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# 2 Global History and the Study of Frontier Zones in Ancient Afro-Eurasia: A Postcolonial Endeavor

## I Introduction

Recent decades saw a decisive shift in spatial imaginations of classical antiquity. The ancient world is now increasingly considered a globalized world, its geography seen as polycentric, its dynamics as interconnected, and its history as world history.[1] Greece and Rome now share foundational place with other centers of connectivity in global configurations of the ancient Afro-Eurasian world, stretching far beyond the geographies of the Mediterranean basin.[2] Timely interests in such global configurations have incited immense fame and fascination for 'Silk Road history' to apprehend the rapid transformative interconnectedness of the Afro-Eurasian world from the third century BCE onward.[3] Often considered as the ultimate story of premodern globalization, a precursor to our modern globalized times, the Silk Road narrative presents the ancient world as a vibrant commercial 'commonwealth' where goods,

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**1** See, for instance, new narratives on the ancient world in Scott 2016; Burstein 2017; Seland 2022; as also, more specifically engaging with globalization theories to understand the ancient world and its connectivities, Pitts and Versluys 2015a; Hodos 2016; Boivin and Frachetti 2018; Hodos 2020; Autiero and Cobb 2021; Blömer et al. 2021; and Versluys forthcoming, amongst others; cf. Altaweel and Squitieri 2018 with an emphasis on universalism; and Malkin 2011; Collar 2013; Hall and Osborne 2022 with an emphasis on networks.

**2** Afro-Eurasia as used in this handbook refers to the world region of North Africa, Europe, and Asia as a macro-unit of analysis, based on local, regional, and global transimperial connectivities across this space. It encompasses the Greek mainland, Egypt, the Red Sea, Western Asia, Central Asia, the Inner Asian steppes, the Indian subcontinent, and East Asia (von Reden, vol. 1, Introduction, 2). For the term Afro-Eurasia as a suitable arena for global history see Hodgson 1963; Frank and Gill 1993; Bentley 1998; Chase-Dunn and Hall (1997) 2018, 149–186; cf. the thoughtful discussion in Hann 2016 in relation to the term 'Eurasia.'

**3** This moment of globality in the third century BCE has been connected to the oft-cited passage of Polybios who observed an increasing connectivity of the *oikoumene*: "ever since this date [ca. 220 BCE], history has been an organic whole: the affairs of Italy and Libya have been interlinked (συμπλέκεσθαί) with those of Greece and Asia, all leading up to one end" (Polyb. 1.1.3, transl. Paton 2010, instructive discussion in Inglis and Robertson 2005; Benjamin 2014). Common narratives, however, anchor the beginnings of the Silk Road in the second century BCE, often evoking the date of 138 BCE as the foundational moment of the 'opening' of the Silk Road, launched by the diplomatic mission of Zhang Qian (164–114 BCE), who was sent by the Han emperor Wudi (r. 141–187 BCE) to the 'Western regions' in Central Asia to seek support of the Dayuezhi against their common enemy: the Xiongnu (Sima Qian, *Shiji* 123). See Christian 2000 for reflection on the chronology of the Silk Roads; cf. Leese-Messing, ch. 3, II.1, this volume, for the origins of the idea of such an 'opening' of the Silk Road.

religions, language, and ideas flowed freely across lands, continents, and seas, driven and facilitated by lucrative long-distance networks of exchange, communication, and cooperation between Han China and the Roman Mediterranean.[4] With a commitment to connectivity, this vision of history promises a novel narrative of rich intercultural contact and human collaborative achievement, shifting the focus from contained areas to connective histories. Yet, as critically outlined by Sitta von Reden (ch. 1), the harmonized success story of the Silk Road has not only served nationalist, colonial, and neo-imperial narratives and ambitions since Ferdinand von Richthofen's popularization of the term in the nineteenth century, but also profoundly obscured and overlooked various historical frictions, conflicts, and a diverse range of local and regional actors in the various spaces in between Rome and China whose voices became lost in the crossroads of civilization.[5] In the vagaries of Silk Road rhetorics, these in-between regions and their 'long-forgotten' kingdoms and polities have been positioned as marginal places, written into history as peripheral spaces between domains of perceived centralities in the West and the East but deprived of being recognized as historically meaningful in their own right. These in-between regions, here referred to as the frontier zones of imperial space, are the topic of this volume, pushed into the limelight of historical analyses.

In service of this handbook volume's objective to historicize economic processes of the Afro-Eurasian world region beyond the Silk Road narrative, this chapter is concerned with embedding the study of ancient frontier zones in the theoretical logics of globalization on the one hand, and with the intellectual agenda of postcolonial studies on the other. At first glance, the combination of frontier zones, globalization, and postcolonialism appears an impossible trinity of subject matter. After all, frontier zones are associated with zonal limits of space within an implied geography of distinct (political) entities, and thus hardly compatible with the borderless decentralized world of cultural ties and flows that globalization presumably represents. The conceptual origins of 'frontiers' further carry significant colonial baggage, much of it related to American expansionism, exploitation, and violent subjugation of indigenous peoples. These trappings might make the focus on frontier zones one that risks reproducing, rationalizing, and reifying landscapes according to colonialist geographies and thus one that might be considered counterintuitive in light of aspirations to redeem ancient Afro-Eurasian history from the essentialist rhetorics of the Silk Road – itself a term produced in imperial times.[6] Globalization, in turn, has not only been considered as a consequence of modernity and therefore conceptually unsuited for studies

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**4** See modern narratives in, amongst others, Liu 2010; Frankopan 2015; Benjamin 2018, 1–15; Whitfield 2019.

**5** Von Reden, ch. 1, this volume, with thoughtful analysis and bibliography; see also Leese-Messing, ch. 3, I.1, this volume, and recent discussion in Winter 2022.

**6** For the imperial context surrounding the emergence of the concept, see Osterhammel 1987; Rezakhani 2010; Chin 2013; see also Hopkirk 1980; Winter 2022, 23–91 particularly in relation to the adventurous travel spirit of the early 1900s.

of antiquity, but has also received harsh criticism by some postcolonial theorists who view it as a new form of imperialism that thrives on grand narratives of a borderless interconnected world at the expense of diverse local realities and deep economic inequalities.[7]

As it seems, the relationships between frontier zones, globalization, and postcolonialism are difficult, complex, and even perceptibly contradictory. Yet, it should not be overlooked that ancient economies did not amount to a single global capitalist market economy, and that imperialism and colonization in antiquity operated in vastly different ways than modern colonizations.[8] As I will argue, frontier zones, globalization, and postcolonialism can form a productive combination for investigating ancient economic processes on various scales if they are not objectified as predetermined phenomena – reified in time and space – but rather treated as part of a heuristic constellation that facilitates the endeavor of global history writing. Broadening rather than restricting the analytical terrain, they are able to direct unprecedented light, thought, and theorization on a diverse range of transscalar interactions on the edge of empires that fundamentally shaped and spurred broader transimperial connectivities, as the various chapters in this volume demonstrate. Complementing the chapters to come, it is thus my goal in the following sections to unravel the uncanny relationships between frontier zones, globalization, and postcolonialism and canvass their combined heuristic potential for writing global history of ancient Afro-Eurasian economies.

