

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

Freiburg/Germany 23rd to 26th September 2021

The aim of this second international conference within the ERC funded Project *Beyond the Silk Road* (BaSaR) is to examine the interrelationships between settlement and urbanism on the one hand, and political and economic development on the other, within the context of frontier zones. The conference develops out of the framework of the first BaSaR conference, 'Economies of the Edge' (September 2019), which explored multi-scalar frontier zone processes across the Afro-Eurasian world region during 300 BCE - 300 CE and their impact on inter-imperial exchange.

In Afro-Eurasian frontier zones between 300 BCE - 300 CE – in the course of the emergence of multiple coeval empires and heightened connectivity between them – we see shifts in settlement patterns, and frequently the phenomena of expanding urbanism. Urban networks played a critical part in creating the long-distance connections that spanned the continents, and were in turn shaped by these connections. At the same time, they were also the products of local political, religious, and economic developments -- conditions that were particularly complex in frontier regions.

Following the work of Elton (1996) and Parker (2006), we conceptualize frontier regions as broad zones where multiple boundaries of different types (ecological, political, cultural, religious, etc.) overlap. The nature and impact of these boundaries can range tremendously. For our purposes, the crucial aspect is that they represent a meeting of difference. We wish to emphasize, however, that in this conference, we will not explore the nature of frontier zones per se, but rather how the meeting of difference in frontiers -- flexible, fluctuating spaces with access to various cultural and social spheres -- impacts economic processes and the development of urban networks, markets, and exchange.

We are interested in the phenomenon of urbanism and the emergence of settlement networks, as such spaces often provided the framework within which local and global developments were negotiated. We hope to explore the interplay of the varied influences that operated at different scales in their development; and to consider how their characteristics influenced the flows of goods, people and ideas along the networks that they formed. We suggest the following themes as being of particular interest:

a) Types of urban centers within frontier zones:

- coastal cities and local metropolises
- 'caravan cities' and settlements as both local consumption centers and nodes of long-distance trade

b) Structure of urban networks in frontier zones:

- specific political, economic, and religious phenomena that shaped urbanism
- processes of economic integration and separation that can be identified
- the impact of geography and spatial configuration of urban centers in relation to each other and to the environment and landscape

c) Impact of frontiers on urbanism, urban development, and settlement:

- special features of frontier settlements, towns, markets, and ports
- development of frontier zones and their impact on inter-imperial relations
- the role of military activity in frontier zones on settlement/town/market development

We hope that we can plan an in-person conference, but if this turns out to be still unfeasible, we will work out an appealing digital format. We plan to reach a final decision by the end of March.

December 2020

The BaSaR research team