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Time as Method

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Time is an integral dimension of any social or historical analysis, yet seldom do analyses explicitly delineate their temporal scaffolding. In *Continuity and Change at Millennial Scale: The Holy Sites of Serindia*, Rian Thum extends an invitation to delve into the specific role time plays when scrutinizing social transformations and enduring cultural forms, as well as their intricate interplay. By juxtaposing two momentous historical junctures within the Tarim Basin, Thum unveils insights into the interlinked dynamics of sovereign control, sacred geography, and human mobility—insights that might otherwise remain elusive when these dynamics are studied solely within the confines of each respective period. Thum's approach prompts us to consider time as a method, especially for shaping analytic perspectives capable of illuminating histories of state expansion while maintaining a culturally attuned sensitivity to local contexts.

In this response, I focus on the idea of temporal juxtaposition and argue that within the rich cultural tapestry of religious traditions and historical borderlands, we find solid ground for constructing temporally capacious analytic perspectives. Within such frameworks, cross-cultural comparisons can evolve into sophisticated accounts of change and continuity, allowing the past and present to serve as mutually enriching conceptual resources.

Thum's analysis revolves around the enduring power of holy sites in the Tarim Basin, portraying them as pivotal “cultural arbiters” (979) amid profound transformations triggered by external aggression. He grounds his exploration

within the sacred expanse of the Tarim Basin, adroitly juxtaposing two historical moments separated by a millennium. The vast distance between the Buddhist societies of 11th-century Tarim and the Uyghur Muslims of the 21st century is undeniable; this temporal gap renders them akin to distant nations, as in the novelist Leslie Poles Hartley's adage, "The past is a foreign country" (1953). However, this sense of distance does not primarily arise from historical duration; rather, it originates from a profound transformation of the region brought about by the Islamic conquest in the 11th century. Thum draws our attention to the perspective of early European explorer-scholars, like the archaeologist Aurel Stein, who viewed the Islamic conquest of the Buddhist Kingdom of Khotan as a complete unraveling of *Serindia*, a term he coined to encapsulate the ancient Tarim Basin as a continuum stretching across China and India along Buddhist pilgrimage routes marked with oases, monasteries, temples, and stupas.

While acknowledging the lasting marks of the Islamic conquest on the formerly Buddhist landscape of the Tarim Basin, Thum highlights the persistent influence of holy sites in shaping patterns of movement and thought in the region. Despite Muslim shrines having replaced Buddhist temples, Thum contends that their function as nodes within networks of travel and texts has remained remarkably consistent. This dynamic is vividly illustrated in his monograph, *Sacred Routes of Uyghur History* (2014), which shows how saintly hagiographies (*tazkirahs*) and the pilgrims engaging with them at the shrines have profoundly shaped collective identity and historical consciousness in the Tarim Basin for centuries.

Following the release of Thum's monograph, these very shrines have been targeted by the People's Republic of China (PRC) as part of its campaign to consolidate control over the Uyghur homeland and reshape its inhabitants' ideological and cultural outlook. As an engaged observer of this new development, Thum discerns a strong parallel between the two historical moments, both characterized by a "traumatic cultural change that often accompanies the arrival of outsider rule" (960). He takes this family resemblance as a starting point to build a deep diachronic perspective so as to align these two pivotal historical moments on a shared analytical plane. This approach serves a dual purpose. On one hand, Thum moves beyond the immediate urgency of the present moment to "reframe the current radical transformations of these shrines as part of a longer historical process" (960). On the other hand, he leverages contemporary developments as a fresh vantage point for identifying gaps in the historical scholarship on the Islamic transformation of *Serindia* in the 11th century.

For example, Thum challenges the notion of a definitive and complete transformation of Buddhist Serindia following Islamic rule. Just as Islamic practices incorporated Buddhist elements following the Qarakhanid conquest, Thum suggests that the adoption of Islamic elements by Buddhists could also have occurred. In proposing this alternative scenario, he draws upon the case of Amannisakhan, a 16th-century queen whose narrative has been recently reconfigured by the PRC to establish her as an apolitical canonical Uyghur heroine. The construction of a prominent “tomb” for Amannisakhan within Yarkand’s shrine complex, overshadowing the tombs of the Yarkand rulers revered by the Uyghurs, might have been expected to create a sense of alienation from this PRC-endorsed figure. However, contrary to expectations, Amannisakhan’s tale gained traction within an older knowledge system underpinned by shrine pilgrimage and tazkirah recitation. Surprisingly, the Uyghurs embraced Amannisakhan’s story and incorporated it into a biographical novel—a contemporary descendant of the traditional tazkirah genre. The case of Amannisakhan underscores that the relationship between sovereign power and the local population often takes the form of an intricate exchange mediated through holy sites rather than mere assimilation or defiance.