## II  Frontier Zones in a Globalizing World

The untangling of these relationships proceeds in a discussion of two main paradoxes and the interlinkage between them. The first paradox forms around the interest in frontier zones as peripheral territorial entities on the one hand, and conceptions of interconnectivity in globalization theory on the other. Phrased differently: how does this handbook, operating in the domain of global history with connectivities and interactions at its methodological core, integrate the notion of frontier zones as its object of study?[9] The second paradox proceeds from the first one and forms around the broad perspectives that globalization offers and the endeavor of postcolonialism to challenge grand narratives. In other words: how do globalization and postcolonial-

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**7** See Giddens 1990 for globalization as a consequence of modernity; Naerebout 2006 for specific criticism in relation to antiquity; and further discussion in Jennings 2011, 1–34; Versluys 2014; Pitts and Versluys 2015b; Hoo vol. 2, ch. 1; Hoo 2022, 229–243.

**8**  For Western historiographies on the ancient economy, see von Reden and Speidel, vol. 1, ch. 17; for thoughtful discussion on ancient and modern colonizations, see van Dommelen 1997; Dietler 1998; 2005; Hurst and Owen 2005, as also n. 50.

**9**  For global history as this handbook's domain of operation, see Hoo, vol. 2, ch. 1.

ism align with this handbook's endeavor of writing global history beyond the essentialist tenets of the Silk Road model?

## II.1 Frontiers and Frontier Zones in History

To untangle the first paradox, we must first address terminology. What is a frontier zone? Intuitively and at its very simplest, a frontier refers to a type of boundary that establishes a real or constructed demarcation of an inner space in relation to an outer space, with the area around the frontier signified as a frontier zone. Frontiers and frontier zones are often used as synonyms for borders and borderlands, respectively, yet both sets of terms accompany different connotations that are worth clarifying. Pertaining to the particular quality of an in-between space, both borders and frontiers belong to what Bradley Parker described as a continuum of boundary dynamics or boundary situations.[10] In this continuum, borders represent crystallized boundaries that can be crossed or contested and therefore relate to more static or restrictive dividing lines between political units. Borders and borderlands, as also used in this handbook, thus appear in particular contexts of territorial state formation and edges of political authority, for instance in the highlands of Armenia or in the disputed area around the Euphrates as an imagined border between the Arsakid and Roman empires.[11]

Frontiers, at the other side of Parker's continuum, are more dynamic boundaries related to both the space as well as behaviors afforded by that space. They are considered to be more porous and fluid in character as they lean into the outwards.[12] This outward orientation of frontiers is also suggested by the etymology of the term: derived from the Latin word *frons* (pl. *frontes*; forehead or front), frontiers face that which is in front of them with the propensity to merge into it. Frontier *zones* are thus by definition fuzzy and spatially ambiguous: like the frontier itself, the zone around it is flexible and open rather than bounded and restricted. This particular openness and flexibility of the term is key for how frontier zones as dynamic networked spaces are analyzed in this handbook. Yet, it should also be made explicit that the term and its expansive connotations have a distinct history connected with the ideology and operation of imperial expansion. To explain how frontier zones then

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**10** Parker 2002, 374–375; 2006, 78–89; further discussion in Langer and Fernández-Götz 2020.

**11** As in, e.g., Plutarch, *Pompey* 33. 6; Cassius Dio 40. 15. 5, 76. 2. For the highlands of Armenia, see Fabian, ch. 9, this volume; for the borderland around the Euphrates, see Gregoratti, ch. 10, this volume; cf. de Jong and Palermo 2018.

**12** The distinction between borders and frontiers is also reflected in scholarship: where there is a primacy in Border Studies of research concerned with modern international state borders, especially the USA–Mexican border, Frontier Studies are more ambiguous about their subject of inquiry because of the more permeable nature of frontiers. See further discussion in Baud and van Schendel 1997; Rodseth and Parker 2005.

comes to align with the theoretical logics of globalization, I discuss here four historiographical highlights as important conceptual pathways that inform and transform the significance of frontier zones in the interest of global history.[13]

The notion of the frontier was first projected into scholarly discourse by Frederick Jackson Turner (1861–1932) whose Frontier Thesis infused the word with profound historical and historiographical meaning in reference to a distinct material reality.[14] A professor of history, Turner delivered his impactful lecture on *The Significance of the Frontier for American History* at the annual meeting of the newly founded American Historical Association in Chicago in 1893, three years after the U. S. Census Bureau formally declared the closure of the frontier after four centuries of West-European colonization of North America since its 'discovery' by Columbus.[15] He explained the colonial conquest of indigenous lands as a "great historic movement" of agrarian settlement that expanded the American frontier westwards across lands of wilderness.[16] The frontier came to represent the outer margins of civilization, a hostile line bravely defied and driven forward by West-European colonists featured as pioneering and voyaging farmers who spread and spatially progressed civilization into 'free land' – indigenous peoples remained fully marginal in the story. Importantly so, Turner's triumphal narrative not only described the frontier as a moving place but articulated its significance as a historical process of encounter. As a "meeting point between savagery and civilization," the frontier was marked by unique opportunity, adaptation, and transformation resulting from a "continuous touch with the simplicity of primitive society" beyond the frontier, an experience that would have shaped European colonists into new, uniquely democratic, and truly independent Americans.[17] With a far-reaching legacy of compelling ideas about American exceptionalism, national identity, and progressive individualism, the Turner Thesis thus established frontiers as a major area of historical inquiry.[18]

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[13] The intimate relation between global history and globalization theory is discussed in Hoo, vol. 2, ch. 1.

[14] Osterhammel 2009, 465–564 provides elaborate discussion on frontiers and their colonial contexts in the nineteenth century.

[15] Turner 1894, 199. The westward frontier had already accumulated adventurous (and celebrated) images of cowboys and 'Indians' in the popular imagination. Significantly so, the 1893 congress in Chicago was organized in connection with the World Columbian Exposition which juxtaposed Turner's lecture with William F. Cody's ('Buffalo Bill') entertainment show on the 'Wild West' (White 1994); Turner's lecture mobilized such existing ideas into the field of historical inquiry.

[16] Turner 1894, 199–200; note the word choice of peaceful "settlement" rather than violent conquest and ruthless exploitation which it entailed.

[17] Turner 1894, 200, see also 226–227; (1920) 1962, 293. The westward advancement of the frontier was thus considered not only as a movement of civilization but also as a movement of increasing independence of America from Europe – an achievement attributed to the courageous and creative spirit that the frontier experience instilled on its Anglo-American inhabitants.

