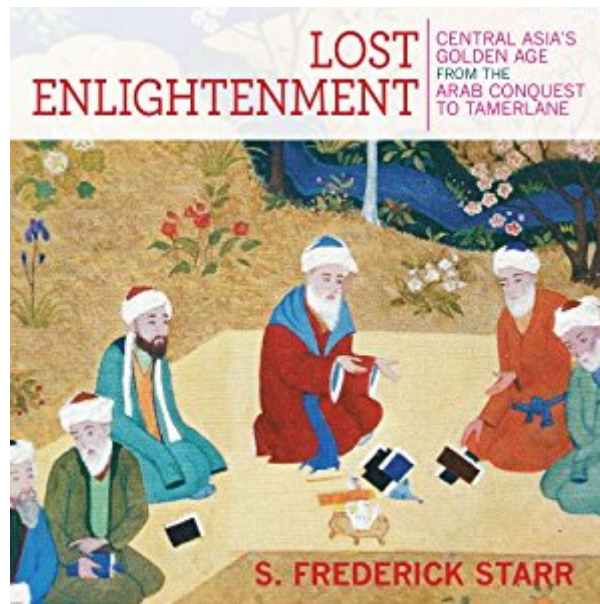


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# Lost Enlightenment: Central Asia's Golden Age From The Arab Conquest To Tamerlane



## Synopsis

In this rich and sweeping history, S. Frederick Starr tells the fascinating but largely unknown story of Central Asia's medieval enlightenment through the eventful lives and astonishing accomplishments of its greatest minds - remarkable figures who built a bridge to the modern world. Because nearly all of these figures wrote in Arabic, they were long assumed to have been Arabs. In fact, they were from Central Asia - drawn from the Persianate and Turkic peoples of a region that today extends from Kazakhstan southward through Afghanistan, and from the easternmost province of Iran through Xinjiang, China. *Lost Enlightenment* recounts how, between the years 800 and 1200, Central Asia led the world in trade and economic development, the size and sophistication of its cities, the refinement of its arts, and, above all, in the advancement of knowledge in many fields. Central Asians achieved signal breakthroughs in astronomy, mathematics, geology, medicine, chemistry, music, social science, philosophy, and theology, among other subjects. They gave algebra its name, calculated the earth's diameter with unprecedented precision, wrote the books that later defined European medicine, and penned some of the world's greatest poetry. One scholar, working in Afghanistan, even predicted the existence of North and South America - five centuries before Columbus. Rarely in history has a more impressive group of polymaths appeared at one place and time. No wonder that their writings influenced European culture from the time of St. Thomas Aquinas down to the scientific revolution, and had a similarly deep impact in India and much of Asia. *Lost Enlightenment* chronicles this forgotten age of achievement, seeks to explain its rise, and explores the competing theories about the cause of its eventual demise. Informed by the latest scholarship yet presented in a lively and accessible style, this is a book that will surprise general listeners and specialists alike.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

If you are interested in the many shapes history takes: that of societies, individuals, religion, science, philosophy, etc - this is a must read. It is a book that covers a wealth of material from a period and region that many (most?) modern readers in the West are unfamiliar with. It demonstrates in a very compelling way the important role Central Asian, Iranian, and Arabic thinkers of the Middle Ages played in both preserving & transmitting the intellectual heritage of the Hellenic civilization, and in developing & enriching these ideas, so that they could become the foundation for the European Renaissance. That Mr Starr does all this in a very engaging way makes this book an even more impressive achievement. If I am to find fault with Mr Starr's work it is that while he eloquently praises al-Biruni for his objective and dispassionate treatment of the Indian culture, Mr Starr himself on a few occasions comes across as a bit of Central Asian cheerleader. However, taking into account how that region is viewed by the public today and the very limited awareness of its rich history, this minor fault is forgivable and it does not get in the way of the narrative. It is probably worth mentioning that this work is sure to annoy some proponents of Iran and the various Arabic states because, on the one hand, it makes a distinction between the various Persian/persianate peoples and the Iranian state, and on the other hand between those who wrote in Arabic and Arabs. Lest that keeps you from reading this book, I would say that Mr Starr makes a distinction between these that is akin to the distinction between Germanic peoples and Germany, or thinkers who wrote in Latin and Romans. Ultimately, while no historical writing is ever entirely objective, as an impartial reader I do not feel he diminishes either.

