Atlantis, Kush, & Turan:

Prehistoric Matrices of Ancient Civilizations in the Posthumous Work of Spengler, Part 1

Robert Steuckers

Nicholas Roerich, “The Destruction of Atlantis,” 1928–29

1,323 words

Part 1 of 2

Translated by Greg Johnson

Editor’s Note:

In this brief review essay, Robert Steuckers provides an introduction to Spengler’s writings on prehistory and early world history, which contain surprising theses, stunning metaphors, and quite interesting departures from The Decline of the West. These writings are almost unknown because they were never finished and were only published in incomplete form decades after Spengler’s death.

Oswald Spengler’s morphologies of cultures and civilizations in his most famous work, The Decline of the West, are widely known. However, Spengler’s positions changed after the publication of Decline. So claims the Italian Germanist Domenico Conte in his recent work on Spengler, Catene di civiltà: Studi su Spengler (Napoli: Ed. Scientifiche Italiane, 1994), which is a thorough study of the posthumous texts published by Anton Mirko Koktanek, especially Frühzeit der Weltgeschichte [The Early Period of World History], which gathers the fragments of a projected but never completed work The Epic of Man.

In his reflections immediately following the publication of The Decline of the West, Spengler distinguished four stages of human history which he designates simply as A, B, C, and D. Stage “A” lasted a hundred thousand years, from the first phases of hominization up to the lower Paleolithic. It is during this stage that the importance of the “hand” for man appears. It is, for Spengler, the age of Granite.

Stage “B” lasted ten thousand years and lay in the lower Paleolithic, between 20,000 and 7,000–6,000 BCE. During this age the concept of interior life was born: “then appeared the true soul, as unknown to men of stage ‘A’ as it is to a newborn baby.” In this stage in our history man was first “able to produce traces/memories” and to understand the phenomenon of death. For Spengler, it is the age of the Crystal. Stages “A” and “B” are inorganic.

Stage “C” lasted 3,500 years: it starts with the Neolithic era, running from the sixth millennium BCE to the third. It is the stage when thought started to be articulated in language and the most complex technological achievements became possible. In this stage are born “cultures” whose structures are “amoebic.”

Stage “D” is that of “world history” in the conventional sense of the term. It is the stage of “great civilizations,” each of which lasts approximately 1,000 years. These civilizations have structures of the “vegetable” type. Stages “C” and “D” are organic.

Spengler preferred this psychological-morphological classification to the classifications imposed by the directors of museums who subdivided the prehistoric and historical eras according to materials used for the manufacture of tools (stone, bronze, iron). In keeping with this psychological-morphological classification, Spengler also rejected the idea of the “slow, phlegmatic transformation” or continuous development, rooted in the progressivist ideas of the 18th century.

Evolution, for Spengler, is a matter of catastrophic blows, sudden irruptions, unexpected changes. “The history of the world proceeds from catastrophe to catastrophe, without any concern with whether we are able to understand them. Today, following H. de Vries, we call them ‘mutations.’ It is an internal transformation, which affects without warning all the members of a species, without ‘cause,’ naturally, like everything else in reality. Such is the mysterious rhythm of the world” (Man and Technics). There is thus no slow evolution but abrupt “epochal” transformations. Natura facit saltus [Nature makes leaps—Ed.].

Three Culture-Amoebas

In stage “C,” where the matrices of human civilization actually emerge, Spengler distinguishes three “culture-amoebas”: Atlantis, Kush, and Turan. This terminology appears only in his posthumous writings and letters. The civilizational matrices are “amoebas” and not “plants” because amoebas are mobile, not anchored to a particular place. The amoeba is an organism that continuously pulsates along an ever-shifting periphery. Then the amoeba subdivides itself as amoebas do, producing new individualities that move away from the amoeba-mother. This analogy implies that one cannot delimit with precision the territory of a civilization of stage “C,” because its amoebic emanations can be widely dispersed in space, extremely far away from the amoeba-mother.

“Atlantis” is the “West” and extends from Ireland to Egypt. “Kush” is the “South-east,” an area ranging between India and the Red Sea. “Turan” is the “North,” extending from Central Europe to China. Spengler, explains Conte, chose this terminology recalling “old mythological names” in order not to confuse them with later historical regions of the “vegetable” type, which are geographically rooted and circumscribed, whereas they are dispersed and not precisely localized.

Spengler does not believe in the Platonic myth of Atlantis, the sunken continent, but notes that an ensemble of civilizational remnants are locatable in the West, from Ireland to Egypt. “Kush” is a name that one finds in the Old Testament to indicate the territory of the ancient Nubians, the area inhabited by the Kushites. But Spengler places the culture-amoeba “Kush” more to the East, in an area between Turkestan, Persia, and India, undoubtedly inspired by the anthropologist Frobenius. As for “Turan,” it is “North,” the Turanic high-plateau, which he thought was the cradle of the Indo-European and Ural-Altaic languages. It is from there that the migrations of “Nordic” peoples departed (Spengler is not without racial connotations) to descend on Europe, India, and China.