[18] Yet, not without critique; see Waechter 1996; Klein 1997 for overviews of the debate.

Its impact was profound: the following decades, deep into the twentieth century, saw an immense surge of studies on the American frontier as well as on comparative frontiers across the world that had been settled by colonists founding new societies in Australasia, Africa, Canada, and Latin America.[19] Using Turner's nascent interpretation of the American frontier as point of departure, such inquiries not only broadened the scope of frontier studies but illuminated very different contexts and diverse consequences of colonial encounters, asserting differential roles of the frontier in various histories. Most influential among these were the writings of Owen Lattimore (1900–1989) on the diachronic relations of Imperial China with their nomadic pastoralist neighbors on the northern steppes. An American Sinologist and Mongolist, Lattimore had travelled extensively in northern China, Mongolia, and Xinjiang and experienced up-close the Japanese invasion of China and the imperial triangulations between China, Britain, and Russia in Central Asia.[20] His monumental work on *Inner Asian Frontiers of China* (1940, second post-war edition in 1951) as well as his subsequent writings were revolutionary in the way they approached frontiers, revising the notion with novel anthropological insights. As in Turner's conception, Lattimore's frontiers were pivotal for the development of human history, but his approach shifted the focus from geographical conditions of the frontier that shaped the colonist, to the social, economic, and ecological factors that shaped the frontier.[21] His deep diachronic analysis of China's frontier zones demonstrated that frontiers were "of social, not geographical origin," anchored in cyclical patterns of interactions and oscillating power relations between communities of expansionist powers (China) and the communities that bordered them (steppe pastoralists).[22] Rather than an essential line of civilization overcoming the wilderness, frontiers were reconsidered as shifting zones of interactions and exchange, shaped by negotiations of difference, mutual accommodation, joint collaboration, and potential community between border populations on both sides of the frontier, driven by shared economic interests different than those of central governments.[23] While providing due discussion of frontier frictions, violence,

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**19** The literature is immense, some examples will suffice: Bolton (1921) 1996 on Latin American frontiers; De Kievit 1938 on South African frontiers; Webb 1951 on global European frontiers; Careless 1954 on Canadian frontiers; McIntyre 1967 on West-African and Australasian frontiers; Hartz 1964 from a comparative perspective; Wieczynski 1976 on Russian frontiers. A Russian frontier thesis concerning Siberia had circulated in Russia decades before Turner gave his lecture, as discussed in Bassin 1993; 1999.

**20** Lattimore 1962, 16–23. Through his scholarly output, Lattimore also exerted influence on public opinion and political affairs, even becoming an advisor to Chiang Kai-Shek upon request of Franklin Roosevelt; further discussion in Harvey 1983.

**21** His framework is vividly outlined in Lattimore (1940) 1951, 21–25.

**22** Lattimore 1962, 469–470 (citation on 471); also Lattimore (1940) 1951, 242–251, 468, 542–552 for main conclusions. His narrative builds on the analytical categories of agricultural 'communities of sown land' and pastoralist 'communities of steppe land' (of Manchuria, Mongolia, Tibet, and Xinjiang) whose socio-economic realms overlapped in the frontier zone.

**23** Lattimore (1940) 1951, 244. Further discussion in von Reden, this volume, ch. 1.

and warfare between expanding Chinese settlement and margin populations, for Lattimore, the significance of the frontier lay in the ebb and flow of local interconnections rather than in the separate histories and destinies of colonizers and colonized – a dichotomy that did not suit at all the fluctuating Inner Asian power dynamics he analyzed.

Shifting the narrative from external imperial forces to internal frontier processes, Lattimore's writings on frontiers not only highlighted the socio-ecological creation of space but also drew attention to the role of marginalized peoples usually excluded from historical inquiry, analyzing them not as "inert pawns on the vast checkerboard of power politics" but as most "capable of political volition."[24] His intellectual engagement with general patterns of human history from the local perspective of the frontier zone anticipated later currents across studies of the past in relation to the rapidly changing present. Post-war scholarship, deeply affected by the sweeping socio-political impacts of World War II as well as the surge of colonial liberation movements of the 1950s, saw the rise of several new streams of thought with heightened awareness for the importance and agency of peripheries and its peoples. It is in this period that William McNeill (1917–2016) catapulted frontier zones to the center of world-historical change in his monumental work *The Rise of the West* (1963), prefiguring his many later contributions.[25] Although written from a distinct Eurocentric perspective, aimed to historically explain the hegemony of Europe and North America since 1500, McNeill's argument was formed around the idea that historical change and innovation were driven by societal confrontation and interaction with 'strangers' whose new skills and knowledge broadened the assortment and expression of civilization.[26] Time and again, it were those peripheral contacts with unfamiliar Others that provided the crucial traction and force needed for the motion of history. In this vein, the emergence of the great ancient civilizations of India, Greece, and China were explained as peripheral frontier processes themselves, their location "on the fringes of the [more] anciently civilized world" having been pivotal for prompting profound originality, drawing on diverse peoples, interactions, and lifestyles.[27] In spite of his preoccupation with how discrete civilizations rose and fell, McNeill's panoramic approach to the rhythms of history and his insistence on recurring cross-civilizational connections pioneered the articulation of peripheral zones as those interconnected spaces that drove 'ecumenical' processes of the world.[28]

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**24** Lattimore 1950, 23.

**25** Most relevant here are McNeill 1992; McNeill and McNeill 2003; McNeill 2008.

**26** As clearly stated in McNeill (1963) 1991, xvi, see also 253 for the ancient world. His retrospective essay on the book after 25 years is remarkably reflective in admitting the flaws, Western bias, and Eurocentric naivety of his writing in the 1960s.

**27** McNeill (1963) 1991, 167–170 (citation on 167).

**28** Most explicitly: they "prepared the way for the spectacular unification of the globe": McNeill (1963) 1991, 253. The rhythms of history would have followed a scheme of Middle Eastern dominance – Eurasian balance – Western hegemony, with the period of 500 BCE until 1500 CE as a balance between

