THE LIMITS OF EMPIRE IN ANCIENT AFGHANISTAN
RULE AND RESISTANCE IN THE HINDU KUSH, CIRCA 600 BCE-650 CE

PROGRAM & ABSTRACTS

The Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago
The Franke Institute for the Humanities
October 5–7, 2016

Wednesday, October 5 — Franke Institute
Thursday, October 6 — Franke Institute
Friday, October 7 — Classics 110
THE LIMITS OF EMPIRE IN ANCIENT AFGHANISTAN
RULE AND RESISTANCE IN THE HINDU KUSH,
CIRCA 600 BCE-650 CE

Organized by Gil J. Stein and Richard Payne
The Oriental Institute — The University of Chicago

Co-sponsored by the Oriental Institute and the Franke Institute for the Humanities — The University of Chicago

PROGRAM

WEDNESDAY, OCTOBER 5, 2016 — FRANKE INSTITUTE

KEYNOTE LECTURE
5:00 Thomas Barfield
“Afghan Political Ecologies: Past and Present”

THURSDAY, OCTOBER 6, 2016 — FRANKE INSTITUTE

8:00-8:30 Coffee
8:30-9:00 Introductory Comments by Gil Stein and Richard Payne

SESSION 1: ACHAEMENIDS AND AFTER
9:00-9:45 Matthew W. Stolper
“Achaemenid Documents from Arachosia and Bactria: Administration in the East, Seen from Persepolis”
9:45-10:30 Matthew Canepa
“Reshaping Eastern Iran’s Topography of Power after the Achaemenids”
10:30-11:00 Coffee Break

LIMITS OF EMPIRE

SESSION 2: HELLENISTIC AND GRECO-BACTRIAN REGIMES
11:00–11:45 Laurianne Martinez-Sève
“Greek Power in Hellenistic Bactria: Control and Resistance”
11:45–12:30 Osmund Bopearachchi
“From Royal Greco-Bactrians to Imperial Kushans: The Iconography and Language of Coinage in Relation to Diverse Ethnic and Religious Populations in Central Asia and India”
12:30–2:00 Break

SESSION 3: KUSHAN IMPERIALISM: HISTORY AND PHILOLOGY
2:00–2:45 Christopher I. Beckwith
“Vihāras in the Kushan Empire”
2:45–3:30 Tasha Vorderstrasse
“The Limits of the Kushan Empire in the Tarim Basin”
3:30–4:00 Coffee Break

SESSION 4: KUSHAN IMPERIALISM: ART HISTORY AND ARCHAEOLOGY
4:00–4:45 Robert Bracey
“The Limits of Kushan Power and the Limits of Evidence”
4:45–5:30 Emily Hammer and Anthony Lauricella
“Pre-Islamic Fortresses of the Balkhab River Valley (Northern Afghanistan)”

FRIDAY, OCTOBER 7, 2016 — CLASSICS 110

SESSION 5: IRANIAN IMPERIALISM: NUMISMATICS AND THE BACTRIAN DOCUMENTS
8:45–9:15 Coffee
9:15–10:00 Nikolaus C. Schindel
“Coins as a Marker of Empire in the Sasanian Period: Examples from Eastern Iran”
10:00–11:00 Nicholas Sims-Williams
“The Bactrian Archives as a Historical Source”
11:00–11:45 Rhyne King
“Local Power Brokers in Iranian and Post-Iranian Bactria: Aristocrats, Dependents, and Imperial Regimes”
11:45–12:30 Break

SESSION 6: COMMENTARY AND DISCUSSION
12:30–1:30 Clifford Ando and Kathleen D. Morrison
Speakers & Abstracts

Clifford Ando (David B. and Clara E. Stern Professor of Classics, History, and Law, University of Chicago)

Provides commentary and discussion  (Friday, 12:30–1:30)

Thomas Barfield (Professor of Anthropology, Boston University)

Title: “Afghan Political Ecologies: Past and Present”  (Thursday, 5:00)

