

Introduction

Eli J. S. Weaverdyck and Mamta Dwivedi

In the six centuries between 300 BCE and 300 CE, two large-scale developments occurred that have captured the attention of global historians: first, empires subjugated increasingly large swathes of Eurasia and North Africa; second, more goods moved more frequently across the Afro-Eurasian world region than ever before. The relationship between these two developments has long been acknowledged in scholarship on the ancient Silk Road, but we believe there is room to interrogate it further. The notion of the “Silk Road,” with its implications of discrete routes along which goods moved according to the laws of supply and demand, has been called into serious question, re-opening the problem of how things actually moved across this space.¹ Not only the routes that they traveled but, more importantly, the mechanisms by which they were exchanged must be reconsidered. Furthermore, while previous scholarship has tended to emphasize developments in imperial cores, we suggest that the spaces on the edge of and in between empires—frontiers—may be a more fruitful focus. These, after all, are the places where goods had to cross boundaries between different systems. Finally, the Afro-Eurasian world is a vast space whose history has been studied within numerous different disciplines. No single scholar could possibly command all the specialized knowledge required to adequately account for the intertwined political and economic developments in which we are interested. A community of specialists is needed.

These are the considerations that lie behind the project “Beyond the Silk Road: Economic Development, Frontier Zones, and Inter-Imperality in the Afro-Eurasian World Region, 300 BCE to 300 CE” (BaSaR) and the 2019 conference “Economies of the Edge: Frontier Zone Processes at Regional, Imperial, and Global Scales (300 BCE–300 CE).” BaSaR, under the direction of Sitta von Reden, consists of a core team of five postdoctoral researchers and a range of affiliated scholars.² Together, we have produced the *Handbook of Ancient Afro-Eurasian Economies* in three volumes.³ Volume 1, *Contexts*, describes the sociopolitical situations of the various empires and regions involved as well as the evidence available for the economic history of each and the scholarly traditions that have studied them. Volume 2, *Local, Regional, and*

1 Chin 2013; Rezakhani 2010; Selbitschka 2018.

2 For more information, see <https://basar.uni-freiburg.de>.

3 Von Reden 2020–2023.

Imperial Economies, examines the economic actors, tools, and processes at work within each region. Volume 3, *Frontier-Zone Processes and Transimperial Exchange*, investigates economic development within a variety of frontier zones to better understand the interplay between local and inter-regional or inter-imperial economic dynamics.

BaSaR organized the 2019 conference to bring together leading experts in the economic history of different parts of Afro-Eurasia whose work, while well known in their respective fields, is rarely put into conversation with each other. Our aim was to assemble a variety of empirically grounded case studies of frontier zone economies that, together, would assist the participants in rethinking the question of “Silk Road” exchange. In the process, we experimented with different conceptual frameworks. In particular, two broadly contrasting frameworks came to the fore: one framework asks us to think in terms of political power and centers and peripheries, although some papers operated within this framework in order to challenge it; the other asks us to think in terms of networks, focusing on nodes in frontier zones or the ways that people moved between these nodes. These frameworks were definitely not straitjackets. Most contributors adopted both to a greater or lesser extent, and some papers combined them, focusing on connectivity between political systems. As a result, we were gratified to see, a lively discussion about the terms in which to examine frontier economies and the ancient trans-continental movements of goods (the Silk Road) arose. That debate is reflected in the structure of this volume.

The Structure of This Book

We group the chapters of this volume into two thematic parts: (1) Peripheries and Frontiers, and (2) Nodes and Flows. While all contributions discuss frontiers in different ways, the first part focuses on how economic development in peripheral regions was affected by interactions with political cores. The chapters in the second part focus more on the networks that cross edges and bind multiple regions together. Each section intentionally juxtaposes explorations from a range of geographical spaces and emanating from a variety of disciplinary contexts.

Part 1 includes contributions that investigate the political dynamics of frontier regions. The expansion of empires in the middle of the first millennium BCE redefined numerous areas in the Afro-Eurasian region as peripheral—from an imperial perspective. However, these regions functioned not only as appendages to an imperial heartland but also as centers in their own right. They were often highly productive zones with resources valued by imperial centers, which developed new institutional methods to control, capture, or redistribute those resources. They also functioned as meeting places of sociopolitical systems, where influences were transferred and

transformed between polities. Thus, the very peripherality of frontier regions facilitated political innovations.

