

# Urbanization and Settlement Networks as Nodes of Connectivity in Afro-Eurasian Frontier Zones (300 BCE - 300 CE)

23rd-24th September 2021, Online  
(All times given in Central European Summer Time)

Thursday, 23rd September

14:00 – 14:15

## Welcome

*Sitta von Reden*

14:15 – 15:30

## Beyond the Silk Road: Economic Development, Frontier Zones and Inter-Imperiality in the Afro-Eurasian World Region, 300 BCE to 300 CE: Past and Future Perspectives

*Sitta von Reden, Mamta Dwivedi, Lara Fabian, Milinda Hoo, Kathrin Leese-Messing, Lauren Morris, Eli Weaverdyck*

15:30 – 16:15

## Revolutionizing a World: From Small States to Universalism in the Pre-Islamic Near East

*Mark Altaweel (University College London) and Andrea Squitieri (LMU Munich)*

By the 8th century BCE, and through the early 1st millennium CE, major changes to urban networks across the ancient Near East became evident. So much so, we have suggested this was a new form of urbanism that was fundamentally different from the Bronze Age (c. 3000-1200 BCE) in the Near East. Some of these changes affected basic urban infrastructure, including street networks and wealth distribution expressed through housing. While towns, streets networks, and urban interaction accelerated inter and intra-city interaction, disparity in wealth also accelerated with new opportunities having differential affects across society. These changes had profound consequences that may have led to both a growth in knowledge and economy, but may have also facilitated greater social tension and adaptation to new circumstances. In this work, we demonstrate how empires in a period of universal empires transformed both large, small, and remote urban sites and explain underlying processes that enabled this. We will compare and assess variations between core and peripheral regions in empires assessed. We propose that the transformations witnessed reflect broader social convergence evident in the age of universal empires. The long-term implications of these social changes and relevance to theory of empires are discussed.

16:15 – 16:45

## Coffee Break

16:45 – 17:30

## Urbanization in the southern East Asia Maritime Zone, 300 BCE to 300 CE:

### Textual and Archaeological Evidence

*Maxim Korolkov (Heidelberg University)*

The formation of an urban network of military and administrative towns accompanied the expansion of the Sinitic empires in East Asia south of the Yangzi River. By the turn of the common era, some of these towns became the centers of long-distance trade and artisanal production partly oriented toward external consumers. Archaeological evidence from the South China Sea littoral points to the connections among the trade ports within and beyond the borders of the Han empire. These communities exchanged manufacturing technologies, elite and sub-elite consumer culture, and possibly also the patterns of socio-political organization. The emergence of the South China Sea network contributed to the early medieval “globalization,” which involved the growth in maritime trade, sizeable merchant diasporas in southern East Asian port cities, and the spread of Buddhism. However, we still lack a survey of textual and material data for a more comprehensive understanding of urbanization and concomitant economic changes in the southern, sea-oriented frontier zone of early Sinitic empires. This presentation is the first attempt at such a survey.

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17:30 – 18:15

### **Making, Doing and Using: Networks of Praxis in South Asia**

*Jason Hawkes (University of Cambridge)*

This paper presents recent research on the development of urbanism in central India during the 'early historic period' (c. 300 BCE–300 CE). Our understanding of urbanism during this and subsequent historical periods in South Asia has hinged on macro-level conceptions of 'the city' as an economic and political entity. Key phases of urbanisation are associated with changes in political rule, which themselves are conflated with 'cultural periods'. Recently, this has begun to change, with the problematisation of the topic in scholarship. Yet, most archaeological approaches continue to focus on the investigation of large cities with little conception of local networks and regional networks.

The research presented here was undertaken to shift the archaeological examination of urbanism in India away from the primacy attached to political rule, by investigating changes in settlement patterns and networks of praxis that took place within those settlements. This was achieved by: 1) carrying out large scale regional surveys across Vidarbha – a region of central India that was, at various points in time, both a frontier and the centre of a kingdom; and 2) the fine-grained analysis of material from key-hole excavations in an attempt to better understand the shared practices that existed across this area.