With McNeill, peripheral areas became a key concern for the endeavor of world history, setting the stage for current practices of global history.[29] Numerous scholars followed up on the task to consider peripheries and their interactive and interlinking dynamics as essential for the motor of history.[30] Ongoing post-independence decolonization processes in Africa, Asia, and the Pacific intensified in the 1970s and 1980s, resulting in shifting political, cultural, and societal structures through increasing long-distance mobility and migrations across the world. These decades saw further intellectual reflections on world-historical dynamics with the rise of world-system approaches, first developed by Immanuel Wallerstein (1930–2019) in his *Modern World-System* (1974; 1980; 1989).[31] Inspired by Fernand Braudel's watershed study *La Méditerranée et le monde méditerranéen à l'époque de Philippe II* (1949, English translation in 1972) which conceived the notion of the entire Mediterranean basin as an interconnected geohistorical unity, Wallerstein argued that the origins, development, and complex mechanisms of political-economic realities of the modern capitalist world could not be adequately understood by using the nation state as the unit of socio-historical analysis.[32] These complexities could only be grasped from a broader macroperspective, if assessed as part of an integrated world system, structured and driven by systemic interactions and interdependencies between core regions, semi-peripheral and peripheral regions.[33] Drawing these dependency networks to the center of analysis, Wallerstein's world-system theory recognized structural inequalities across the system with peripheral zones at the poorest end of history. Peripheral regions, according to Wallerstein, were functionally defined as economically underdeveloped countries (often former colonies in frontier zones) that produced raw materials for more developed core areas whose economic success, in turn, depended on their exploitation of peripheries and semi-peripheries.[34] The role of peripheries in the development and workings of the world system was therefore crucial, as their possession of desirable (material and human) resources influenced the economic incorporation of these zones into the system as well as further shaped structural distributions of power, wealth, and resources within it. Since Wallerstein's scope of analysis reached back to 1500 as

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Eurasian civilizations. McNeill's approach aligned with the French Annales school of history, though Braudel is scarcely cited in his work.

**29**  Hoo, vol. 2, ch. 1 for the distinction between world history, globalization history, and global history.
**30**  For studies on frontier zones in ancient history and archaeology, see von Reden and Speidel, vol. 1, ch. 17; von Reden, ch. 1, this volume.
**31**  For his own reflections on how decolonization processes shaped his work, see Wallerstein 1974, 4–6. For world-systems theory and the question of power, see Hoo, vol. 2, ch. 1.
**32**  Wallerstein 2004, 18. Braudel's approach deeply impacted ancient studies as it confronted and challenged traditional modes of analysis previously focused on isolated regions of the Mediterranean.
**33**  Wallerstein 2004, x–xi. Wallerstein analyzed the origins of the modern world system, which initially spanned only part of the globe (Europe and North America) but later developed to span the entire globe.
**34**  Wallerstein 1974, 97–99, 349–350, 355.

the origins of the modern world system, his theory had limited immediate impact on studies of antiquity.[35] Yet his timely and compelling methodological appeal to adopt global units of analysis to understand peripheral areas as entangled in networked processes unfolding beyond the geographical stretch of distinct societies resonated deeply across the humanities.[36] It is from world-system approaches that globalization studies rose to the fore, gaining momentum in the 1990s. While (early formulations of) world systems theory attracted much criticism for deterministic and totalizing overtones with exclusive concern for economic macrostructures at the expense of local cultural dynamics and human agency, other strands in proliferating globalization research of the past decades provide conceptualizations of the myriad ways in which local, regional, and global processes were entangled.

## II.2 The Significance of Frontier Zones for Global History Writing

It is against this background that we come to the significance of frontier zones in the interest of global history. The four historiographical highlights – connected with the writings of Turner, Lattimore, McNeill, and Wallerstein – illuminate how the conceptual itinerary of frontier zones shaped a repertoire of figurations that resonate in various scholarly explanations of frontiers zones. Frontier zones are considered as expanding (imperial) spaces, marked by (colonial) encounter, adaptation to physical and human geographies, and opportunities of transformation into something new. They are shaped by conflict and warfare but also by local social and ecological interaction, negotiation of differences, and with the potential of forging new communities. Phrased differently, they are places of change and innovation, where diverse people meet, exchange, and connect with unfamiliar 'strangers' with different sets of skills and knowledge. And finally, frontier zones possess economically exploitable resources and are interlinked with core areas as they likely operate as peripheral spaces in networks of dependency. All related to shifting social orders and variously conceptualized according to models of diffusionism, evolutionism, assimilation, interaction, and dependency networks of the world system: these figurations illustrate the formative and transformative significance of frontier zones across history.

The chapters in this volume engage with the existing thematic terrain but with particular interest in the significance of frontier zones for increasing and shifting transimperial connectivities across Afro-Eurasia in the period from 300 BCE to 300 CE.

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**35** See reflections in Kohl 1987; Hall and Chase-Dunn 1994; cf. Woolf 1990. For his own thoughts on antiquity, see Wallerstein 1974, 127–129.

**36** Wallerstein's world-system theory (originally spelled with a hyphen, later meaningfully conceptualized as world-systems analysis – in the plural – or world system analysis, without hyphen) branched out in various directions since its inception; see Chase-Dunn and Hall 1993; Hall et al. 2011; Hall 2017; Chase-Dunn and Hall 2018; and recently Chase-Dunn and Khutkyy 2021.

Answering to the endeavor of global history writing, potent globalization concepts centered around connectivities between distant localities have helped to shift lenses of research from politico-economic and socio-cultural containers to broader units of analysis that accommodate transregional connectivities. Much of the diverse globalization research adopted by pioneering historians and archaeologists for studying the ancient world has been built on theorizations of the cultural dimension of globalization. Concepts and practices such as deterritorialization and decentering, respectively, have drawn attention away from unidirectional core-periphery relations, to the ways in which objects and ideas (such as silk and religion) can be 'lifted out' of their previous spatio-historical context, to be adopted and re-embedded in other, new, or old local settings in light of large-scale political-economic connectivities and integration.[37] Such considerations can provide valuable alternatives to top-down narratives in order to explain the decentralized emergence of shared material culture, similar consumption practices, and social transformations across large distances in the ancient world.[38]

Early globalization scholars framed such deterritorialization as the growing irrelevancy of borders, resulting in a borderless world marked by increasing integration, assimilation, and universalization of institutions, standards, and behaviors.[39] Such conceptions gave rise to the persistent idea that globalization would entail increasing transregional homogenization – processes which were understood to entail a new form of hegemony of the universal.[40] The narrative of globalization thus presented an imperialistically shaped world order as a harmonious and naturalized version of reality – similar to the Silk Road model. Critics within and beyond globalization debates raised their voices against 'globalcentrism' and the emphasis on universalization in light of ever-increasing movements, migrations, and connectivities at the expense of local realities of place. Arturo Escobar, amongst the critics, argued that "place continues to be important in the lives of many people, perhaps most, if we understand by place the experience of a particular location with some measure of groundedness (however, unstable), sense of boundaries (however, permeable), and connection to everyday life, even if identity is constructed, traversed by power, and never fixed."[41] In similar vein, Arjun Appadurai stressed that local culture and identity "are not

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**37** It should be noted that globalization research adopted much vocabulary from postcolonial studies (Krishnaswamy 2008, 1–3; cf. Acheraïou 2011, 171–178). For deterritorialization, see Appadurai 1986; 1990, 301–308; Giddens 1990, 21–29; Tomlinson 1999, 106–149; for decentering ('provincializing the centre') see Chakrabarty 2000, 3–18. For these terms used in (globalization) approaches to antiquity, see, e.g., Fitzpatrick 2011; Versluys 2014, 35; Nederveen Pieterse 2015; Hoo 2022, 243–270.