In this part, Maxim Korolkov investigates the regional economic impacts of the expansion of the Qin and Han Empires into southern East Asia. Luca Olivieri traces economic developments in Swat, which exported grain in large quantities to various different empires. Finally, Michael Speidel examines how and why Roman methods of control in northern Arabia changed with the transformation of the Nabataean kingdom into the Roman province of Arabia.

Part 2 focuses less on politics and more on the acephalous networks that spanned and often traversed political boundaries. These are the networks along which goods from China arrived in the Roman Empire, the very phenomenon that the notion of the “Silk Road” purports to explain. However, moving beyond the outdated notion of stable, physical “roads” or “routes” re-opens the question of how flows of information and goods actually occurred and what impacts they had. The contributions in this part examine these flows at different spatial scales. At the local scale, the investigation of ports and border markets provides fine-grained data about the various ways in which people from different backgrounds came together and organized the transfer of goods and ideas. At the same time, these places acted as nodes within broader networks. The analysis of these networks and the mechanisms that allowed people, goods, and ideas to move over great distances and across physical and social divides elucidates larger-scale processes. Together, these large-scale network dynamics and small-scale, local infrastructures of exchange constitute the trans-continental connectivity popularly known as the “Silk Road.”

In Part 2, Sören Stark, relying primarily on medieval evidence, examines market places on the borders of the Bukhara oasis in Central Asia as venues for regional and long-distance exchange. Federico De Romanis explicates the roles of Barygaza in intermediating between various trade networks, with particular focus on the integration of different coinage systems. Stefan Hauser uses evidence from the site of Charax to examine the role of Mesene in long-distance trade and argue for a more active Arsacid presence in maritime connectivity. Rocco Palermo looks at regional patterns of interaction in northern Mesopotamia to push against traditional understandings of frontiers. Mark Altaweel and Andrea Squitieri analyze settlement patterns and evidence for unskilled wage labor to investigate how the growth of empires influenced the movement of people and labor markets in the Near East. Miguel Versluys closes the volume with a meditation on network power, globalization, and innovation in the ancient Mediterranean.

Frontier Conceptions and “Frontier” as Heuristic

While the subject of our conference was economic processes in frontier zones, we refrained from specifying *a priori* a strict conception of what constituted a frontier. This gave contributors the flexibility to define “edges” in a way that best facilitated their own research in their own context. Nevertheless, common conceptions emerged—a result, surely, of more than 100 years of historical and archaeological scholarship on frontiers. The history of that scholarship has been well summarized elsewhere, and we will not repeat it here.⁴ We see the designation of “frontier,” with its attendant connotations of peripherality and/or inbetweenness, as a heuristic device that structures inquiry into the economic processes of a region. Specifically, the frontier paradigm encompasses three broad sets of overlapping characteristics that draw focus toward questions of interaction across space and between different geographic scales, questions of dynamic movement and expansion, and questions about the meeting and negotiation of difference. Each contribution to this volume addresses one or more of these questions in different ways.

Because the frontier concept is inherently *relational*—a place is only a frontier in relation to one or more cores—it leads us to ask questions about the impacts of interaction across space and about the intersection of processes operating at different geographical scales. Frontier zones interact with cores, and local processes in the frontier zone are bound up in larger-scale processes that transcend it. Such a relational approach has a long history. While core–periphery models such as those of Immanuel Wallerstein inherently privilege the agency of the core and its impact on the frontier,⁵ the impact of frontier processes on the core to which they are peripheral has been acknowledged and studied since the days of Turner.⁶ The racism and colonialism that infect early scholarship on frontiers makes it difficult to work with some of these ideas, and post-colonial scholarship continues to highlight and confront that legacy.⁷ Nevertheless, the questions about systemic interactions marked by power imbalance and operating at multiple scales continue to stimulate valuable scholarship.

Frontiers are also, usually, conceived of in *dynamic* terms. A frontier is a place into which something is expanding (state power, a demographic community, etc.), so the

4 For the discussion of frontiers in the Roman context, see von Reden and Speidel 2019. On frontier/borderland studies in an archaeological perspective, see Lightfoot and Martinez 1995; Naum 2010; Parker 2006.