Abstract: Max Weber classically defined the state as a “human community that (successfully) claims the monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force within a given territory.” Yet while Afghanistan has been an independent polity for 270 years, only on very few occasions did its central governments ever come close to meeting such a standard in theory, let alone in fact. This has been viewed as a serious defect by modern Afghan state builders, but the stability of the polity (if not its rulers) suggests that deeper factors may be at play. In particular, the policy of successful Afghan regimes has always been to employ multiple strategies of governance that sought direct rule over cities, irrigated agricultural lands, and strategic trade routes, but used indirect strategies of governance and punitive violence to deal with its mountainous hinterlands and other marginal regions. Where the political and economic cost of direct administration was deemed too high, governments did not even attempt to impose it; but in exchange local communities recognized the state’s putative sovereignty over their territories. A similar pattern occurred at the regional level where powerful local elites recognized the sovereignty of the central government but in other respects acted independently of it. It is likely that this type of political system has deep roots, dating back to the Achaemenid empire and its successors. It was particularly well adapted to the larger Iranian plateau and central Asia where regional urban centers, each with distinct populations, were separated by large stretches of mountains and deserts. The more recent example of the Afghan case may therefore hold lessons for understanding how earlier states and empires used similar political structures and strategies to create long lived empires.

Christopher I. Beckwith (Professor of Central Eurasian Studies, Indiana University)

Title: “Vihāras in the Kushan Empire”  (Thursday, 2:00–2:45)

Abstract: We are accustomed to monasteries being built in remote areas, or in positions difficult to access, such as high up on a cliff face. If one defines vihāra as “monastery,” it is not surprising to us that ancient and early medieval travelers’ accounts say there were once very many vihāras in the mountainous countryside of eastern Bactria (what is now Tajikistan), and in mountainous areas of Gandhāra and Kashmir. In fact, archaeologists have found many of them in remote, un-urbanized areas of Central Asia and northwestern India (now Pakistan). But when the very first vihāras were built no such earlier cultural tradition existed. They were at once the first monasteries, the first cloisters, and the first colleges and their residents were the first “monks.” The Kushan-period vihāras of Taxila are the earliest attested exemplars of what is known in the West as the cloister plan. In architecture, “form follows function,” as the dictum of Louis Sullivan goes. These structures were built to embody specific functions, including teaching, libraries, research, and meditation, and they had a particular type of endowment. Some vihāras were certainly built in urbanized areas, such as in Taxila and other cities of the Kushan empire, as well as in Qocho in the Tarim Basin region, which was under Kushan
influence and may have been a tributary. Thus vihāras were built, in effect, all across the territory ruled by the Kushans and their successors. There seems to be a reasonable explanation for this. The Kushan-period vihāras, and at least some of the medieval ones, have often been described as “fortified.” That received view is supported by the remains of vihāras from late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages. Those found in Taxila and other early sites in South and Central Asia are very heavily built, of brick, with a single entryway, i.e., with no other openings around the perimeter. Forts per se are aggressive — not defensive — constructions. Considering their fortified design, it appears that the Kushan empire blanketed the land with vihāras to help hold conquered territory.

Osmund Bopearachchi (Adjunct Professor, University of California at Berkeley and Directeur des Études, CNRS-Paris)

**Title:** “From Royal Greco-Bactrians to Imperial Kushans: The Iconography and Language of Coinage in Relation to Diverse Ethnic and Religious Populations in Central Asia and India” (Thursday, 11:45–12:30)