**38** Within this volume, most explicitly, Brosseder and Miller, ch. 5.

**39** E.g., Ohmae 1990; Ritzer 1993; Friedman 2005; further discussion in Nederveen Pieterse 2021, 159–176.

**40** Most notably voiced by Hannerz 1997; Hardt and Negri 2001.

**41** Escobar 2001, 141; see further discussion on globalization and the local in Hoo 2022, 237–240 with bibliography.

subordinate instances of the global, but in fact the main evidence of its reality."[42] Despite global connectivities and global flows, it is in the locality where globalization processes are felt and negotiated: the locus of global macrointeractions lies in local contexts. Caution is therefore necessary in order not to lose sight of the significance of local action and local dynamics mediating globalizing processes on the ground, despite the focus on increasing transregional connectivities.

These deliberations were certainly relevant for the adoption of globalization vocabulary in studies of ancient history which, impacted by the immediacy of globalization in modern times and the prevalent usage of its lexicon, sometimes uncritically replaced the rubrics of Romanization and Hellenization to articulate hegemonic acculturative processes and implied civilizational progress, with that of globalization.[43] Escobar's concerns over the loss of the local and the eradication of local agency in favor of global interconnections aligned with earlier postcolonial criticisms stressing neo-imperial consequences of globalization processes. Arif Dirlik, most vehemently, argued that globalization processes are neither neutral or natural but that its workings are rooted in asymmetrical colonial power dynamics that are perpetuated and reconfigured into transnational neocolonial ones.[44] For Dirlik and others, global structures developed as reconfigurations of past colonial power dynamics, echoing the world-systemic inequalities that Wallerstein had brought into focus. For such critics, the language of globalization is profoundly inadequate if not profoundly inappropriate for any intellectual endeavor claiming to be postcolonial.

# III  Globalization, the Local, and Postcolonialism

## III.1  Postcolonialism and Discursive Knowledge

This brings us to the uneasy relationship between globalization and postcolonialism and its intellectual connection to the study of ancient frontier zones. Importantly so, the stirring socio-political context of the 1970s and 1980s not only shaped the climate in which Wallerstein developed his world systems theory to conceptualize structural global inequalities but also instigated, in parallel, the intellectual movement of postcolonialism. Spearheaded by scholars with personal histories of migration or displace-

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**42**  Appadurai 2010, 12; cf. Latour 2005, 176: "Macro no longer describes a *wider* or *larger* site in which the micro would be embedded like some Russian Matryoshka doll, but another equally local, equally micro place, which is *connected* to many others through some medium transporting specific types of traces" (emphasis in original). On the production of locality, see Appadurai 1996, 178–199; Tomlinson (2000) 2003.

**43**  Critical discussion is offered in Versluys 2014 (on Romanization); Hoo 2020; 2022, 38–70 (on Hellenization).

**44**  Dirlik 1994; see similar critique in Mignolo 2000; Hardt and Negri 2001; Dirlik 2002.

ment from former European colonies, postcolonialism devoted itself to articulate and challenge the manifold operations of imperialism and the lasting cultural and societal effects of colonization.[45] Initially in the form of literary criticism, postcolonialism soon galvanized a much broader wave across academia that critically interrogated the hegemonic structures and consequences of European colonialism as well as colonial canons of knowledge and (mis)representations of colonized places and peoples.

This makes postcolonialism profoundly relevant for the study of ancient frontier zones, as indeed for broader historical studies. The subtle but crucial difference between 'post-colonialism' and 'postcolonialism' is worth articulating here.[46] The absent hyphen gives meaning to the term as an intellectual movement that directs attention as well as challenges ongoing complex colonial legacies in the present. It indicates a broader scope than 'the historical period after colonialism' which focuses on the conditions, experiences, and effects of colonialism on peoples and diasporas of the 'postcolony'. The two often overlap in thematic scopes of study but, importantly so, the foundational premise of postcolonialism (without hyphen) is that colonialism and imperialism have not come to an end but still impact the present in manifold ways, long after colonies achieved formal independence. As phrased by John McLeod, postcolonialism "does not refer to something which tangibly *is*, but rather denotes something which it *does*."[47] Postcolonialism, as such, embodies ways and methods of thinking and inquiry that demand critical awareness of asymmetrical power relations wrought by centuries of colonialism of large swathes of the world.

Most astute is the postcolonial observation of the deep and lasting legacy of colonialism on the production of knowledge – both popular and academic – of (once-)colonized places, and peoples. Aligned with other scholarly observations and inspired by Michel Foucault's understanding of a discourse, Edward Said's seminal work *Orientalism* (1978) radically brought to light the intricate ways in which Europeans (the British and the French) were historically able to describe, manage, and dominate their colonies, not only militarily but also ideologically, scientifically, and imaginatively.[48] He argued that centuries of colonialism had created a profound institutional and

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**45** A concise history of the broad field is provided in Young 2005, 151–712; 2009; for discussion on the postcolonial turn, see Bachmann-Medick 2016, 131–173. See also n. 48.

**46** I follow McLeod 2010, 5–6; Appiah 1991, 348; but cf. broader terminological discussion in Ashcroft 1996; Ashcroft et al. (2000) 2007, 168–173.

**47** McLeod 2010, 6 (emphasis in original).

**48** Cf. Marchand 2009 for German Orientalism. While Said's work is often considered to have launched postcolonialism into a broader field, due should also be given to other pioneering postcolonial theorists. Most notably are Fanon 1952; 1963 on the psychological and cultural internalization of colonial structures of thought by colonial subjects; Spivak 1988; Hall 1990 on the fluid construction of cultural identity and the problem of fixed binaries; Spivak 1996a on unheard voices of subaltern groups (esp. women) and the problem of their (authoritative) representation by Western scholars; Bhabha (1994) 2004 on hybridity and the ambivalence of the interstitial Third Space where cultural difference and power (between colonizer and colonized) is negotiated. For an overview of critiques on Said, see Ashcroft and Ahluwalia 2009, 69–82.

