In the tribal borderlands of the Roman world of Late Antiquity, as Walter Pohl notes, “[b]arbarian residences only become apparent once they have been transferred to Roman cities”. The same may be said of the Middle East and the oasis cities (or earlier city-states) of the southern tier of Central Asia. ‘Courts’ in settled Central Asia, even with monarchs who made periodic tours of their realms, dragging entourages with them and imposing on the ‘hospitality’ of their subject aristocrat-servitors, usually returned to more permanent residences in cities, the presumed ‘natural’ locus for a developed court life and culture. The ‘places of power’ of the steppe peoples, Pohl contends, were an exception to this general pattern. This was largely, but not universally true of the steppe polities prior to the thirteenth century. The overwhelming majority of the Turkic peoples in the pre-Chingissid era were pastoral nomads, whose life-style, although not entirely lacking in settled zones, was not usually associated with cities or urban settings. In the steppe, the ordu, the camp of the ruler, who often followed the traditional pastoral nomadic cycle of seasonal migrations, was the court. Some nomad-based empires did create urban centres (e.g. the Uighurs and Khazars). Others, such as the Qarakhanids, having conquered settled areas, maintained residences in the subject cities, imposing their Central Asian nomadic political traditions as a governmental carapace over the older state and urban traditions, many elements of which (especially the daily practicalities of governance) were maintained. Nomadic political traditions remained much in evidence. This is particularly true of the Chinggisid and Timurid eras, which lie beyond the chronological boundar-
ies of this chapter. In either event, the process usually involved some degree of sedentarisation on the part of some of the nomads, in particular the elites. In the studies that follow, the focus has been on ‘nomadic states’, i.e. states founded by nomads who continued to hold the dominant positions of political power and constituted the bulk of the population. These states were located in ecologically distinct areas (i.e. the steppe), separate from sedentary populations that may have been politically subordinate to them.3

The seasonal migrations of the nomadic cycle included areas (usually winter quarters) with some permanent structures, that were used for part of the year, year after year.4 These ‘proto-urban’ or ‘early urban’ developments, presumably with more or less permanent resident populations (former nomads, subject artisans et al.), could serve as ‘places of power’ as nomadic or semi-nomadic rulers moved around their realms.5 Scholars are just beginning to explore these long-term camps and more permanent settlements.

Cities in the Turko-Nomadic World

As a preface to any discussion of ‘proto-urban’ or urban ‘places of power’, something must be said about ‘urbanism’ in the early Turko-nomadic world and how the nomads viewed cities. More than one pre-Chinggisid nomadic polity considered the practicality of having a fixed capital and court, but nomad attitudes towards cities were filled with ambivalence. Nomads wanted access to cities for trade, but were wary of them and—with the occasional exception of the elite—feared sedentarisation and disdained those who sedentarised (see below).

The historiography of Central Asia has often drawn a sharp line between the steppe and the urban world within it. Unlike the Middle East, Central Asian nomads occupied a very distinct ecological zone (the steppe), often at some distance from the major cities. Distance did not preclude elements of symbiosis. Nonetheless, standard histories tend to focus on the major oasis city-states associated with the Silk Road, such as Bukhara and Samarkand,6 leaving the urban history of Central Asia from the Turko-

---

3 See definitions in Khazanov 2007, 9.
5 Pohl (2008b, 101) notes that Attila had several of these and chose to meet with Byzantine ambassadors in the “largest and most beautiful” of them. See discussion below.