also greatly transformed by the river regulations.



Fig. 7 The temperate steppe zone with the most important geographic names used in Antiquity. – (Map M. Ober, RGZM).

The heartland of Central Asia is the Turan Plain, traversed by the Syr Darya (Jaxartes) and the Amu Darya (Oxus), both of which empty into the Aral Sea. The latter rises in the Pamir Range; its length is 2,620 km and it drains a 465,000 km² large area. The Amu Darya once flowed into the Caspian Sea. The Syr Darya, the longer of the two rivers with a length of 2,660 km, rises in the Tien Shan and drains an area of 462,000 km². The two rivers often shift their course owing to their high bed-load.

Any description of Central Asia remains incomplete without mention of the two relict lakes, the Caspian Sea and the Aral Sea. The Caspian Sea, the world's largest inland body of water, covers an area of 371,000 km². Its greatest depth is 980 m and its surface lies 28 m below sea level. Its water level dropped dramatically during the 20th century. While the lake's northern part freezes completely in winter, its waters are warm in summer. The lake abounds in fish species. The Aral Sea extends over an area of 64,000 km² and its surface lies 53 m below sea level. Its northern part is similarly covered with ice in winter. The lake's water-level fluctuations are considerable.

The third large lake of Central Asia is Lake Balkhaš, whose area reaches approximately 21,000 km². The lake has a length of 607 km and its greatest depth is 41 m. Its broader area is rich in copper ore deposits. The fertile Zhetysu/Semireč'e («Seven Rivers») lies south-east of the lake¹³.

TEMPERATE STEPPE ZONE

The temperate steppe zone is the region bounding the desert and semi-desert areas of Central Asia in the north, extending from the northern Pontic through the Caspian Depression, a flat lowland, the northern part of the Kazakh Uplands to the western slopes of the Tien Shan and Altaj Mountains (figs 2. 7). Its climate is characterised by cold winters, hot summers, and a short spring and autumn. Precipitation is low, ranging between 200 and 400 mm, and its distribution is uneven, with most of it falling in early summer. Precipitation and its evaporation are roughly proportionate to each other, so the decaying vegetation stimulates intensive humus formation, meaning that the region's larger part is covered with fertile chernozem whose distribution and quality, however, are uneven. A tall-grass steppe developed in the north and a stipa steppe on the richer chernozem in the south.

The region's hydrology played an important role. The rivers emptying into the Black Sea are of the continental type, meaning that the spring snowmelt generates heavy floods. Most flow into shallow bays, so-called limans sealed by shoals. The principal waterways from west to east are the 950 km long Prut, the 1,370 km long Dniester, draining an area of 72,000 km², the 792 km long South Bug, the 2,285 km long Dnieper draining a 503,000 km² large area, the 1,970 km long Don, the main river of the Sea of Azov, draining an area of 440,000 km², the Kuban, also emptying into the Sea of Azov, and the Rioni which, like the Kuban, rises in the Caucasus. The largest and most abundant river of the steppe and of Europe, the Volga, discharges into the Caspian Sea. The river has a length of 3,690 km and drains an area of 1.4 million km². At the time of its great flood between April and late June, the river carries 70 per cent of its discharge. The Volga freezes in winter; at the river's mouth, the winter freeze makes the river crossable for some three months. The other important river of the Caspian Sea is the Ural, whose length is 2,530 km, but only drains an area of 220,000 km². Its discharge is not particularly great, even though there are major fluctuations in its water-level¹⁴.

¹³ The description of Central Asia is based on Balbi 1897, 195-201, and Futó 1969, 49. 72-74.

¹⁴ The description of the temperate steppe zone is based on Futó 1969, 49. 59-60. 72.