systemic discourse of Orientalism – a "Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient" – that culturally naturalized notions of Western superiority over the Orient, its peoples, and cultures.[49] This pervasive discourse of Orientalism not only referred to structures of thought but also to academic, seemingly objective practices of describing and researching (histories of) the Orient which produced knowledge that endorsed the legitimization and materialization of colonial projects in the process. Exposing the historical entanglements between imperial power and academia, Said compellingly argued that those who control cultural knowledge of geographical regions (the Orient), by investing in scholarship about it, are able to monopolize and shape authoritative 'truth' about these regions in the service of colonialism. Postcolonial criticisms reverberated across the humanities with particular relevance for ancient Near Eastern studies, a collective discipline borne from Napoleon's expedition to Egypt (1789), and classical studies, traditionally devoted to the history and archaeology of Greece and Rome as cradles of and models for modern Western civilization.[50] Mindful about hegemonic practices of knowledge production, new directions of research soon emerged that integrated broader arrays of source material (beyond Greek and Latin texts) while challenging colonial narratives of the ancient past.[51] Yet, despite the interdisciplinary transformations that postcolonialism instigated, postcolonial thought in studies of antiquity runs a current risk of being relegated to the background as a politicized academic trend of the recent past. Especially in debates on Hellenization and Romanization, several scholars voiced criticism of postcolonial perspectives that were taken up, arguing that these engendered anticolonial methodologies that fostered nativist narratives of indigenous resistance and local continuity at the expense of historical change and complexity of imperial situations.[52]

## III.2 Globalization and Postcolonialism: A Heuristic Constellation

We should indeed remain cautious not to fall in the trap of monocentric essentialism: there is no fixed, authentic native past to retrieve from the ancient past. But

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**49** Said (1978) 2003, 3; see also 1994 elaborating on discursive (imperial) production of culture.
**50** See thoughtful reflections on archaeology in Webster and Cooper 1996; van Dommelen 1997; Gosden 2001; Meskell 2002; González-Ruibal 2010; Porter 2010; Gorshenina et al. 2019; Garcia-Ventura and Verderame 2020. For critical reflections on ancient history, see Goff 2005; Vlassopoulos 2007, 13–67; Schein 2008; Bradley 2010; Vlassopoulos 2010; Vasunia 2013, 1–30.
**51** For Greek and Hellenistic studies, see, e.g., Briant 1978; Preaux 1978; Kuhrt and Sherwin-White 1987; Sherwin-White and Kuhrt 1993; Malkin 2004; van Dommelen and López-Bertran 2013; Prag and Quinn 2013; Chrubasik and King 2017. For Roman studies, see, e.g., Millett 1990; van Dommelen and Terrenato 2007; Jiménez 2008; Mattingly 2014 for Roman studies.
**52** This evokes what Spivak 1996b, 214 coined as 'strategic essentialism' against mainstream narratives. See criticism in, e.g., Woolf 1997; Strootman 2011, 28–30; Versluys 2014, 2–4, 7–10; but cf. Gardner 2013; Hingley 2015; van Oyen 2015; Hingley 2017.

nativist strands within the swathes of academia should not distract from the postcolonial critiques on hegemonic knowledge production which still carry significant weight for the study of ancient frontiers. Importantly so, the frontier zones discussed in this handbook all share modern histories as objects of colonial or imperial desire which deeply affected discursive knowledge productions about these regions. Cognizant of hegemonic structures of thought, the authors explicitly respond to dominant core-periphery models of civilization, high culture, and economic progress moving into these spaces by the agency of foreign empires. Enduring legacy of ancient historiographies also play a role. The edges of the Eastern Desert in Egypt, for instance, as well the coastal regions of Arabia and India, feature already in Graeco-Roman geographical writings as wondrous places on the edges of the inhabited world, abundant with natural raw resources, which attracted imperial desire.[53] Such ancient representations, in turn, left distinct imprints on the directions of modern research and historical narratives of frontier zones and their peripheral, accommodating role in (historical processes of) 'Silk Road trade.'[54]

Although the interest of this volume lies in the significance of frontier zones for increasing transimperial connectivities, it is not the intention to essentialize the nature of frontier zones through comparative analysis or to interpret them aprioristically as exploitable places in the service of empires. While labelling frontier zones as such might be considered a reaffirming act of scholarly (Orientalist/imperialist) reification, it is precisely their selection based on perceived peripherality that speaks to the intellectual agenda of postcolonialism. Fabian et al.'s approach to frontier zones as a heuristic in a related forthcoming volume is relevant here. They compellingly argue that the designation of frontier zones pushes these zones to the perspectival center of investigation which opens up avenues to ask questions about their very 'frontier-ness' in light of various "relationships across space and scale, dynamics of expansion and transformation, and meeting of difference and their subsequent negations."[55] Commencing the inquiry from within these 'peripheral' zones rather than from the perspective of imperial centers, the authors of this handbook thus actively (re)contextualize these spaces as dynamic interconnected centers in their own right, rather than mere transit zones for Silk Road trade in the interest of empires. Discussed with similar historical depth as traditional imperial centers, the chapters give voice to a diverse host of active interacting local, regional, and global actors such as merchants, financiers, steppe elites, monasteries, tax administrators, kings, and armies, as well as providing major consideration of constraining, demanding, and enabling affordances of the landscape that influenced the actions, interactions, and tools

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**53** Discussed by von Reden, ch. 8, III.5, this volume; cf. von Reden, vol. 2, ch. 10.B; Ruffing 2017.

**54** But cf. the specialist historiography on Armenia, for which see Fabian, ch. 9, I.1, this volume.

**55** Weaverdyck and Dwivedi forthcoming. Cf. Ludden 2011 Düring and Stek 2018; Stek and Düring 2018 for similar reflections on the potentials and challenges of centralizing (perspectives from) 'peripheries'.

that these actors used to achieve their goals. These agentic variables open up space for greater historical nuance of ancient economic processes. Rather than being passive recipients of physical or institutional infrastructures endowed upon them by empires, this volume demonstrates that local actors were actively and socially engaged participants in economic developments of frontier zones. For instance, in the Gulf of Khambhat, discussed by Mamta Dwivedi (ch. 7) in relation to 'Indian Ocean trade,' any ship wanting to moor at the low shores of Barygaza was dependent on the navigating service of local fisherman to lead the way.[56] Yet the various chapters in this handbook demonstrate that local demand, knowledge, and skill not only played a mediating role, but also significantly contributed to tie frontier-zone processes to broader connectivities across Afro-Eurasia between 300 BCE to 300 CE. Likewise, economic development did not immediately plummet when empires drew back from frontier zones, as Kathrin Leese-Messing (ch. 3) observes for the Hexi corridor, nor was it stagnant if it remained outside the administrative orbit of empires, as in the case of the coastal sites of India (Dwivedi, ch. 7).[57]

In addition, rather than resulting in the reproduction of grand narratives, globalization – when considered as part of the heuristic toolbox – can actually assist analytical navigation of the thematic terrain of frontier zones in a way that does not propel back to the colonial Silk Road model. The authors of this volume work in explicit recognition of the diversity of frontier zone contexts, situations, and processes that shape the local, regional, and transregional networks across and beyond them. As discussed elsewhere in this handbook, conceptualizations of space and scale in globalization research provide productive ways to take interpenetrative levels of human activity into account.[58] A central premise is formed around the notion that space – as a scale as well as a sphere of action – is not contained: local processes do not happen in isolation but are shaped by their relational entanglements in regional and global social, cultural, and economic dynamics. The interconnection of different imperial networks, in turn, significantly depended on local efforts, frequently in the form of interpersonal relationships and interactions. In Nabatean society, discussed by Eli Weaverdyck (ch. 12.A), evidence for banqueting practices in places across large distances indicates that social conviviality played a significant role in maintaining and negotiating various intra-Nabatean relationships.[59] During such banquets, a Nabatean merchant could advance his personal reputation as trustworthy potential trade partner, in competition with other traders. Historical actors, therefore, operated in social domains which, through networked ties, expanded across geographical scale. These transscalar entanglements are expressed in the notion of glocalization which draws

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**56** PME 43–44 provides a vivid impression; discussion with further evidence by Dwivedi, ch. 7, III.1.1, this volume.