This is a very interesting book, but not one to buy on Kindle. The Kindle copy is of very poor quality compared to a hard copy, for the book contains many illustrations and some maps, but in the Kindle copy many of the illustrations are black and it says 'To view this see the hard copy' which sounds like a rip off, and something that is somewhat dishonest. How can one see the hard copy unless you buy or borrow a copy? What is the point of buying a book where parts are missing? Furthermore, the book refers to plate so and so, but how do you find the plate from the text, and going to the menu and trying to find the location of the plates, there is nothing. So while I would recommend this book as an excellent overview with some detail of the caldron of Central Asia at the time when the Buddhists, Zoroastrians, Christians, Jews and Muslims met, and where the age of Enlightenment

preceeded the european equivalent by a thousand years, the is NOT A BOOK TO BUY ON KINDLE.

Scheherazade narrated interesting tales for thousand and one nights. More modest, the author has spread his narrative skills over about half the number of pages, without loss in quality. It is rare that one would begin a review on a non-fiction book by praising the style and the author's expository skills. This work deserves such singular mention. Reading it cover to cover was a delight, attention never flagging, curiosity being subtly redirected to the next intellectual or political issue in order to avoid overstay. One of the author's strength is his ability to summarize the positions of the different scholars clearly, and in a few pages. His treatment of Biruni's India is a model for anyone dealing with intellectual history. The topic helps, of course. Central Asia's role in reworking and syncretizing ancient regional cultures is presented here in its magnificent detail: Central Asia not as a place of passage (akin to the sterile place de la Concorde in Paris), but a square (Brussels' Grande Place?) where cultures met, conversed, blended, and where novel synergies emerged. The metaphor would be of Central Asia as a sort of "heart" - pulling in and pushing out intellectual and spiritual forces over decades and centuries. The region was able take on its role thanks to a concurrence of reasons: ecology (the oasis as center of agricultural production), geography (the crossing of the trade routes), economic (a proper balance between trade and local production and technical skills), technological (the underground irrigation system demanding a high degree of imagination), and social and cultural (a discerning mentality from trade and assimilation of production). Time and again the region was devastated, and time and again it pulled itself up - a homeostatic system with a strong capacity for self-repair. Syncretism allowed a renewed analysis of scientific and philosophical questions that had remained dormant since the Greek Enlightenment. The border between philosophy and theology was explored, defining their respective contents as the study progressed. Great minds emerged, and argued. Where these two disciplines separate, or was there a ranking, and if so, which was to lead, which one was to adapt? The matter was never resolved. Meanwhile it all came to naught, and Central Asia somehow disappeared from the map, only to be discovered by intellectual archeologists in the last few decades. Why so? The author puts much of the blame on emergent Islamic fundamentalism, which found its strident voice in Ghazali. He is certainly right in this. A culture of conformity dampens curiosity by creating negative stereotypes. The threat of death (for committing apostasy by questioning the Koran) was potent inhibitor (we've seen this kind of threaat with Giordano Bruno and Galileo). On page 429 the author also conjectures a reduced supply of "rising geniuses." May be the author is right. My hunch is somewhat different