**Abstract:** The conquest of the easternmost satrapies of the Persian empire (Bactria, Sogdiana, Paropamisadae, Arachosia, Seistan, Gandhāra) by Alexander the Great between 329 and 326 BCE drastically changed the geopolitics of these regions with far-reaching consequences. During the eight centuries that follow the conquest of the Macedonian king, these territories were occupied by Greeks (Seleucids, Graeco-Bactrians, and Indo-Greeks), Parthians, Scythians, and Kushans. Geographically, politically, and culturally these regions can be divided into two important and distinct zones along the natural barrier of the Hindu Kush mountain range. The zone north of the Hindu Kush corresponds to highly Hellenized Bactria and Sogdiana, while that to the south corresponds to Arachosia, Paropamisadae, and Gandhāra of Indian culture. It was for this precise reason that at the time when Bactria and Sogdiana passed under the control of the Seleucid dynasty, the territories to the south of the Hindu Kush passed under the control of Chandragupta, the founder of the Mauryan empire. The geographical, political, and cultural characteristics of these two large zones help us in understanding the settlement patterns and choice of iconography language of the successive kingdoms and empires. For example, thousands of coins issued by the Greek rulers circulated in the north of the Hindu Kush mountain range are mainly monolingual while the ones issued in the south are bilingual. Though the depictions of Greek gods and goddesses testify to the prevalence of a Hellenistic culture in the area, the emergence of Bhāgavata imagery as early as the third and second centuries BCE as revealed by numismatic evidence can no longer pass over in silence. The bilingual silver drachms issued by the Indo-Greek king, Agathocles, depicting Balarāma-Sam and Vāsudeva-Kṛṣṇa, give us a perfectly clear and explicit illustration of the first forms of Vaiṣṇavaism in India. However, most of the sovereigns of the independent Bactrian and Indo-Greek kingdoms legitimized their kingship by identifying themselves with Alexander the Great and using monetary types evoking his persona. The pressure of invaders, including the Scythians and the Parthians and the Adam Yuezhi (later known as Kushans), compelled the Greeks to progressively abandon their possessions. Scythian kings not only repeated on their coinages the most popular Greek monetary types, but they also inaugurated a new type on the obverse, representing the king on horseback wearing heavy armor or cataphractus. The cataphracti — heavily armored horsemen — usually fought in columns, holding their long spears against the infantry. At the time the Kushans reached their apogee, cultural interactions and preexistent Hellenistic artistic forms facilitated a progressive Indianization. The diversity and syncretism characterizing Kushan iconography resulted firstly from religious tolerance opening doors to multicultural diversity, secondly from the development of trade routes crossing these regions made this fertile land a meeting point of different cultures, and finally, the cultural, religious, and artistic heritage of the former political supremacies (Persians, Greeks, Scythian, and Parthians) was still in vogue and penetrated diverse Kushan art forms, making this school one of the richest in India.
Robert Bracey (Curator, British Museum)

Title: “The Limits of Kushan Power and the Limits of Evidence”  (Thursday, 4:00–4:45)

Abstract: In part this talk responds to James Scott’s The Art of Not Being Governed through the lens of a relatively narrow period and a particular historical political unit. Scott’s central thesis, that non-state peoples were engaged in a dynamic responsive relationship to the settled agrarian imperial states which form the focus of much modern historiography, is a genuinely interesting one. For reasons which are explored, essentially limitations of evidence* and historiography, this talk does not begin by attempting to construct the sort of history Scott challenges us to write — a history of hill peoples, āṭavika, and nomadic confederations.

Instead the talk begins at the ideological centre of the Kushan empire, the king and his court, and follows the lines of power out from that center. How was imperial authority exerted? How far did it reach, and how quickly? Who were the officials responsible? Some examples are offered, particularly water management and calendrical regulation. This exercise partly illustrates the limitations of the evidence for addressing the questions that Scott poses. Moving from the network and point models of power the limits of the historiography of fortification and warfare are touched upon.

The final part of the talk examines some of the negative non-state spaces that are left at the edges of this system of imperial power. Many of these are, of course, less well-known political units that presumably mirrored the Kushans’ own structures. Others offer the opportunity to explore the sort of non-state spaces that Scott outlines. They are substantially more diverse than a binary opposition of agrarian state and non-state hill peoples would imply. Those people separated from the Kushan state by altitude are almost entirely unknowable, the evidence for them simply too sparse for a meaningful examination. However, the forest tribes of northwest India and the nomadic pastoralists of Central Asia do offer some opportunities. The talk finishes by exploring some of the ways incorporating these people can unlock new perspectives on the Kushan state.