**57** Respectively, Leese-Messing, vol. 2, ch. 3; Dwivedi, ch. 7, this volume.

**58** Hoo, vol. 2, ch. 1.

**59** Weaverdyck, ch. 12.A, III.1, III.3.2, this volume.

analytical attention to the diverse ways in which local and broader translocal and global processes are entangled through the disjunctive flows (such as objects, produce, and knowledge) and ties (relationships and the tools that shaped them) between nodes (actors) that drive the connectivities between them. Rather than limiting the inquiry, globalization concepts can thus call to prioritize relational and transscalar perspectives in framing the central research questions.[60] Globalization thinking can extend the range and scope of frontier zones, while embracing localized interactions tapping into broader networks.

## III.3 An Analytical Spectrum of Inbetweenness

This translates into the investigation of frontier zones on a transscalar spectrum of inbetweenness – not an objective quality but an analytical construct for inquiry – that ranges from particular places to abstract spaces of connectivities.[61] The frontier zones in this handbook are meaningfully considered as peripheral *places* in a physical locality within a larger spatial and social context. Thus, frontier zones are considered in relation to their setting along environmental gradients, referred to as ecotones: transitional or integrative ecological zones where disparate landscapes (and their affordances) meet.[62] The setting of frontier zones on such ecotones, combined with a marginal or in-between position in relation to ideological (imagined) imperial geographies, in fact did distinctly shape the tensions, interactions, and economic opportunities cultivated in and afforded to these spaces. For instance, ecotones (and attendant geoclimatic conditions) that afforded subsistence strategies combining sedentary agriculture with mobile pastoralism feature in several landscapes in this volume.[63] Although episodes of violent 'nomadic raids' of urban settlements by steppe pastoralists – a powerful image of the nomadic barbarian as typically featured in ancient literary sources – were part of the range of economic interactions, these were not the only types of relations that shaped economic connectivities in such frontier zones.[64] Ursula Brosseder and Bryan Miller (ch. 5) as well as Lauren Morris (chs. 4.A and 4.B) stress the economic importance of elite competition and consumption of prestige

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60 Von Reden, Introduction, this volume, on this handbook's central research questions.

61 For inbetweenness as a construct, see Shields 1991, 3; Green 2005, 1–40; Giesen 2017; and related discussion Hoo 2022, 17–33 on cultural inbetweenness. For (in)betweenness in network terms, see Knappett 2011, 42 and application in Weaverdyck, ch. 12.B, II.9, this volume.

62 Von Reden, ch. 1, this volume; see also Weaverdyck et al., vol. 2, ch. 7 for human-environment interactions in this handbook; cf. Kempf 2020 for recent instructive discussion. Ingold 2018 provides a concise introduction to the theory of affordances.

63 See most notably Leese-Messing, ch. 3; Morris, ch. 4; Brosseder and Miller, ch. 5; also Fabian, ch. 9, this volume.

64 For literary imaginations of the nomadic barbarian, see Shaw 1983; Di Cosmo 2002, 93–126; 2010; Gerstacker et al. 2015.

goods in relation to those landscapes that afforded mobile (if seasonal) pastoralist practices and lifestyles across the Eurasian steppes.[65] Another example of place-based geophysical factors affecting economic configurations can be seen in coastal frontier zones. Maxim Korolkov (ch. 6), for instance, articulates the expansion of agricultural settlements and the intensification of transregional interactions along the South China Sea coast as significant economic developments that entangled with changes in the sea level which formed the fertile deltas of the Red and Pearl Rivers.[66]

In concert with their physical locality, frontier zones are also meaningfully considered as peripheral *spaces* in the geography of networks. As connectors of macroregions, frontier zones are analyzed with distinct eye for their transscalar relationality as spaces where various regional, imperial, and transimperial networks meet and, accordingly, where frictions between intersecting and overlapping value regimes and institutions occur.[67] In light of such network convergence, frontier zones are arguably spaces where peripheral connections ('weak ties,' i.e., social relationships that are distant or infrequently maintained) are common since network frictions or network distance make it more demanding to form strong social ties. On the one hand, such intensified tensions emerging from diverse encounters could be pivotal for instigating innovations – innovative solutions to negotiate frictions.[68] On the other hand, these weak ties also facilitated access to different networks beyond one's own, which could be capitalized upon as pathways to new knowledge, resources, and economic opportunities.[69] Although such weak ties, for instance between a merchant and a financier, might be peripheral within one's own network, they can be strong connectors (shortcuts) to other social networks and so provide access to larger and more distant circuits of regional, imperial, and transimperial exchange.[70] Leese-Messing (ch. 3) dis-

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**65** Morris, ch. 4.A, II.2, 4.B, I.1, this volume; Brosseder and Miller, ch. 5, this volume; also Miller and Brosseder 2016.

**66** Korolkov, ch. 6, III.1, this volume.

**67** Lightfoot and Martinez 1995 for similar considerations; Brughmans et al. 2016; Knappett 2016a provide concise discussions on network perspectives and methodologies for archaeology and history. Cf. Elton 1996, 5 who defines frontier zones as places where boundaries came together. See further recent discussion in Versluys 2021 on globalization as a theory of friction.

**68** Versluys forthcoming; after Grewal 2008.

**69** Granovetter 1973; see also Knappett 2011, 126–129; 2016, 31–32. That 'weak ties' are common in frontier zones does not mean that strong relationships were not forged in these spaces, nor that these spaces were not well-networked. On the contrary, it is through relationships of trust and reciprocity ('strong ties'), built through repeated interactions, that many economic transactions came about while, in Granovetters model, it is through peripheral connections ('weak ties') that goods and knowledge (for instance information about a trader's trustworthiness or how to navigate infrastructural obstacles) could reach more people and places. Cf. more nuance below.

