

The End of the “Silk Road”: Plague, Natural Disasters and Transformation of Central Asia, c.1330-1400

Philip Slavin

Pathfoot Bld. GB

Abstract

Despite the Central Asian origins of the Black Death, as established in a 2022 Nature article, the question of the impact of plague (and other exogenous crises) on local demography, economies, and societies in the fourteenth century, remains confined, almost exclusively, to Europe, largely because of a Eurocentric perspective of this field. The proposed paper will fill up that gap by considering the role and impact of biological and ecological crises on socio-economic, urban and demographic decline and transformation of Chinggisid-ruled Central Asia between c.1330 and 1400.

The proposed paper will put forth a methodological framework to identify biological and ecological crises in archaeological and bio-archaeological record in Central Asia – roughly, between the Volga and West Xinjiang. It will be based on a database-in-process, collating archaeological data from >350 archaeological sites and graveyards excavated during the Imperial Russian-, Soviet- and post-Soviet eras. In particular, the paper will focus on the following indications of demographic and mortality crises: (1) site abandonment; (2) palaeo-seismic activity; (3) multiple/mass burials; (4) burials with disproportionately high share of female and sub-adult skeletons, reflecting plague mortality patterns; (5) mixed cremation-burial graves (whereby corpses would be placed upon a small pyre inside a grave), associated by archaeologists with plague contexts.

The paper will, thus, reconsider the factors behind the demographic decline, de-urbanisation and nomadisation of Central Asia in the fourteenth century, stressing the bio-ecological factors, rather than the anthropogenic ones (particularly, Tamerlane’s campaigns, traditionally blamed by historians), showing that the crisis commenced several decades before Tamerlane’s