Endnote: *The historiography of the Kushans is well developed and much relevant source material has been compiled in useful collections. The most influential volumes remain J. Rosenfield, Dynastic Art of the Kushans (1967) and A. L. Basham, Papers on the Date of Kaniska (1968). Inscriptions are compiled in S. Shrava, Kushan Dated Inscriptions (1993) and online in the Corpus of Kharoshthi Inscriptions (CKI) https://www.gandhari.org. Literary evidence has recently been revisited in H. Falk, Kushan Histories: Literary Sources and Selected Papers from a Symposium at Berlin, December 5 to 7, 2013 (2015), and Buddhist literature relevant for contemporary social and economic issues have been explored by Gregory Schopen, his work collected in four volumes beginning with G. Schopen, Figments and Fragments of Mahāyāna Buddhism in India: More Collected Papers (1987). This contrasts markedly with the situation for contemporaries, both other political units and non-state entities.

Matthew Canepa (Professor of Art History and Classical and Near Eastern Studies, University of Minnesota)

Title: “Reshaping Eastern Iran’s Topography of Power after the Achaemenids”  (Thursday, 9:45–10:30)

Abstract: The archaeology of eastern Iran reveals impressive continuities with cities such as Balkh and Merv retaining their importance for centuries. Yet this sense of stability dissolves as one examines more closely the shape of these cities or the surrounding landscapes. This paper explores the strategies by which successive Iranian empires reshaped eastern Iran’s symbolic topography of power, both materially and conceptually. It considers a series of case studies, in which “Iranian” empires, such as the Seleucids, Kushans, or Sasanians, altered eastern Iran as they sought to take control of the region’s urban and natural environments.
Emily Hammer (Research Associate-Assistant Professor, Director of Center for Middle Eastern Landscapes, University of Chicago) and Anthony Lauricella (Doctoral Candidate in Archaeology, University of Chicago)

**Title:** “Pre-Islamic Fortresses of the Balkhab River Valley (Northern Afghanistan)” (Thursday, 4:45–5:30)

**Abstract:** In this paper we describe and analyze the particularly varied and dense landscape of forts/fortresses and fortified citadels in the Balkhab River Valley of northern Afghanistan. Settlement here generally follows the various shifting channels of the river as well as artificial canals that cut through the desert. Published data, especially Ball and Gardin’s Archaeological Gazetteer of Afghanistan (1982), describe many of the large sites in the region, but dozens of smaller, undocumented fortresses and citadels also dot the landscape. Our research uses modern and historical satellite imagery to systematically survey the river valley. Analysis of this region, an approximately eighty kilometer swath stretching from the edge of the Aqcha river system to the desert east of Kholm and north to Amu Darya, revealed over two thousand sites. The most common are mounded sites and square or circular enclosures. Our survey also identified caravanserais, relict field systems, and abandoned villages. Many of the fortified or enclosed sites may be provisionally dated on the basis of architectural and comparison to excavated sites and on the basis of their spatial association with geomorphologically dated water channels. Study of the distribution and spatial patterning of these forts not only fills the gaps in our knowledge of the region and its changing settlement patterns, but also allows us to track changes in various pre-Islamic polities’ maintenance of territorial control along the inhabitable corridors of the shifting river valley.