5 Wallerstein 1974; for core–periphery models of frontiers in archaeology, see Feuer 2016.

6 Turner 1893; for a more recent, archaeological example, see Düring and Stek 2018.

7 See Beaulieu 2017; Naum 2010 for overviews. N. Green 2018 takes the agency of change away from imperial cultures when focusing on the seas as spaces where non-imperial, vernacular cultures meet to form systems and networks.

designation can focus attention on medium- and long-term dynamics.⁸ Often, because of the example of modern colonialism, this dynamic is conceived of in demographic terms. Settlers from one group move into an area that is either unoccupied or (more often and more realistically) occupied by others, and the place becomes a frontier until it develops into something that resembles the place of origin of the immigrants, i.e., is “tamed.”⁹ However, in the ancient world, the degree of demographic movement from a core into a frontier is often questionable. Nevertheless, a similar paradigm can be adopted by focusing on the extension and development of power relations—empire—rather than population. In this paradigm, the frontier dynamic begins when an empire begins to exert control over a space and ends when imperial control in that space resembles control in more core regions of the empire.¹⁰

Frontiers, finally, are places where *differences meet*.¹¹ Owen Lattimore influentially emphasized the meeting of different ecological and economic systems, which he saw as underpinning different social structural systems, on China’s northern frontier.¹² A prime focus of postcolonial frontier research, though, is on the meeting of different cultural systems and regimes of value.¹³ Investigations are focused on conceptualizing these encounters, the ways in which difference is negotiated, the impact of these negotiations on the entities meeting, and the emergence of something new as a result.¹⁴ However, it is also important to leave space for the role of violence, both as a tool in the negotiation of difference and as an effect of such negotiations.¹⁵

It is difficult to combine the above characteristics into a single, all-encompassing definition of frontier zones. Furthermore, the utility of such a definition, with which one could categorize historical situations as frontiers or not frontiers, for generating novel insights is dubious. Instead, the value of the frontier concept is in providing a heuristic device, a shared set of approaches that center *relationships* across space and scale, *dynamics* of expansion and transformation, and *meetings of difference* and their subsequent negotiations, which allows scholars to benefit from the work of their peers

8 Osterhammel 2014, 322–331 emphasizes this characteristic while discussing previous literature.

9 Indeed, Turner wrote his seminal essay in response to the completion of this process in the American West (Turner 1893).

10 Osterhammel 2014, 327–328.

11 Parker 2006 seeks to systematize the study of frontiers in precisely these terms by proposing a typology of borders of different types that may overlap in frontier zones. See also Osterhammel 2014, 356.

12 Lattimore 1962. See Whittaker 1994 for an application of Lattimore’s ideas to the Roman frontiers.

13 Lightfoot and Martinez 1995; Naum 2010; Beale 2017; U. M. Green and Costion 2017; N. Green 2018.

14 For example, Gallaway 2005 explains how the ecotonal zones, especially ports of trade, are places to look for changes in legal regimes, which are starkly different from their immediate inland neighbors.

15 Ferguson and Whitehead 1992; Fernández-Götz, Maschek, and Roymans 2020.

operating in very different historical contexts. Ultimately, we will ask how designating a certain place and time a “frontier zone” helps us understand the economic processes at play there. First, though, it is worth articulating explicitly the variety of “frontier” concepts at play in this volume.

The Frontier Heuristic in Use

All of the contributions in this volume make use of at least one of the three frontier characteristics described above. Many adopt the *relational* perspective, examining interactions between imperial power and places at the edge of its control and the interplay of local and transregional processes. Maxim Korolkov examines how regional elite networks and negotiations in southern East Asia incorporated and were changed by the extension of Qin and Han imperial power while also taking into account the position of his region within larger networks centered on the South China Sea. Stefan Hauser explores the position of Mesene and its capital Charax as a “missing link” between distant centers. Luca Olivieri traces the history of the Swat Valley to better delineate how external imperial power and demand for grain affected settlement patterns and the agricultural economy. Similarly, Rocco Palermo examines the impact of the expansion of Roman imperial power into northern Mesopotamia. Michael Speidel focuses on Roman imperial strategies for controlling northern Arabia and the Red Sea. Sören Stark examines border markets that were peripheral not to empires but to the cores of oasis polities that were themselves peripheral to larger regions, thereby integrating local, regional, and interregional scales of analysis. Miguel Versluys, while criticizing core–periphery perspectives, also considers how large-scale shifts in political power configurations impacted local economies in different ways.