The case of Amannisakhan also reminds us that religious traditions, endowed with a rich repertoire for reshaping sacred geography in response to competing assertions of sovereignty, provide local communities the means to absorb impositions from ruling powers into their cultural identity. We find a captivating example of this in Anya Bernstein’s (2013) study of post-Soviet Buryatia. Bernstein describes how Buryat Buddhists, grappling with their ‘peripheral’ standing within the Russian Federation and the world of Tibetan Buddhism, adeptly integrated the Russian president Dmitri Medvedev into the Buddhist pantheon as Queen Tara. Their ability to center themselves cosmologically and politically within the world of conquering or colonizing powers by embracing symbols of rival sovereigns lends historical credence to the notion of Buddhist assimilation of Islamic elements following the Qarakhanid conquest of the Tarim Basin.

The potency of holy sites emerges from a larger constellation of figures, texts, narratives, and objects, which they harness and elevate. These constellations—essentially traditions when viewed historically—offer fertile ground for exploring time as an analytical tool. Within these constellations lie enduring threads amidst seemingly transformative shifts, as well as pathways through which transformations are channeled to sustain an overarching sense of continuity. This double helix of change and continuity pivots on the moral investments bestowed upon these sacred sites (and the broader constellations

they uphold) by conquerors and worshippers alike. As Thum astutely notes, the enduring presence of holy sites becomes a moral statement that carries both empowering and threatening implications. Functioning as conservative forces, temples and shrines integrate the flow of pilgrims and texts into their local surroundings. This assimilation not only brings stability to patterns of travel, worship, trade, and politics but also positions these sites as magnets for external intervention, making them the focal point for outside influences. Preserving continuity while inviting change, holy sites can be considered as “moral spaces that do not simply persist but are seen to do so in ways good or bad, safe or dangerous, welcoming or inhospitable” (Sheele and Shryock 2017: 6).

Borderlands offer a distinctive vantage point from which to observe the temporal and spatial vectors of these moral investments. The Tarim Basin, encompassing a “vast, mountain-ringed zone of desert and oases at the crossroads of China, Tibet, India, the Inner Asian steppe, and Turkic Central Asia” (959), stands as a quintessential borderland receptive to influences from myriad directions. Within these spaces, we can grasp the consequences and limitations of sovereign interventions within the cultural fabric of network societies shaped through a long history of human movements, textual traditions, and built landscapes. Here, the grand gestures of state-making and imperial expansion intersect with the subtle nuances embedded in local landscapes and literary forms. Historically informed analytical exercises, such as the one presented by Thum, demonstrate how temporal juxtapositions in these environments lay bare persistent forms through which historical change unfolds. The Old World encompasses many such borderlands that hold the potential for cross-cultural comparisons within deep diachronic perspectives.

What precisely do we gain from such temporally capacious perspectives? At the very least, they enable us to consider a medieval Islamic empire like the Qarakhanids and a colossal nation-state with global ambitions, such as China, within the same analytical framework. While the expansion of an Islamic dynasty and the homogenization efforts of a nation-state might seem incommensurable with each other, Thum urges us to approach such swift conclusions with skepticism. He maintains that both powers, in their pursuit of dominion over the Tarim Basin, have recognized the significance of holy sites in cementing the allegiance of their respective communities.

The central role of holy sites in the politics of conquest is a familiar theme for scholars of medieval and early modern Eurasia. Azfar Moin’s comparative study of Hindu temples and Islamic shrines illustrates how the desecration, destruction, and selective preservation of sacred sites played a pivotal role in the enactment of divine kingship, fostering the rise of universalist empires and political upstarts across Indo-Persia and Central Asia (2015). Thum’s analysis

suggests that these historical patterns may resonate more closely with our present circumstances than we often realize. While the Chinese government does not employ Uyghur shrines or their destruction to perform divine kingship, the repurposing of these sites as museum pieces along the Silk Road taps into the universalist frame of “heritage,” which, despite its self-representation as a transcendent value beyond the political, has deep ties to empire-building (Tugendhaft 2020: 31–74).

The methodological lesson is clear: The past and the present possess the potential to enrich each other analytically, forming conceptual reservoirs when connected through deep diachronic frameworks. Religious traditions and historical borderlands constitute rewarding contexts for such deep dives. In these realms, the vistas waiting to be unlocked are poised to transcend overarching dichotomies, such as modern versus pre-modern, colonial versus post-colonial, and religious versus secular. The audacity to embark on such historical leaps remains imperative, especially given the unabating trend of topical and temporal specialization within academia. Thum’s article exemplifies how scholars stand to gain immensely by embracing such temporally expansive perspectives instead of reserving them solely for the popular press.

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