Nomads & Cross Civilization Contacts and Exchanges

Through much of recorded history, nomadic peoples have been key agents of contact between sedentary, farming peoples and town dwellers in centers of civilization across the globe. Nomadic peoples pioneered all of the great overland routes that linked the civilized cores of Eurasia in ancient and medieval times. The most famous were the silk routes that ran across the mountains and steppes of central Asia from western China to the civilized centers of Mesopotamia in the last millennium BCE and to Rome, the Islamic heartland, and Western Europe in the first millennium and a half CE.

Chinese rulers at one end of these trading networks, and Roman emperors and later Islamic sultans at the other end, often had to send armies to battle hostile nomads who threatened to cut off the flow of trade. Perhaps more often, pastoral peoples played critical roles in establishing and expanding trade routes and trade links. In exchange for periodic payments, they provided protection from bandits and raiding parties for caravans passing through their grazing lands. For additional payments, nomadic peoples provided animals to transport both goods and supplies needed by those in the caravan parties. At times, the pastoralists even took charge of transportation and trading, but usually specialized merchants controlled these operations. These merchants were based either in the urban centers of the civilized cores or in trading towns that had grown up along the Silk Road in central Asia. the oases of Arabia, and the savanna zones that bordered the vast Sahara desert.

Until the railroads and steamships of the industrial revolution replaced them, the overland trade routes of Eurasia and the Americas were the most important channels for contact between civilizations. Religions such as Buddhism and Islam spread peacefully along the trading routes of central Asia, Persia, and Africa. Also, artistic styles such as those developed in the Hellenistic world during and after the time of Alexander the Great, were spread by trade contacts in northern Africa, India, and western China.

Inventions that were vital to the continued growth and expansion of the civilized cores were carried by traders or nomads from one center to another. For example, central Asian steppe nomads who had been converted to Islam clashed with the armies of the Chinese empire in the 8th century. The victorious Muslims found skilled artisans among their prisoners who knew the secrets of making paper, which had been invented centuries earlier by the Chinese. The combination of nomadic mobility and established trading links resulted in the diffusion of paper-making techniques to Mesopotamia and Egypt in the 8th and 9th centuries and across northern Africa to Europe to Europe in the centuries that followed.

Nomadic warriors also contributed to the spread of new military technology and modes of warfare. Sedentary peoples often adopted the nomad's reliance on heavy cavalry and hit-and-run tactics. Saddles, bits, bow and arrow designs developed by nomadic herders were avidly adopted by farming societies. In addition, defenses against nomadic assaults inspired some of the greatest engineering feats of the pre-industrial world. Examples include the Great Wall of China and gunpowder, both of which were in response to the threat of nomadic incursions, which continued in China into the 19th century.

In addition, nomadic peoples have served as agents for the transfer of food crops between distant civilized cores, even if they didn't usually cultivate the plants themselves. In a less constructive vein, nomadic warriors have played a key role in transmitting diseases. The best-known example of this is when Mongol cavalrymen carried the bacteria that caused the Black Death from central Asia to the Middle East and to Europe.

Questions

1. What features of nomadic society and culture made them ideal agents for transmitting technology, crops, merchandise, and disease between different cultural zones?
2. Why have the avenues of exchange they provided been open only for a limited time, and then blocked for years at a time?
3. What other groups played roles as intermediaries between civilizations in early world history?
4. What other agents of transmission have taken the place of nomadic peoples in recent centuries?