Rhyne King (PhD Student in Ancient Near Eastern History, University of Chicago)

**Title:** “Local Power Brokers in Iranian and Post-Iranian Bactria: Aristocrats, Dependents, and Imperial Regimes” (Friday, 11:00–11:45)

**Abstract:** Bactria was a zone of interimperial competition in the Iranian and post-Iranian periods. At various times between ca. 200 and 750 CE, the region north of the Hindu Kush was under the purported control of the Kushans, Iranians (Sasanians), Kidarites, Hephthalites, Türk Qaghanate, and Umayyad Caliphate. However pre-industrial imperial rule was always fragmentary, and Bactria’s mountainous terrain further hindered imperial pretensions. In order to operate the mechanisms of empire, super-regional powers needed to incorporate local elites into their hegemonic apparatuses. Bactria provides an opportunity, unique in the Iranian world, to investigate the ever-changing relations among empires, aristocrats, and dependents over hundreds of years. More than 150 Bactrian documents, spanning from the fourth to the eighth centuries, attest to the importance of patrimonial landowners in the maintenance and operation of empire. However, these texts, chiefly letters and economic documents, demonstrate that these aristocrats were not imperial pawns. Rather the Bactrian elite sought not just to serve their imperial overlords, but also to maintain and increase their own wealth across generations. In the documents of these elite families, three networks are apparent: aristocratic-imperial, aristocratic-aristocratic, and aristocratic-dependent relations. This paper examines these three social networks in order to parse the dynamics of local and imperial power in Bactria.
Laurianne Martinez-Sève (Professor of Greek History, Université de Lille-3)

**Title:** “Greek Power in Hellenistic Bactria: Control and Resistance”  (Thursday, 11:00–11:45)

**Abstract:** The entire history of Afghanistan shows how difficult it is to control this country. This paper studies which choices the Greeks made to control Bactria, what kind of domination they tried to impose, and some markers of this domination. It also studies how the local population reacted to this foreign power, especially in Ai Khanoum where we can identify the evidence of a strong resistance.

Richard Payne (Neubauer Family Assistant Professor, The Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago)

Co-organizer of The Limits of Empire conference  (Thursday, 8:30–9:00)

Kathleen D. Morrison (Neukom Family Professor of Anthropology and the College, University of Chicago)

Provides commentary and discussion  (Friday, 12:30–1:30)

Nicholas Schindel (Wissenschaftlicher Mitarbeiter, Austrian Academy of Sciences)

**Title:** “Coins as a Marker of Empire in the Sasanian Period: Examples from Eastern Iran”  (Friday, 9:15–10:00)

**Abstract:** Since its very invention, coinage has always been an expression of imperial propaganda, as can be seen in the cases, e.g., of the Lydians or the Achaemenids, even if there are also exceptions such as, e.g., China. Sasanian Iran was not different from its Achaemenid and Arsacid predecessors; as regards the numismatic evidence, we are in a more fortunate situation since Sasanian coinage from eastern Iran is more plentiful, and in several regards more informative, than its earlier parallels. While much (if not most) of what can be learned from these coin issues for our understanding of imperial dynamics rests on modern interpretation, in the paper I try to focus as much as possible on the unambiguous and reliable data that can be derived from the coins and try to address what coins can tell us about how the Sasanians tried to rule in what is nowadays Afghanistan.

Nicholas Sims-Williams (Professor of Iranian and Central Asian Studies, School of Oriental and African Studies – University of London)

**Title:** “The Bactrian Archives as a Historical Source”  (Friday, 10:00–11:00)

**Abstract:** Since 1991 more than 150 documents in Bactrian, chiefly legal contracts and letters, have appeared on the international art market. Many of these documents are dated in years ranging from 110 to 549 of an unnamed era. With them are associated some 32 Arabic documents dated in the years 138–160 A.H., some of which refer to members of the family of Mir son of Bek, who are also known from the latest of the Bactrian documents. Certain documents, in particular those relating to the Bek family and a much earlier Bactrian letter referring to the Sasanian emperor Peroz, provide synchronisms that make it possible to establish at least approximately the starting-point of the Bactrian era, two current views placing this in 223/4 or 227/8.