In the course of examining these relationships, the contributors take on their *dynamic* nature, with a general focus on expansion from one place to another. In most cases, this was an expansion of power rather than a large-scale demographic movement. Olivieri shows that the demographic population of the Swat Valley remained stable even as different imperial power networks expanded into it. Similarly, Korolkov describes how the extension of Sinitic imperial power into the region of southern East Asia was accompanied by the flow of certain technologies from the imperial core to the frontier region, but he argues that there is little evidence for demographic movement from the core to the periphery. Speidel’s discussion of the Roman incorporation of the Nabataean kingdom focuses not on the initial expansion of imperial power into the area—the kingdom had been a subordinate ally of the Roman Empire for over a century—but the extension of a particular type of governmental structure, the directly governed province. At a much smaller scale, Stark identifies a pull factor

drawing political power out of its core zone: in order to maximize the revenue from caravans, which would reduce their tax burden by selling some of their goods to the inhabitants of the steppe, oasis polities in Central Asia established tax collection points far beyond their well-established and demarcated political boundaries. For Versluys, the crucial thing that expands (and can also recede) is network connectivity, which is often associated with but is not identical to imperial power. On the other hand, Palermo points out that the Roman conquest of northern Mesopotamia did entail a demographic influx of at least several thousand individuals. These immigrants had an outsized economic impact because they were soldiers concentrated in cities that had previously had much lower populations. Altaweel and Squitieri focus explicitly on large-scale demographic mobility, but they see it as a consequence of imperial expansion and the erasure of political boundaries. In a way, they describe the situation that follows the completion of the frontier dynamic. In the process, they remind us that, while people might move into frontier zones, moving beyond them is costly. Hauser, finally, demonstrates that biases in contemporary research have left some regions of this vast interconnected space critically understudied, with deleterious consequences for our ability to understand systemic processes.

The expansion of something—be it power, connectivity, or a population—into a new space entails a *meeting of difference* that can be negotiated in a variety of ways, including through violence. Power structures and eliteness in southern East Asia were negotiated through a material cultural system that was common to the South China Sea, and the expansion of Han power into this region had varying effects on this culture. A violent rebellion in one place was followed by the replacement of older cultural forms by Han expressions of eliteness. In other places, the older forms persisted despite Han control. In contrast, documentary evidence from northern Mesopotamia shows Roman soldiers engaging in economic transactions with local individuals with apparent ease. On a broader geographic scale, Palermo argues that the Roman military conquest of the region entailed the improvement of a road network that ultimately facilitated movement across the imperial frontier. The enormous scale of ancient Charax, as discussed by Hauser, can be understood as another form of infrastructural development that both was prompted by and helped to facilitate the new economic opportunities.

Such meetings are not always bilateral. In the Swat Valley, incorporation into the Achaemenid Empire corresponds with the introduction of not only Iranian pottery forms but Indo-Gangetic ones as well, which were used alongside local forms. De Romanis's exploration of Barygaza focuses on how the differences between southern and northern terrestrial trade networks and the Indian Ocean maritime trade network were mediated, including through the simultaneous use of various scripts on coins and established methods of converting between a wide variety of coinage systems. Versluys goes further: he takes the meeting of difference *per se*, rather than any particular frontier

zone, as his object of study and argues that we should adopt the analytical tools of network analysis (particularly Grewal's network standards and network power) and globalization. While emphasizing connectivity, Versluys does not deny the existence of different cultural traditions from which individuals can draw. Indeed, he sees places where many differences meet, places often described as "peripheral," as particularly potent centers of innovation.

Major Themes and Frontier Phenomena

The goal of the conference was to better understand economic processes in frontier zones in order to rethink the concept of "Silk Road" exchange. In generalizing, theoretical work on frontiers, a variety of economically significant phenomena is often considered, including the environment, demography, settlement dynamics, and the presence or absence of state power. The narrowly focused, empirical works presented here take up these themes and reveal a certain degree of diversity in how they manifest in different contexts.

Frontier zones are often seen as environmentally marginal or, at least, situated on an ecotone.¹⁶ Certainly, the steppe–desert environment of the Nabataean kingdom and northern Mesopotamia seems to fit this description, as does the border zone of the Bukhara oasis. Barygaza and Charax, as ports, sit at the ecotone of land and sea. The Swat Valley stands this picture on its head, though. The empires of the region were centered in ecologically marginal areas that were crossed by major trade routes, and the Swat Valley—nestled in the mountains, cut off from the trade routes, and distant from the political core—provided the agricultural surplus necessary for the state to survive. While politically peripheral, Swat is anything but environmentally marginal.

