
BOOK REVIEWS

The Archaeology of Medieval Islamic Frontiers: From the Mediterranean to the Caspian Sea, edited by A. Asa Eger. University of Colorado Press, 2019. 232pp., Hb. \$58.00. ISBN-13: 9781607328780.

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Over the course of three decades of theoretical and methodological development in landscape archaeology, traditional perspectives of archaeological frontiers have been reassessed and diverse alternatives advanced. Eger's edited volume advances a nuanced view of frontiers as both vague and complex regions, far more than simple boundaries between conflicting factions or sparsely populated and untraveled borderlands at the extremities of a cultural-political region. The authors' treatment of the frontiers of the medieval Islamic world reveals them to be highly dynamic, fluid, and culturally productive regions of human interaction; a fertile area for research that surely merits greater scholarly attention than it has been heretofore given.

The collection is the product of a session held at the Annual Meetings of the American Schools of Oriental Research (ASOR), entitled "Islamic Frontiers and Borders in the Near East and Mediterranean" from 2011 to 2013. Rather than focusing on "major frontiers" such as the Iberian/Andalusi, the Central Asian/east Iranian, or those of the Byzantine Empire, the particular selection of articles in the volume is aimed at addressing issues at the "minor frontiers" of the Islamic Empire. The book is therefore organized into three parts, each corresponding to minor frontiers within major quarters of the medieval Islamic world: the Maghrib and the Mediterranean Sea in *Part I The Western Frontiers*, Egypt and Nubia in *Part II The Southern Frontiers*, and finally the Caucasus and Central Asia in *Part III The Eastern Frontiers*. As noted in the introduction, the existing body of archaeological research into these frontiers is unfortunately limited. All the authors have therefore incorporated some analysis of textual sources into their studies as a supplement, although the degree to which they incorporate these sources varies considerably. The archaeological material and methodology is additionally highly varied throughout the collection, with focuses ranging from material culture, as in Ian Randall's use of ceramic wares in "Conceptualizing the Islamic-Byzantine Maritime Frontier," to landscape approaches, such as Anthony J. Lauricella's viewshed and settlement pattern analysis in "Ibadi Boundaries and Defense in the Jabal Nafusa (Libya)."

As a starting point for exploring differing perspectives of the Islamic frontiers (or *al-thughur*), Eger takes a critical view of the core-periphery model, according to which frontiers of the Islamic world are best characterized in terms of their hierarchical relationship to regional centers (that is, politically/culturally important, urban, and densely populated areas). Eger makes the case for an alternative view, according to which frontiers, as areas of major economic production/exchange, societal change, and political power, can essentially be considered

Keywords: Keywords: Frontiers, Landscape Archaeology, Medieval Islam, Historical Geography

“centers” in their own right. Germane to this premise is that frontiers are also heterogeneous; that is to say, there are different types of frontier and a frontier’s type is determined by the type of interactions it mediates, which are not always mutually exclusive. Thus, for example, a given frontier may be characterized as economic, or as cultural, or as both. Of especial note is the concept of internal frontiers, a concept not well captured by the core-periphery model, which can reveal internal local expressions and regionalisms throughout different frontier types: demographic, religious, environmental, rural/local, and cognitive.

Two of these types and their corresponding case studies should draw particular attention. First, in her paper “Making Worlds at the Edge of Everywhere: Politics of Place in Medieval Armenia,” Kathryn J. Franklin explores the cognitive frontier perspective by raising the question “a frontier for whom?”; primarily through architectural analysis of caravansarais and examination of medieval Armenian and Islamic textual sources. By contrasting the Islamic view of Armenia as a peripheral region with the Armenian perspective, which sought to characterize Armenia as instead a central region, she demonstrates how frontiers are mentally constructed, (in her words, “imagined”), thereby dissolving the conceptual dichotomy between “natural”/physical frontiers and political frontiers, as well as providing insight into how and why frontiers persist.

Second, Randall and Renata Holod’s and Tarek Kahlaoui’s “Guarding a Well-Ordered Space on a Mediterranean Island” the authors examine the settlement system of Ibadi fortified mosques and other defensive structures on the rural island of Jerba. Here the authors illustrate that not only did the northern coast act as a Byzantine frontier, but that the southern coast also functioned as a rural and local frontier. In this case, the nature of the settlements and their distribution were defensive, indicating that the coast represented an internal border within the Islamic world, between the Sunni realm and the Ibadi island refuge. Also focusing on a historical Ibadi held territory, Lauricella makes a parallel conclusion about the defensive internal and external frontiers in the Jabal Nafusa.

Collectively, the studies provide a fairly strong critique of the core-periphery model. While Eger himself acknowledges that all of the case studies in the collection examine frontiers at the periphery of the Islamic realm, the few arguable cases of internal frontiers provide strong counter examples to the generalization that all frontiers must be peripheral to a core, both in a social and in a geographic sense. Proposing that frontiers do not need to be physically peripheral calls into question the association of frontiers with specific types of borders and boundaries, and might be construed as an argument concerning terminology, with the potential downside of missing the useful generalization that associates frontiers with areas of transition, be they cultural, physical, or of any other type. Nevertheless, the association between frontier, border, and boundary is strong throughout the book, with the possible exception of Jana Eger’s study on the Land of Tari in Nubia. Case studies of frontiers that are more clearly internal to the Islamic realm would provide a stronger critique of the core-periphery model and a more comprehensive picture of medieval *thughur*. However, given that few such cases are available, as research and sources in this field are limited, their absence does not diminish the value and substance of this collection.

Altogether, this book is an invaluable contribution to medieval Islamic studies and the archaeological studies of frontiers, in general.