While it is important for the historical evaluation of these documents to establish the starting point of the Bactrian era, and thus the dates of the documents dated in that era, it is no less significant to
fix the relative and absolute chronology of the numerous undated Bactrian documents. Various types of evidence can be used for this purpose, including historical data in the documents, references to persons known from other documents, and the numerous palaeographic, orthographic, and linguistic developments that inevitably took place over the course of more than four centuries.

In order to exploit the Bactrian documents as a historical source, it is necessary not only to distinguish those from different periods but also to distinguish those from different regions. Although the manuscripts unfortunately have no reliable provenance, the majority can be shown to derive from three areas: the petty kingdom of Rob (modern Rui) in the northern Hindukush, which at certain times seems to have extended as far north as Samingan; the province of Kadagstan, farther to the east, which in the earlier documents appears to be a direct dependency of the Sasanian crown; and the region of Gozgan (Juzjan) to the west of Balkh. In addition at least one document was written in Warnu (probably Qunduz) and one in a place named Khesh, which was probably situated to the south of the Hindukush, between Bamiyan and Kabul. While many of the latest documents clearly form part of the archive of the Bek family, who seem to have been major landowners in both Rob and Kadagstan, it seems impossible to establish whether this also applies to the earlier documents and to those from other regions such as Gozgan.

Having established where and when the Bactrian documents were written, one can begin to make sense of the fragments of history that each of them contains.

**Gil J. Stein** (Director, The Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago, Professor of Near Eastern Archaeology)

Co-organizer of The Limits of Empire conference  (Thursday, 8:30–9:00)

**Matthew W. Stolper** (John A. Wilson Professor Emeritus of Assyriology, Director, Persepolis Fortification Archive Project, The Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago)

**Title:** “Achaemenid Documents from Arachosia and Bactria: Administration in the East, seen from Persepolis”  (Thursday, 9:00–9:45)

**Abstract:** Dense information in records from Persepolis makes it possible to infer the institutional context of recently available Elamite administrative fragments from Old Kandahar and Aramaic satrapal records from Bactria and to recognize them as products of widespread, long-lasting Achaemenid imperial organization.

**Tasha Vorderstrasse** (Research Associate, The Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago)

**Title:** “The Limits of the Kushan Empire in the Tarim Basin”  (Thursday, 2:45–3:30)

**Abstract:** The Kushans built an ethnically and geographically diverse empire in Central Asia and northern India about which we still know surprisingly little. The question that is posed in this paper is the extent to which the Kushans controlled the Tarim Basin and what this can tell us about the political ecology of the Kushan empire in general. Attempting to unravel the extent of Kushan control in the Tarim Basin has implications for our understanding of the Kushan empire and how it interacted with its local subjects. It allows us to construct an imperial model for the Kushan empire that may lead us to better understand whether it acted as a direct-rule empire, an indirect control empire, or some combination that varied on the basis of which region it controlled or particular circumstances.
This means we need to take the different forms of evidence we have for the Kushans in the Tarim Basin and determine if we can use them to reconstruct the eastern border of the empire. Further, the evidence from the Tarim Basin should be compared to the material culture found in other parts of the Kushan empire in order to better understand the Kushan empire and the limits of its control over specific regions.

The Tarim Basin itself was also an imperial periphery for the Han Chinese empire in this period. The Chinese dynastic histories tell us that the Kushans were involved in the Tarim Basin on several occasions but the information is limited and for some periods of time the Chinese sources are silent. Further, as I have argued elsewhere, using Chinese sources can be problematic since the Chinese only recorded what was of interest to them and had a definite point of view. Later sources also suggest Kushan involvement in the area, but the question remains whether this collective memory of the Kushans actually has a grounding in reality. In this paper, I compare the various sources and assess how they can help us understand the Kushan activities in the region. Beyond the evidence from the Chinese historical sources and later traditions, this paper also assess the archaeological evidence from the Tarim Basin and determines how it reflects (or does not) evidence for either direct or indirect Kushan imperial control and how that may have impacted life in the Tarim Basin after the fall of the Kushan empire.
— Notes —
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