Demography has already been touched on to a certain extent. The primacy of Turner's work on the American frontier has led scholars to expect that frontier situations are characterized by the movement of one demographic group into a new area inhabited by one or more other groups and their subsequent encounters.¹⁷ In this volume, however, we see different situations. There was indeed a demographic influx into Roman Mesopotamia, but its economic impact was out of proportion to its size.

16 Indeed, the role of ecology in limiting the expansion of empire and, therefore, in defining frontier zones is central to Lattimore 1962's work, taken up by Whittaker 1994, among others. Osterhammel, in contrast, focuses more on the ways that frontiers change the environment (2014, 375–391). An example of environmental ecotone, where forest zones work as frontiers limiting empires and affected by imperial agents, is commonly found in South Asian history. For example, see Parasher-Sen 1998; Trautmann 2009.

17 Turner 1893; Lattimore 1962; Osterhammel 2014, 322–327.

In southern East Asia, population movement was largely internal to the frontier zone. The Swat Valley displays remarkable demographic stability over the *longue durée*, despite political changes. The borderlands of oases in Central Asia are characterized by cyclical movement tied to pastoralism and long-distance trade rather than migration. And in western Asia and Egypt, Altaweel and Squitieri have shown that large-scale regular movement follows the dissolution of frontiers.

Demography and settlement patterns are closely related. Altaweel and Squitieri take increased inequality in settlement sizes—the growth of a few, very large settlements—in southwestern Asia as evidence for increased mobility, whether voluntary or coerced, resulting from imperial expansion. Korolkov argues that population movement in southern East Asia, often the result of conquest or state coercion, led to urbanization and the creation of spaces susceptible to state control. The rise of Barikot as an urban center in Swat had less to do with population movement and more to do with imperial control of the grain surplus. In Mesopotamia, the Roman Empire took advantage of a preexisting urban hierarchy to exert its control and, in the process, contributed to the growth of the largest cities. As demonstrated by Charax, such cities also developed under the Arsacids.

It is striking that, in this volume, discussions of urbanism so often invoke state power. It is all the more striking since frontier zones are often taken to be areas where state power is relatively weak as a result of distance from the political core.¹⁸ Indeed, the chapters presented here demonstrate that imperial states had consistent, significant interests in frontier zones. Sinitic empires were concerned with controlling trade routes that connected the South China Sea to the imperial core as well as the forest products and precious metals produced in southern East Asia. Similarly, Roman interest in the Nabataean kingdom was part of a larger concern over trade between the Mediterranean, southern Arabia, and the Indian Ocean, as was Arsacid interest in Charax. The interests of Central Asian oasis states were also drawn to their border zones by trade and the revenue that they could extract. In contrast, the Swat Valley was cut off from major trade routes, but it drew the attention of a whole series of imperial states because of its own surplus production. At the same time, the examples of Gordion, the Kargha Oasis, and Seleukeia-Tigris adduced by Versluys demonstrate that state interest in a place can change quickly with alterations in political geography.

18 Feuer 2016, 18; 48–57; Osterhammel 2014, 327–328.

Conclusion: “Frontier” and the “Silk Road”

The economic processes at work in the frontier zones examined here are diverse, and the reader may justifiably ask how the collection of these case studies contributes to our understanding of local and regional economies on the one hand and the transcontinental movement of goods on the other. More generally, one might ask whether what we have called the frontier heuristic is useful in understanding economic processes. Certainly, the categorization of a place as a “frontier” at a given time should not be taken to imply a specific set of economic processes at work without further investigation. It is the direction of this investigation, we contend, that the frontier heuristic contributes. As we argued above, the ability to label a variety of historical contexts as “frontier zones” encourages us to ask similar questions about them: questions about the relationships between these zones and others and between processes operating at different scales; about the dynamics of expansion into these areas; and about the meeting and negotiation of difference.

These “frontier questions,” we suggest, are precisely the ones that need to be asked in order to understand not only economic development in frontier zones but also the large-scale movement of goods across the Afro-Eurasian world region in general. As noted above, scholarship on the “Silk Road” tends to focus on major imperial centers and treats the people and places between these centers as intermediaries. But the ancient world was not a collection of nation-states, and we cannot study the ancient, transcontinental economy as if it were the sum of national economies. Both empire and networks are important parts of the larger story, but to understand how Chinese silk made it to Rome or, rather, the complex of socioeconomic processes that made such a thing possible, we must turn our gaze to the questions of relationships across space and scale, dynamic expansions, and meetings of difference. We must look, in other words, to the economies of the edge.

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