Book Review

S. Frederick Starr. *Lost Enlightenment: Central Asia's Golden Age from the Arab Conquest to Tamerlane*. Princeton University Press, 2013. 609 pp. + index.

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This impressive volume covering the historical and intellectual developments in Central Asia up to the 15th century begins with a modest approach. In the preface the author says, "This book was written not because I knew the answers to the questions it poses, or even because I had any particular knowledge of the many subjects and fields it touches upon, but because I myself wanted to read such a book." Although the title suggests that the book starts with the Arab conquest (7-8th centuries), we do not encounter the Arabs until chapter 4. Instead, the preceding chapters (2 and 3) inform us about the pre-conquest situation.

In the Introduction (ch. 1) the author argues that our present day perceptions of Central Asia (with the independent republics) and its cultural neighbors Iran and Turkey as nation states serve to narrow down our outlook when examining the region historically. Starr shows that "diverse Iranian and Turkic peoples met and mingled above all in the territory of Greater Central Asia where, from the earliest days, they acquired a pluralistic but very real and distinctive identity of their own" (p. 17). One of the main points of the book is that we should understand Central Asia on its own terms, rather than concentrating solely on the Arab and Iranian cultures, while ignoring other language groups. The Arab and Iranian cultures have been seen as the definition of culture and civilization largely because historical and literary sources were recorded in those languages. Starr also notes that medieval Central Asians did not merely transmit the achievements of the ancient Greeks, but also engaged in creation of knowledge, as well as inventions such as paper, and the creation of visual reproductions of Buddha. (pp. 16, 47, 82) The author also states that Central Asia should not be regarded as a "crossroads of civilizations," as this term refers to an abstract point with no identity of its own, but rather one should consider it as a "crossroads civilization" (p. 69). Moreover, he also states that the strength of Central Asian identity displayed in this region is reflected by their skill in managing their conquerors (p. 48). The tendency of imperial governors to "go native" (pp. 49, 53) and the resurgence of local autonomy were to be observed on countless occasions. The author maintains that these characteristics were first observed during and after the arrival of Greeks. He continues that the fate of the later Arab and Mongol conquerors was not different (p. 49).

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Starr states that another characteristic of Central Asia was its religious diversity (p. 75). "Central Asians received various aspects of the religions that appeared at their doorstep between 300 B.C. and A.D. 670. Each time they displayed flexibility and curiosity in accommodating these new outlooks. With the exception of the 'official' Zoroastrianism of Sassanian Persia, no religion prior to Islam sought to inhibit the practice of others" (p. 96). Archeological remains showing the existence of priests from different cults (p. 77) provide support for these developments. The author synthesizes these points with the following words: "But if the temples show powerful Greek influence on their design, their overall plan was more Persian than Greek, while the gods to which they were dedicated, with the exception of Zeus, were Indian or Eastern. This was the case everywhere in Central Asia where Greek forms combined with Greco-Indian-Central Asian content in a syncretism among seeming opposites" (p. 78, also figure 3.5).

All of these features and many more aspects of multiplicity contributed to a Central Asia that "was firmly established as an inquiring society, highly literate and also numerate, wordly, and self-confident" (p. 95). These attributes are illustrated by archeological evidence in the chapters dealing with early urbanization (ch. 2) and diversity of ideas and beliefs (ch. 3). As an archeologist, the author provides a very lucid account of the archeological work in the region, acquainting the reader with recent publications on the subject. The first three chapters of this work are a valuable resource for readers who are not familiar with Central Asia. Here are the Bronze Age sites, cities like Balkh, Merv, Tirmidh, and other once minor sites which developed into important cities like Herat and Nishapur. Likewise religious movements like Zoroastrianism, Manichaeism, Buddhism, and Christianity are introduced and discussed in a fluency that makes the reader admire the writer of those lines. In chapters 5-9, the reader is introduced to the nuanced ideas of great thinkers like Farabi, al-Kindi, al-Khwarazmi, Ibn Sina and al-Biruni. As the narrative in these chapters becomes from time to time provocative, avid readers will want to look further into the issues mentioned. With this Central Asia centered approach, the author proposes to ask three questions and ventures to answer them in 15 chapters. In his words these questions are: "1. What did Central Asian scientists, philosophers, and other thinkers achieve during these centuries? 2. Why did this [achievement] happen? 3. What became of this fecund and tumultuous movement of ideas" (p. 21)? These questions and various responses to them are summed up in the concluding chapter 15.