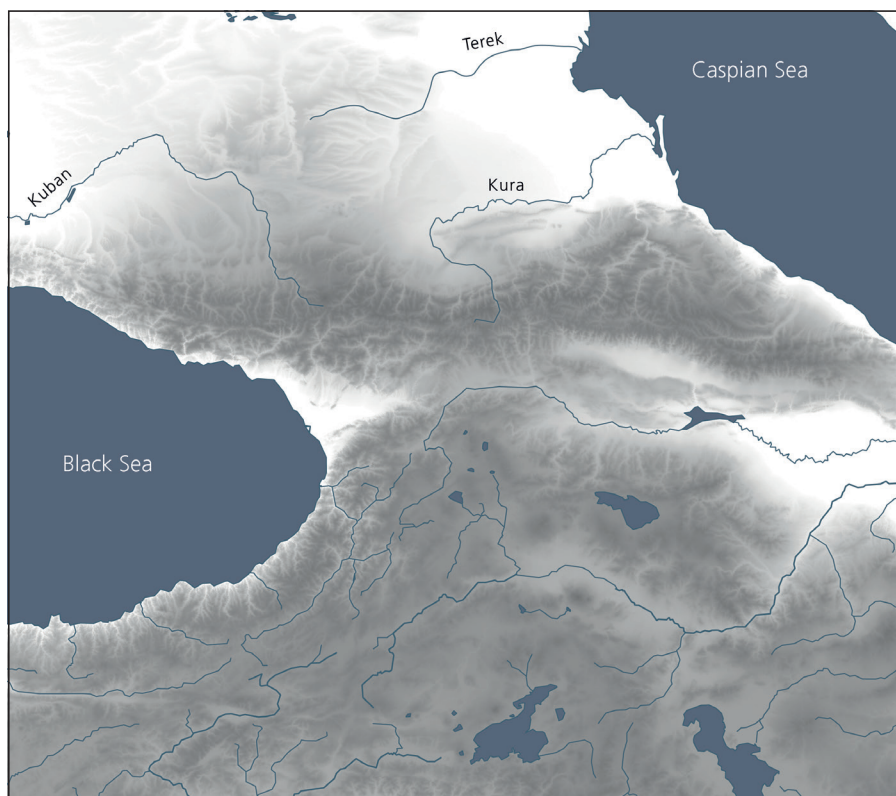


Fig. 8 The Caucasus. – (Map M. Ober, RGZM).

Proceeding west to east, two major regions (and several smaller sub-regions) can be distinguished on the basis of the changes in the vegetation cover. 1) The western half of the steppe lies along the Pontic coast and across Kazakhstan, extending from the Lower Danube to the Altaj and Saur Mountains. Smaller sub-regions are formed by the East European forest steppe, the Western Siberian forest steppe, the Pontic steppe and the Kazakhstan steppe. 2) The eastern half of the steppe stretches into Inner Asia. Three sub-regions can be distinguished: the Khangai-Daurian forest steppe, the Manchurian forest steppe and the Mongolian steppe.

The Silk Road has already been briefly mentioned in the above. The course shown in **figure 5** was its main artery, which had several branches toward the Pontic, the most important in this context being the route skirting the Caspian Sea by the lower reaches of the Volga and reaching the Black Sea at the Don Delta. It could be concluded from this fact that this was the road taken by the Golden Horde¹⁵.

THE CAUCASUS

The Fore-Caucasus or Cis-Caucasus played an important role in the history of the Sarmatians (**fig. 8**). Extending along the northern flank of the Greater Caucasus Mountains, the region is divided in two by the »protruding« Stavropol Upland, lying at an altitude of 600-800m. In the west, the Kuban Plain stretches to the eastern shore of the Sea of Azov. With its fertile chernozem and relatively abundant precipitation,

¹⁵ Ascherson 1995, 17-18.



Fig. 9 The Crimea. – (Map M. Ober, RGZM).

the region is well suited to farming. The Caspian Depression, the plain of the Kuma and Terek rivers with a saline, alkaline soil and low precipitation, lies east of the Stavropol Uplands¹⁶.

Two main passes lead from north to south through the high mountains of the Caucasus, and have been used for many millennia. One leads along the foot of Mount Kazbek, where the so-called Georgian Military Road runs. The Darial (or Kazbek) Pass pierces the range at an altitude of 2,382 m. The other route, more popular in the Antiquity, leads through the Derbent Pass, the narrow ledge of rock between the Caspian Sea and the high mountains¹⁷.

