**SOBTI — Beyond**

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**Beyond Potomology & Place: (Re)Imagining Narratives of Journeys and Non-Places along the Oxus River**

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The construction of historiographies and master narratives has for long remained among the most critical products peculiar to the deliberate histories of data collation. Within the realms of the so-called spatial turn in the digital humanities, the impulse to position new tools against old questions (Guldi, n.d.) has now allowed for a self-conscious re-visiting of these data repositories. Not only can the logic of these data compilations be questioned, so too can the biases on how this data has been used to ‘create’ legitimizing histories. Meanwhile, given that the concept of spatiality (Tally, 2013; Stilgoe, 1980; Bender, 2006)—broadly defined as the engagement of land, landscape, and human agency—has now become central to this vein of humanistic inquiry, even the master narratives themselves are open to interrogation. Places and events can be ‘re-built’, and unprecedented questions can be asked. Within this broad purview, this paper provides a vignette of a digital humanities research project currently under way within the Buildings-Landscapes-Cultures Program (blc) at the School of Architecture & Urban Planning, University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee.

The Medieval Riverlogues research project (2013–present) engages and organizes datasets that lie nested within the ‘grand’ and ‘geographic’ histories of medieval Persian and Arab scholars documenting the epoch of the medieval Riddah expansions towards Central Asia’s fertile Mawarannahr region situated across the Oxus River. While superficially ‘documenting’ the advances of the large Arab hordes who crossed this legendary waterway—their many encampments and logistics—alongside their socio-ethnic origins and purported destinations, these data compendiums also proposed the strategic re-positioning of prevalent Islamic histories within cultural tropes central to the Persian and Eurasian heartlands. Even more significantly, in their liberal cannibalizing of past repositories, they focused attention on the momentous nature of passage and journey between the nomadic and sedentarized realms, investing this riverine ‘borderland’ or ‘crossing zone’ with special meaning as a non-place of sorts. In interrogating this genre of collation and re-presentation, this research draws upon three important Islamic data collations that served as exemplars towards this introspective yet self-conscious construction of identity at this liminal zone. The first is geographer al-Muqaddasi’s (945–1005 CE) encyclopedic, exhaustive compendium on the provinces of the Islamic domain (*mamlakat al-Islam*)titled the *Ahsan at-Taqasim fi Ma`rifat il-Aqalim*. The second text is al-Tabari’s (838–923 CE) impressive *Tarikh al-Rusul wa al-Muluk* or *Tarikh al-Tabari*, which documented in its 36 volumes the detailed history of the movement of Persian armies at major crossing points along the Oxus River (later the Amu Darya), while suggesting how the relentless process of the great Arab *tamsir* and the spread of Islamic urban traditions imparted significance to the role of Arab armies as the agents of urban transformation. The third is al-Narshakhi’s (899–959 CE) *Tarikh-i Bukhara*: the global urban history of Mawarannahr’s most prosperous city.

The Medieval Riverlogues project combines the deep analysis of these medieval texts and narrative accounts in Arabic and Persian, alongside archival research at repositories across the Russian Federation and Central Asia. It also employs extensive acquisitions of Soviet-era map collections that document the topography and potomology of the Oxus River (Amu Darya) towards developing digital renderings and 3D computer animations based on these maps, besides a set of newly drawn maps especially prepared for the project. A proposed public documentary proposal to the NEH combines all of these elements alongside live video footage from Central Asia (preliminary preview phase completed Summer 2013). It is intended that the completed Medieval Riverlogues project shall be shared with educational institutions and museums worldwide, thereby describing this historical riverine landscape within its cultural context via electronic media resources and digital imagery in unprecedented ways (including web streaming and video technologies).

**References**

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