However the author's Central Asia centered approach does not give much weight to the nomads who came to the Central Asian settled lands from the steppe regions. They are portrayed as warriors and marauders who devastated and destroyed cities, libraries, irrigation networks and farmland in their quest for power and riches (pp. 56-57 etc.). Though he sometimes comes to a *modus vivendi* between nomads and sedentary peoples in terms of the exchange of goods (p. 59), the author cannot emphasize enough the achievements of the period before the Arab conquests. While Arabs are not regarded in the same category as the steppe nomads, he states that long before the Arabs, Central Asia had a successful export-driven economy, and long before the Arabs arrived, the Central Asians as well as Persians had begun the work of systematizing knowledge (p. 93). By the 12-13th centuries Central Asian cities had acquired a character of their own

which was defined before the Arab conquests. The author compares Central Asian cities with the so-called Islamic cities and states, Their "distinctiveness arose above all from the irrigation systems that made life possible and the rigorously hierarchical and strictly regulated social systems that enabled those systems to function." (p. 39)

According to the author, the enlightenment that came into being with Central Asia's own resources and creativity gradually faded away with the arrival of nomads. Concerns and doubts first arise with the arrival of the Karakhanids, but their quick assimilation into settled life and non-interference in commerce result in the author's surprise: "One must stand astonished that these nomadic khans, who had earlier focused all their energies on maintaining the kind of army that would enable them to survive on the embattled steppe, and who, even after adopting a settled way of life, were content to leave the tedious work of commerce to others, could have emerged as astute managers of their combined economies" (p. 309). Together with these observations the author discusses the achievements of two erudite personalities of the 12th century, Mahmud of Kashgar and Yusuf of Balasaghun, at great length (pp. 310-331). Within such a context, he regards the newly established caravanserais along trade routes and the looming minarets that lined the trade routes as products of Karakhanid creativity in architecture. But he also says that "architecture and crafts can flourish in an intellectual void" (p. 394). Yet at the same time the author sees signs of fading creativity and enlightenment in the 11th century with the arrival of Mahmud of Gaznah whom the author regards as a marauder (ch. 11). After chapter 11, the narrative becomes increasingly interpretative. We encounter the scientists, philosophers, statesmen, historians and poets like Al-Biruni, Ghazali, Nizam al-Mulk, Utbi, and even Omar Khayyam and Ferdowsi, that is Islamic intellectuals of the period who are portrayed under the shadow of the political power and oppressive uniformity of Sunni Islam. Fortunately personalities like Ferdowsi are also discussed in other chapters so that we have a more positive picture of those lives. In the author's view, "since both the sultans and caliphs were Sunnis" (p. 401), the education in the Nizamiya madrasas established by Nizam al-Mulk, the powerful vizier of the Seljukids, was instrumental in this move against "the Shiites, Ismailis, Mutazilites and other groups that challenged the orthodox Sunni hegemony" (p. 405). He further states, "in other words, they represented a shift from analysis to indoctrination, from defense to offense on the intellectual front" (p. 407). One must say that the author's voice reflecting value judgments and expressed through the lens of political power overshadows the historical developments in these last chapters.

On the whole this work is an ambitious undertaking. Very few people venture to treat pre-Islamic and Islamic Central Asia in one opus. Moreover, these time periods are generally examined in separate treatises. This work that was undertaken with enthusiasm provides an introduction to Central Asia, as well as to its historical and intellectual developments. However as reflected by the title of the book, according to the author this enlightenment fades away by the 11th century, and the ensuing period until the 15/16th centuries are seen as a story of decline, whereas the author's arguments regarding diversity, creativity and enlightenment up to 11th centuries are much more convincing and skillfully executed. In the last chapter of the book, the author discusses "diverse

theories and hypotheses on the waning of the Age of Enlightenment" (p. 537). However, any interested reader who wants to explore these issues further can consult the second volume, Marshall G.S. Hodgson's *Venture of Islam,* offering a different perspective.

The book is equipped with a "dramatis personae" (pp. xxi-xxix) to which the reader can always refer; the extensive index will also be a useful resource for interested readers. Unfortunately the references with mostly up-to-date bibliography are found within the endnotes (pp. 541-609) rather than in a collected bibliography. As the book is a good introduction for the educated reader, a list of references and figures (including the maps) would have been a great asset. These are of course minor technicalities. This favorable account of Central Asia's intellectual life will enhance any reader's perception of Central Asia and challenge further investigation.