How do physical borders and boundaries delineate the nature of cultural interactions and determine the development of historical time and place? What are the kinds of spaces created alongside borders that promote inclusive permeability versus boundaries that generate exclusive separation?

Critical biographies of borderlands—the conditions created by these borders and boundaries—are evocative biographies of no-places and the people who no longer live there. Yet, these biographies are seldom recorded in scholarly writings even though the passage of history through these so-called spatial “edges” frequently leaves behind a rich palimpsest of cultural records. Extending upon Kevin Lynch’s emphasis on “edges” (*The Image of the City*) and Richard Sennett’s fascinating distinction between a boundary that divides, versus a border that serves a place of exchange (“Democratic Spaces,” *Hunch* 9 [2005]), my ongoing book project examines one such unique borderland condition on the legendary Silk Road, located on Central Asia’s important Oxus River.

In between Arab and Persian worlds
Combining a close reading of archival sources spread across repositories in the Russian Federation, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan, with several years of innovative fieldwork, my project seeks to unravel how conflict, reconciliation and interaction between medieval Arab and Persian communities created unique urban forms alongside this geographically significant and politically critical divide.

Spurred by the success of the Riddah raids initiated after the death of the Prophet Mohammad, the formidable Oxus was crossed by the Arab armies in the year 673 AD. For the Arab armies, crossing the Oxus (*Jayhun* in Arabic) symbolized great glory, unchallenged access to the riches of the prosperous *Mawarranahr* (Arabic for *Land between the Two Rivers*), and subsequently an empire in Hindustan. However, beyond its significance as a geographical barrier, the Oxus had also long served as a distinct yet permeable cultural boundary, situated strategically at a global borderland separating Persia from Central Asia. It had always remained an inviolate in-between space, a veritable void between the two distinct cultural realms.
Its extended banks had served as no-man’s land that contentiously belonged to none, yet gained from every passage of the impressive armies that crossed it in pursuit of gold, glory and frequently the deposed sovereigns of collapsed dynasties.

Little happened, however, on the Oxus itself, whose meandering banks changed treacherously through the course of its history, save for a series of non-descript inconsequential towns of no special significance. Indeed, in historical and political terms, much of the action appears to have emanated from affected territories that lay to the west and east of the Oxus itself, especially the impressive urban emporiums of cultural fecundity, including the legendary cities of Bukhara, Samarkand, Merv and Termez. The Oxus borderland was significant in one additional way. Unlike earlier expeditions that had crossed the Oxus, the Arab forces never intended to return to their homelands. Instead, in the centuries following the invasions, they assimilated widely among the local population, settling permanently to expand the urban centers along the legendary Silk Road.

**Between barrier and boundary**

By employing the trope of the Oxus as a selectively-permeable cultural divide that continually morphed between barrier and boundary in the centuries following the Arab invasions on Central Asia, my project proposes that examining this borderland condition would be critical towards understanding the genesis of these urban emporiums. It interrogates the process of the monumental Arab urban expansion (tamsir) that accompanied the diffusion of Islam following these invasions east of the Oxus, a semi-porous border separating the urbane, cultured Persianate world on the west from the warlords of the nomadic steppes on the east. It suggests that the tamsir, in its unique synthesis of mainstream Islamic city-building traditions with nascent, quasi-nomadic Sogdian urbanity, effectively transformed military encampments first into urban quarters and later into impressive cities.

In extension, as the agents of this unprecedented cultural encounter between the two disparate worlds, the Arab armies intervened on the cities of Sogdiana, Bactria and Khwarazm to create the most vital centers of urban life, distinct in several ways from other parts of the Islamic world. Traditional cities in the Islamic world further west and south of Central Asia had a dense structure within an encircling wall, and eventually the residential areas were found to extend beyond the wall, only themselves to be eventually protected by another wall.

**A unique “cultural condenser”**

In Central Asia, however, a further stage of development took place. Here the main administrative functions and markets moved out into this outer residential area and abandoned the central core entirely. In this so-called “suburban-city” model, this outer area of the city (the rabad) became the locus of political and commercial activity. In due course the process repeated itself—the residential areas overflowing beyond the walls of the rabad, only themselves to be surrounded by a third outer wall.

How did the encounter between the two culturally-removed worlds—one characterized by its
accretive, urban conurbations of propinquity, the other relishing detached encampments and suburbia—exaggerated by the borderland condition of the Oxus River, affect the making of these unique cities in Central Asia? How did the Oxus contact zone—divisive locally as it was internationally—acknowledge the multiplicity of urban experiences and the agency of multiple actors even in the face of unequal power relations? Why did the Oxus or Jayhun remain, and still does (now as the infamous and much-depleted Amu Darya), a global border determining the geo-politics of Central Asia? Finally, would it be topical to reconsider this sliver of a riverine west-east divide between Persia and Central Asia—often positioned within the convenient, space-time continuum of early medieval Islamic history—as a unique “cultural condenser” of unprecedented historical significance?

This project stems from my broader interest in researching and recording non-Western, especially Islamic, urban history. For me this is not so much the history of artifacts and buildings, but a deliberate unraveling of a series of complex socio-cultural interactions, documented as “thick descriptions” through the careful sifting of multiple 9th and 10th century textual sources, particularly when strategically combined with the material remains of urban spaces.

The hybrid nature of cities
Within my Central Asia research, I specifically examine the processes of building and re-building of urban elements within two early-medieval urban spaces, considered by scholars as exemplars within the field of Islamic urbanism. These were the so-called Rigistan spaces—both located outside the citadels of Samarqand and Bukhara in Central Asia (current day Uzbekistan), and created soon after the Arab invasions on this region beginning 675 AD. Significant ninth and tenth-century texts, including al-Narshakhi’s Tarikh Bukhara (948 AD) and al-Muqaddasi’s Ahsan al-Taqasim (980 AD) describe these urban spaces and the dramatic physical changes inflicted on these spaces following the arrival of Islam.

This Oxus borderland project is yet another facet of my ongoing research, unprecedented in its rarely-discussed emphasis on journey, passage, interaction and the spaces produced, yet critical in how it reveals the hybrid nature of the cities I am writing about. Once complete, I hope that the book shall serve as the basis for future research in the region and the growing field of urban studies. It shall also disentangle the issues of conflict, reconciliation and interaction writ large in the historicity of the urban and borderland spaces.

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