(albeit not incompatible). The wisdom of a scientist lies in asking questions for which he can find an answer. At the end of the period, all questions that could have been answered with the technologies of the day had been resolved. The niche had been explored. Latecomers were condemned to be epigones. Reading Biruni's achievement in astronomy one realizes that given extant observational capacities, he had come to the end of the line. There simply were no "adjacent possibles" at hand, or the combination of conceptual framework and tools needed for further advance. Kashi's later work in Samarkand was solid, but broke new ground. Nor could it have done so. One had to await the invention of the telescope to move beyond what the naked eye could see, and settle open questions or discover new ones. The question is, of course, why Central Asia did not invent the telescope - it had all the components. My guess: practice precedes science. In Europe it probably had practical use at sea (in Holland) before it was adapted for astronomy. Another area where I may part (gently) with the author's conclusions is in the role of the Islamic religion. Rome was a republic well before it became an empire, and the state structure in China goes back to Lord Shang, well before the Yellow Emperor. They expanded from a core, never deserting it, like Islam did. The tragedy of Islam may have been to have succeeded too fast, never having had the time to create proper state structures. The Arab term for bureaucracy is diwan - originally simply the roster of the army. This is little to go on, when building a state. So the mighty ship of the Arab empire may have slipped into the water and drifted out to sea without proper instruments to steer it. Islam was jury-rigged device: it prevented the ship from foundering, but no more. Take away religion tomorrow, and still the ship of state would be rudderless. To conclude: A "classic" is a text that raises more follow-up questions than it settles issues. This book has the potential of becoming a highly readable classic, rather than a door stopper or coffee-table book one skims, but then leaves unread. One small regret: reading *The Waning of the Middle Ages* I was struck by this sentence: "A scientific historian, relying first and foremost on official documents, which rarely refer to the passions, except violence and cupidity, occasionally runs the risk of neglecting the differences in tone between the life then and now." The Middle Ages were passionate, vibrant, and colorful to a degree we can hardly imagine. I suspect that this was the case in Central Asia as well. The Sufi movement is witness. The book, however, reads like marble from Greek statues, from which age has removed the garish colors. A final comment: This book belongs to what I have dubbed tongue-in-cheek the "new historiography" school, where readability trumps structure, and plates trump maps. I'm not sure that it is utter progress. A few minor problems now. One of the frustrations while plowing through the text was the abysmal dearth of maps. For each period and center of power, one would have liked the corresponding map. There is only one map, incomplete, at the beginning - just about useless. It also

contains errors (Shakhrisabz in the text is without k). I understand that including maps may be expensive, but I suspect that publishing houses have expanded on the age-old rule: "each mathematical formula in the text halves the readership" to include maps. The author has adapted to this ukase: he foregoes geography: Khwarazm is introduced at pg. 44 without any comment, as if its location and import was self-evident. Structure, it would seem nowadays, is counterproductive. At times the text sounds like GPS instructions: "prepare to turn to Ibn Sina;" the author chimes cheerfully, and then: "turn now." Summary inserts, maps, and timelines in each chapter would have been more useful than the global "Chronology" of dates of births and deaths at the beginning (Biruni never gets to be born there, BTW), a list that also includes assorted events outside the region (what's the purpose of mentioning the Norman invasion of England?). One is in awe of the wealth of footnotes and references, which testify to language skills beyond anyone's dream. Given the subject, however, a decent bibliography is a must (may be subdivided by language, or type of source). On pg. 546, footnote 52 there is the startling assertion: "A history of the trade routes from Central Asia to India has yet to be written". I was unable to verify whether the author had missed LIU Xinru (The Silk Road in World History (The New Oxford World History)Â ), who has done a splendid job there. A minor quibble - the Pantheon is not a "double dome," and the link back from Central Asia to Brunelleschi's dome in Florence may be quite tenuous...

This is a must read for any one who wants to understand history of Central Asia. An absolutely scholarly work with truly deep insights on what caused the flowering of sciences and knowledge for about a millennium and then how it was lost for in Central Asia. The important view the author takes is the fact that the region was at the cross roads of other major civilizations and you had to pass through what he calls as cross road civilization. This enabled great exchange of ideas along with the ever existing trade patterns. It was an era where tolerance and understanding along with acceptance of all faiths was common. His analysis of orthodox, dogmatic and rigid religious interpretation and intolerance along with tirades against reasoning as against scriptural truths that began in 11th century is excellent, specifically with the cases of Ghazali and Hanbal. I always wondered what made different parts of the Islamic world follow different schools of Jurisprudence? The authors thesis about why Central Asia went the Hanafi way and not Hanbali way probably explains a lot for other parts of the world too. In sum and excellent work.

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