Atlantis: Hot and Mobile; Kush: Tropical and Content

Atlantis, Kush, and Turan are cultures bearing morphological principles emerging mainly in the spheres of religion and the arts. The religiosity of Atlantis “hot and mobile,” is centered on the worship of the dead and the preeminence of the ultra-telluric sphere. The forms of burials, notes Conte, testify to the intense relationship with the world of the dead: The tombs always have a high profile, or are monumental; the dead are embalmed and mummified; food is left or brought for them. This obsessional relationship with the chain of ancestors leads Spengler to theorize the presence of a “genealogical” principle. The artistic expressions of Atlantis, adds Conte, are centered on stone constructions, as gigantic as possible, made for eternity, signs of a feeling of life which is not turned towards a heroic surpassing of limits, but towards a kind of “inert complacency.”

Kush developed a “tropical” and “content” religion. The problem of ultra-telluric life is regarded with far less anxiety than in Atlantis, because in the culture-amoeba of Kush a mathematics of the cosmos dominates (of which Babylon will be the most imposing expression), where things are “rigidly given in advance.” Life after death is a matter of indifference. If Atlantis is a “culture of the tombs,” in Kush tombs have no significance. One lives and procreates but forgets the dead. The central symbol of Kush is the temple, from which priests scrutinize celestial mathematics. If in Atlantis, the genealogical principle dominates, if the gods and goddesses of Atlantis are father, mother, son, daughter, in Kush, the divinities are stars. A cosmological principle dominates.

Turan: The Civilization of Heroes

Turan is the civilization of heroes, animated by a “cold” religiosity, centered on the mysterious meaning of existence. Nature is filled with impersonal powers. For the culture-amoeba of Turan, life is a battlefield: “for the man of the North (Achilles, Siegfried),” Spengler writes, “only life before death, the fight against destiny, counts.” The divine-human relationship is no longer one of dependence: “prostration ceases, the head remains high; there is ‘I’ (man) and you (gods).”

Sons guard the memory of their fathers but do not leave food for their corpses. There is no embalming or mummification in this culture, but cremation. The bodies disappear, are hidden in underground burials without monuments, or are dispersed to the four winds. All that remains of the dead is their blood in the veins of their descendants. Turan is thus a culture without architecture, where temples and burials have no importance and where only the terrestrial meaning of existence matters. Man lived alone, confronted with himself, in his house of wood or in his nomad’s tent.

Source: Nouvelles de Synergies européennes, no. 21, 1996.

Atlantis, Kush, & Turan:

Prehistoric Matrices of Ancient Civilizations in the Posthumous Work of Spengler, Part 2

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1,180 words

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Part 2 of 2, Part 1 here

The War Chariot

Spengler reserved his sympathy for the culture-amoeba of Turan, whose bearers were characterized by the love of adventure, implacable will power, a taste for violence, and freedom from vain sentimentality. They are “men of facts.” The various peoples of Turan were not bound by blood ties or a common language. Spengler does not utilize archaeological and linguistic research aiming to find the original fatherland of the Indo-Europeans or at reconstituting the source language of all the current Indo-European idioms: the bond which links the people of Turan is technical; it is the use of the war chariot.

In a lecture given in Munich on February 6th, 1934 entitled “Der Streitwagen und the Seine Bedeutung für den Gang der Weltgeschichte” (“The War Chariot and its Significance for the Course of World History”), Spengler explains why this weapon constitutes the key to understanding the history of the second millennium BCE It is, he says, the first complex weapon: One needs a war chariot (with 2 wheels and not a less mobile carriage with 4 wheels), a domesticated and harnessed animal, a meticulously trained warrior who will henceforth strike his enemies from above. With the war chariot is born a type of new man. The chariot is a revolutionary invention on the military plane, but also the formative principle of a new humanity. The warriors became professional because the techniques they had to handle were complex, and they came together as a caste of those who love risk and adventure; they made war the meaning of their life.

The arrival of these castes of impetuous “charioteers” upset very ancient orders: the Achaeans invaded Greece and settled in Mycenae; the Hyksos burst into Egypt. To the East, the Kassites descended on Babylon. In India, the Aryans bore down on the subcontinent, “destroyed the cities,” and settled on the ruins of the civilization of Mohenjo Daro and Harappa. In China, the Zhou arrived from the north, mounted on their chariots, like the Hyksos and their Greek counterparts.