18:15 – 19:00

### **Models of Empire and City and Frontier Zones: Some Reflections and a Case Study (Third-century CE Asia Minor)**

*Arjan Zuiderhoek (Ghent University)*

The conventional model of the Roman empire of the Principate is that of a strongly decentralized, low-bureaucracy imperial territory, heavily dependent, for its day-to-day functioning, on the cooperation of provincial urban elites and largely held together by informal ties of patronage, symbolic communication and exchange between centre and provincial communities, including shared rituals (imperial cult). A common model of the (Greco-)Roman city under the early empire is that of a semi-autonomous urban community, headed by a civic elite of large landowners drawing in rent-incomes from the surrounding countryside while engaged in governing both their own city as well as completing administrative tasks for the imperial centre (e.g. tax gathering). Mostly lacking institutionalized means for keeping order (police force, civic guard), its public life largely consisted of intra-elite and mass-elite consensus seeking with, in the east at least, still a considerable element of Greek-style assembly-politics thrown in. While these models seem to work well enough (in the sense of being in accordance with most of the evidence) for the imperial heartland and the provinces generally, applying them to 'frontier zones' raises a host of interesting issues. For instance, the decentralized model of empire explains why both the Roman empire and the Hellenistic monarchies (which, with the exception of the Ptolemies, are now often viewed as similarly 'lightweight' structures) were so keen to reproduce themselves in their provincial areas and at their fringes. Cities organized as Greco-Roman civic communities, with 'hellenized/romanized' civic elites, sharing the paideia of their imperial masters, made it much easier to run an empire in this informal way. How did frontier-zone cities, often characterized by institutional, socio-economic, cultural and sometimes ethnic diversity, fit into this model? After some general reflections on these issues, I turn to a case study of frontier activity and imperial responses, third-century CE Asia Minor, where we can see how one type of interaction at the northern and eastern frontiers, namely military activity (including the Gothic incursions) and the imperial responses to it had a profound effect on the urban communities of the region. The demands of the frontier in effect led to a breakdown of both the low-bureaucracy, decentralized empire-model and the semi-autonomous provincial city-model in the region, arguably turning much of the area into a kind of militarized frontier-zone. Other factors, demographic, economic, socio-political... reinforced these tendencies, leading to profound changes in urban life and political culture.

Friday, 24th September

14:00 – 14:45

### **The Economical Life at the Northwestern Outposts of the Han Empire**

*Enno Giele (Heidelberg University)*

Archaeological research since the 20th century and the recent possibilities of remote sensing have provided us with data from ruins of frontier towns, border fortifications, as well as with manuscript sources that allow us some glimpses into the life in what is the Chinese Northwest roughly two thousand years ago. The talk will try to give an overview of the more interesting glimpses and add some thoughts on how the militarization of a frontier zone may have aided (or not) with urbanization processes.

14:45 – 15:30

### **Who is "beyond the wall"?**

#### **Bactro-Sogdian Borderlands in Seleukid and Greco-Bactrian Policy**

*Ladislav Stančo (Charles University, Prague)*

Such a large realm as the Seleukid Empire could seldom boast to be internally homogenous and unite, with an enemy standing only beyond its borders. The forts within this empire, such as those on the Euphrates and Oxus, demonstrate the need to defend strategic points on long-distance routes and fords or ferries seemingly far from the outer border. However, any construction of a fortification system within the territory signals weak, neuralgic points.

The fortification system located along the supposed border of Bactria and Sogdiana around the so-called Iron Gates may indicate a shift in the outer border of the empire from the Syr Darya to the Baysuntau ridge, or rather illustrate internal conflict between the distant king's representatives and renegades. Increased military activity on the border of the historic Bactria and Sogdiana regions and the associated construction of forts, towers, long walls and other related fortification elements went hand in hand with the settlement of the previously almost barren foothills of the Baysun and Kugitang Mountains. The results of new archaeological surface surveys and excavations in the Surkhandarya province of southern Uzbekistan offer a comprehensive view of the dramatic transformation in the settlement of this region during the 3rd century BC related primarily to warfare activities, having at the same time social, economic and other aspects.