**70** Granovetter 1973, 1363–1369; he articulates this as "the strength of weak ties." Weak ties, according to Granovetter, thus form peripheral innovators whereas 'strong ties' (defined as frequent and more intimate relationships between peers), though contributing to internal social cohesion, are less likely to lead to the diffusion of innovation – compare McNeill's notion that contact and interaction with strangers drive ecumenical processes (see this ch. section II.1).

cusses a telling case of a Han officer stationed in Dunhuang, who writes his friend or colleague, stationed elsewhere, to buy him a specific pair of shoes as well some supplies for others from the regional market there – with the promise to pay him back in coin later.[71] The example illustrates how a spatially stretched social relationship could be capitalized upon by 'stayers' to connect, via 'movers,' to the circulation of supplies from a distant market and so trigger a chain of translocal exchange.[72]

The example also suggests that the strength of ties may vary depending on the situation and that weak ties could be exploited as strong ones to advance economic goals through social obligation. Mechanisms to bridge networks could widely diverge: not all bridging relations were 'weak' while investment in weak ties could transform them into strong ones (or vice versa) over time, blurring the distinction.[73] Additionally, the notion of glocalization makes aware that global (distant) macrointeractions and local microinteractions should neither be seen as static nor separate levels of processes of exchange. The request to buy shoes in the example invoked by Leese-Messing was predicated upon prior knowledge of distant circuits of exchange in the first place. Knowledge, too, reflects transscalar relationality. Knowledge of networked practices, such as the consumption of prestige goods, the use of universalized language, the format of contracts, or architectural decorations, could be capitalized upon with different economic aims, for instance to facilitate commensurability across institutional frameworks to gain network advantage (as the use of Greek language and legal forms at Dura, discussed by Jen Baird and Sitta von Reden, ch. 11) or to boost local social standing and prestige (as in Brosseder and Miller's case of regional elites engaging with a global visual language of prestige in localities across the Eurasian steppes, ch. 5).[74] Moreover, the same actors (or various members from the same network cluster) could traverse across networks scales themselves, operating within different localities in different sometimes distant places and investing in social relationships of various strengths. Leonardo Gregoratti (ch. 10), for instance, draws attention to the economic roles of a network of Jewish communities within and around the Roman-Arsakid frontier zone, while Weaverdyck (ch. 12.A), in a different context, also articulates the importance of Nabatean actors as a networked collective[75] Specific types of sociopolitical networks such as those formed by Armenian-Iranian interdynastic marriages in the Armenian frontier zone (discussed by Lara Fabian, ch. 9) could also forge strong relationships that provided socially regulated contexts for the movement of goods within distinct circles (royal courts) which, in turn, could influence broader local taste and consumption of elite culture, such as Greek literature and

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**71** Leese-Messing, ch. 3, III.2, this volume.
**72** Thus, although not everyone is a 'mover', connectivities still reach into the lives of 'stayers' in the way they structure, coordinate, and internalize social relations; see Woolf 2016 and discussion in Hoo, vol. 2, ch. 1, IV.3.
**73** Knappett 2016b, 31.
**74** Baird and von Reden, ch. 11, IV.3, this volume; Brosseder and Miller, ch. 5, this volume.
**75** Gregoratti, ch. 10, II; Weaverdyck, ch. 12.A, III, this volume.

art.[76] The social contours of transscalar relationality that shaped economic processes in frontier zones are thus highly contextual. Indeed, in the analytical consideration of frontier zones as physical places in their respective landscapes as well as particular spaces in the geography of networks, the chapters in this handbook evoke a diverse series of scenarios of economic frontier-zone processes that formed and transformed transimperial connectivities in profound and disparate ways.

## IV Conclusion: A Postcolonial Endeavor

The contradictions of the paradoxical combinations reviewed here – between the interest in frontier zones and the "borderless world" of globalization, and between universalist conceptions of globalization and postcolonial critiques – eventually dissolve when brought into the fold of this volume's intellectual endeavor. Common to these paradoxes is the implied looming pitfall of reproducing a grand narrative, either that of colonialism or that of globalization, which obscures the role of local places and peoples in the service of top-down history, dominated by central (imperial) powers. Yet, research on frontier zones, globalization, and postcolonialism actually resonate and expound on common themes and concerns around connectivities and the local. In this handbook, globalizing processes are not considered to entail the erasure of local place in an increasingly borderless world. On the contrary, this volume insists that it is in localities that increasing connectivities are negotiated, articulated, and capitalized upon in diverse ways and for various economic goals. Secondly, postcolonial studies and globalization research are neither contradictory nor exclusively relevant to historical periods of modernity but provide critical complementary bodies of thought and reflection on the analytical terrain of historical inquiry. Their combination is here considered as a critical heuristic constellation that facilitates the thinking tools to globalize the study of antiquity – not merely in terms of geographical scale but more importantly in relation to the analytical scope of research on economic processes in the ancient Afro-Eurasian world.

The study of frontier zones in this handbook, written in the domain of global history, thus speaks as a postcolonial endeavor in various ways. Firstly, this handbook commences from a common critique of the Silk Road model as a master narrative of ancient world trade. Seeking to reorient that story and diversify the lines of Afro-Eurasian economic developments, it answers the demand of global history to expand the horizons of historical inquiry not only outwards but also inwards. Transscalar approaches to entangled local, regional, and global processes are taken up to explore

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**76** Fabian, ch. 9, IV.1, IV.2, this volume; see further Fabian 2021; cf. Strootman 2013 on Hellenism as court culture; Strootman and Versluys 2017 on Hellenism and Persianism as a cultural concept; Hoo 2022 on Hellenism as a paradoxical interpretive model.

diverse networked histories, relationships, institutions, and tools that cultivated innovations and economic opportunities to tap into transimperial connectivities. Secondly, this handbook is grounded in the awareness of previous privilege given to imperial centers and imperial actors and the modern geopolitical factors that shaped that privilege. The Afro-Eurasian world areas under review here all share a heritage of modern colonial or imperial histories which variously impacted research traditions in which studies of economic processes developed. Modern historiographies have extensively been discussed in volume 1 of this handbook, and are again touched upon in the chapters of this volume with particular reference to their respective frontier zones. Within their own fields of expertise, the authors not only expound awareness of that intellectual heritage but explicitly challenge traditional narratives anchored in imperial modes of inquiry and hierarchical knowledge production. Lastly, the focus on frontier zones in this handbook does not emanate from a commitment to reify these areas as territorial peripheral entities (or voids of wilderness). Rather, this handbook sheds central light on various frontier-zone situations whose role in shaping connectivities and networked interactions are analyzed from the inside of the frontier. It does so in ways that neither (exclusively) prioritize local agency, serving nativist narratives, nor privilege imperial agency in service of the Silk Road model. By balancing diverse bodies of knowledge and investigating frontier zones as local places and networked spaces of economic connectivities, the chapters in this handbook develop fresh understandings of various ancient frontier zones at the edge of empires. In the process, the emerging panorama effectively deconstructs the peripherality of these zones, as each chapter articulates diverse significance of frontier zones for the increasing transimperial connectivities across Afro-Eurasia from 300 BCE to 300 CE.

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