From 1,200 BCE, warlike princes reigned in China, in India, and in the ancient world of the Mediterranean. The Hyksos and Kassites conquered two older civilizations of the South. Then three new civilizations carried by “dominating charioteers” emerged: the Greco-Roman, the Aryan civilization of India, and the Chinese civilization resulting from Zhou. These new civilizations, whose princes came from North, Turan, are “more virile and energetic that those born on banks of the Nile and Euphrates.” According to Spengler, however, these warlike charioteers sadly succumbed to the seductions of the softening South.

A Common Heroic Substrate

The theory of the rough simultaneity of the invasions of Greece, Egypt, India, and China was shared by Spengler and the sinologist Gustav Haloun. Both held that there is a common substrate, warlike and chariot-borne, of Mediterranean, Indian, and Chinese civilizations. It is a “heroic” civilization, as shown by the weapons of Turan. They are different from those of Atlantis. In addition to the chariot, they are the sword and the axe, which imply duels between combatants, whereas in Atlantis, the weapons are the bow and arrow, that Spengler judges “vile” because they make it possible to avoid direct physical confrontation with the adversary, “to look him right in the eyes.”

In Greek mythology, Spengler claims, the bow and arrows are remnants of earlier, pre-Hellenic influences: Apollo the archer originated in Asia Minor; Artemis is Libyan, as is Hercules. The javelin is also “telamon” [= Atlantid] while the jousting lance is “Turanic.” To understand these distant times, the study of the weapons is more instructive than that of kitchen utensils or jewels, Spengler concludes.

The Turanic soul also derives from a particular climate and a hostile landscape. Man must fight unceasingly against the elements, thus becomes harder, colder, more wintry. Man is not only the product of a “genealogical chain,” but equally of a “landscape.” Climatic rigor develops “moral strength.” The tropics soften the character, bringing us closer to a nature perceived as more matriarchal, supporting female values.

Spengler’s late writings and correspondence thus show that his views changed after the publication of The Decline of the West, where he valorized Faustian civilization to the detriment primarily of ancient civilization. His focus on the “chariot” gives a new dimension to his vision of history: the Greeks, the Romans, the Indo-Aryans, and the Chinese found favor in his eyes.

In The Decline of the West the mummification of the Pharaohs was considered as the Egyptian expression of a will to duration, which he opposed to the oblivion implied by Indian cremation. Later, he disdained “telamon” mummification as an obsession with the beyond, indicating an incapacity to face terrestrial life. “Turanic” cremation, on the other hand, indicates a will to focus one’s powers on real life.

A Change of Optics Dictated by Circumstances?

Spengler’s polycentric, relativistic, non-Eurocentric, non-evolutionist conception of history in The Decline of the West fascinated researchers and anthropologists outside the circles of the German right, particularly Alfred Kroeber and Ruth Benedict. His emphasis on the major historical role of castes of charioteers gives his late work a more warlike, violent, mobile dimension than revealed in Decline.

Can one attribute this change of perspective to the situation of a vanquished Germany, which sought to ally itself with the young USSR (from a Eurasian-Turanian perspective?), with India in revolt against Great Britain (that he formerly included in “Faustian civilization,” to which he then gave much less importance), with China of the “great warlords,” sometimes armed and aided by German officers?

Did Spengler, by the means of his lecture on the charioteers, seek to give a common mythology to German, Russian, Chinese, Mongolian, and Indian officers or revolutionaries in order to forge a forthcoming brotherhood of arms, just as the Russian “Eurasianists” tried to give the newborn Soviet Russia a similar mythology, implying the reconciliation of Turco-Turanians and Slavs? Is the radical valorization of the “Turanic” chariot charge is an echo of the worship of “the assault” found in “soldatic nationalism,” especially of the Jünger brothers and Schauwecker?

Lastly, why didn’t Spengler write anything on the Scythians, a people of intrepid warriors, masters of equestrian techniques, who fascinated the Russians and undoubtedly, among them, the theorists of the Eurasiansm? Finally, is the de-emphasis on racial factors in late Spengler due to a rancorous feeling toward the English cousins who had betrayed Germanic solidarity? Was it to promote a new mythology, in which the equestrian people of the continent, which include all ethnic groups (Mongolian Turco-Turanians, descendants of the Scythians, Cossacks and Germanic Uhlans), were to combine their efforts against the corrupt civilizations of the West and the South and against the Anglo-Saxon thalassocracies?

Don’t the obvious parallels between the emphasis on the war chariot and certain theses in Man and Technics amount to a concession to the reigning futuristic ideology, insofar as Spengler gives a technical rather than a religious explanation of the Turanian culture-amoeba? These are topics that the history of ideas will have to clarify in-depth.

Source: Nouvelles de Synergies européennes, no. 21, 1996.