15:30 – 16:15

### **Peopling the Land in Between: Settlements, Environment, and Economy in Mesopotamia between Assyria and Rome**

*Rocco Palermo (University of Pisa)*

This paper examines the physical and cultural re-organization of the Mesopotamian landscape in the wake of the fall of Assyria, from the late 7th c. BC to the Roman-Parthian confrontation. Through the combined analysis of legacy data, newly collected survey records, and paleoenvironmental evidence, I aim at discussing modes of occupation and economic performances in an ecologically fragile territory under the large territorial empires. With the aid of recent archaeological data from the Kurdistan Region of Iraq, intersected with paleoclimatic proxies from the same zone, I plan to demonstrate how settlement structures and socio-economic dynamics reacted to targeted political processes and variable environmental conditions.

The land in between the rivers experienced different cycles of growth and decline at the end of the 1st millennium BC and in the early years of the 1st millennium AD, dictated alternately by the lack of centralized power in the North and the establishment of a political core region in the Centre/South of the region.

The planned landscape of Assyria is somewhat transformed and shifted further down the Tigris, creating an imperial panel where primate settlements and the hydraulic landscape of the Seleucids radically transformed the alluvial plains. With the debut of the Parthian-Roman rivalry in the North and the growing importance of Central Mesopotamia as the political center of the Arsacids, the landscape of settlement further evolved, following different trajectories, and adjusting to mutated environmental conditions.

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16:15 – 16:45

### **Coffee Break**

16:45 – 17:30

### **Inside the Frontier at Dura-Europos**

*Jen Baird (Birkbeck College, University of London)*

While few would still describe Dura-Europos as Rostovtzeff did, as a “caravan city”, there is no doubt that the extensive excavations there in the first half of the twentieth century provide rich archaeological evidence for this frontier settlement, whose life spanned from c. 300 BCE to 256 CE. Indeed, it is easy to point to images of camel caravans scratched into house walls, or to scraps of fine imported silks pulled from the debris, and imagine Dura as just another node in an ancient network of cities spanning the Afro-Eurasian frontier. This presentation will consider the development of the settlement over the long term, as a place which was both liminal, forever inside the frontier, but also central and hyper-connected, and examine how Dura negotiated its place within and between spheres. Examining aspects of Dura’s material, social, and political networks, I will assess the ways in which this negotiation was not only a tale of trading, taxing, and military triumphs, but also of one of local habitus and a particular relationship with the site’s own deep past.

17:30 – 18:15

### **The Three Lives of Dura Europos**

*Leonardo Gregoratti (Durham University/Università di Udine)*

Thanks to the extraordinary richness of the archaeological findings from its site, the border town of Dura Europos on the Euphrates is one of the best-known settlements in the Near East. Founded at the beginning of the Seleucid era Dura Europos gained a particular relevance and maintained the role of regional capital until the Sassanid conquest in the middle of the 3rd century AD. Unlike all other major settlements in the Near East, at Dura Europos, this rich documentation concerns three different periods of occupation, the Seleucid/Macedonian, the Parthian and more relevantly the Roman. The aim of this paper is to take into consideration these three periods of rule in order to point out the elements of continuity and change in Dura society. The transition period between Parthian and Roman rule and the changes that occurred during Roman occupation will be discussed. The purpose is to answer the recent hypothesis proposed by some scholars who thought about various forms of foreign occupation and political transition before the final establishment of the Roman garrison, including also a sort of Palmyrene “protectorate” on the city. All these new alternative formulae, conceived for Dura’s political status and its connection with Palmyra moving from an evident Romano-centered approach, seem to ignore not only the characteristics of a Greek city under the Arsacid rule but also the nature of the Parthian dominion on its subjects.

18:15 – 19:00

### **Contrasting the Period 300 BCE-300 CE with the Changes around the Year 1000**

*Valerie Hansen*

Concluding and comparative thoughts on the conference.