THE CRIMEAN PENINSULA

The northern part of the peninsula, ringed by the Pontic and the Sea of Azov (**fig. 9**), is a level plain whose climate resembles that of the steppe. The plateau of the Kerč Peninsula, rich in iron ore deposits, extends in the east. In the south, the peninsula is punctured by the 50 km wide Crimean Mountains, stretching for 150 km along the coast. The narrow coastal plain has a Mediterranean climate and lush vegetation. Jutting into the Black Sea, the Crimean Peninsula was the ideal location for controlling the entire region, this being the reason why the ancient Greeks established the major centre of their colonies here. In the north-west, the peninsula is linked to the mainland by the narrow Perekop Isthmus. The mainland could be reached by ship through the Sivaš, the salty lagoons to the east¹⁸.

¹⁶ Futó 1969, 89.

¹⁷ Balbi 1897, 118-122.

¹⁸ Futó 1969, 86-87. – Ascherson 1995, 17-22.



Fig. 10 The Carpathian Basin. – (Map M. Ober, RGZM).

THE CARPATHIAN BASIN

Covering an area of 330,000 km², the Carpathian Basin is Europe's largest inland basin group, enclosed by the Carpathians, the Eastern Alps and the Dinarian Range (**fig. 10**). Modern Hungary (93,000 km²) and Slovakia both lie in the Carpathian Basin, as do parts of the Czech Republic, Austria, Slovenia, Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, Romania and the Ukraine. Smaller basins divided by lower ranges are the Graz Basin, the Little Hungarian Plain, the Great Hungarian Plain and the Transylvanian Basin. The two principal axes of the basin's river system are the Danube and the Tisza.

Rising in the Black Forest and discharging into the Black Sea, the Danube is Europe's second longest river (2,850 km). It drains an area of 817,000 km². The river's main bed in the Carpathian Basin evolved during the Pleistocene Epoch.

The headwaters of the Tisza are two springs, the Black Tisza and the White Tisza, in the Maramureş Mountains. The river drains an area of 157,186 km². The current main bed was formed in the Early Holocene Epoch. It flows into the Danube in Serbia. Its principal tributary is the Maros, coursing for 754 km and draining an area of 30,332 km². The Maros carries an immense bed-load and has a steep fall. Its largest tributary, the Száraz Stream branches from the river north of Arad. The level plainland basins were covered by extensive floodplains alternating with higher, flood-free terrain covered with closed forests and gallery woods until the river regulations of the 19th century. Droughts are frequent in the Great Hungarian Plain, while harsh winters characterise the Transylvanian Basin.

The geographic terms – often appearing erroneously in the archaeological literature – used in this study are the following:

Transdanubia (*Dunántúl*): western Hungary between the Danube and the country's borders.

Little Hungarian Plain (*Kisalföld*): a region covering an area of 9,000 km² in the north-eastern part of the Carpathian Basin. A plainland extending between the north-western Carpathians, the Transdanubian Range and the western Hungarian borderland, connected to the Great Hungarian Plain through the Visegrád Pass in the east. Its average elevation above sea level is 115-140 m. The Danube divides the region into two parts.

Great Hungarian Plain (*Alföld*): a loess and sand covered plain extending over an area of roughly 100,000 km², often described as the western projection of the Eurasian Steppe. Its elevation above sea level ranges between 78 and 186 m. Its temperature is extreme, the differences between monthly means are often as much as 24 °C, with summer temperatures often over 40 °C and winter temperature below -30 °C. Precipitation is usually below 600 mm, with some areas receiving less than 500 mm. The rivers slow down after reaching the plain, and floods are often multi-peaked, resulting in extensive inundations. The region is rich in subterranean water. The plain was once covered by forest steppe.

Danube-Tisza interfluvium (*Duna-Tisza köze*): the region between the Danube and the Tisza in Hungary and Serbia (Vojvodina), the western part of the Great Hungarian Plain.

Territory east of the Tisza River (*Tiszántúl*): the eastern part of the Great Hungarian Plain extending from the left bank of Tisza River to the Transylvanian Range in the east and Maros River in the south.