

FORUM: REVIEWS AND COMMENTS

KREUTZMANN, HERMANN: *Hunza Matters. Bordering and ordering between ancient and new Silk Roads*. 570 pp., 193 ill., 379 photos, 7 tables. ISBN 978-3-447-113 6 9-4 (E-book ISBN 978-3-447-19961-2) Harrassowitz Verlag, Wiesbaden 2020. € 98,-

Over the past four decades Hermann Kreutzmann has established himself as an impressively prolific, incisive and authoritative scholar of the mountainous borderlands between South and Central Asia. Nowhere is this more evident than in his recently-completed *magnum opus*, a three-volume trilogy totaling 1,410 pages, which examines how the region's circumstances and characteristics have been shaped from the pre-colonial period to the present by its situation at the unstable margins of competing political, economic and ideological powers. The first book in the trilogy, titled *Pamirian Crossroads: Kirghis and Wakhi of High Asia* (2015), analyses the changing implications of relations with neighbours, rulers and invaders for two cultural groups – Wakhi and Kirghiz – who together occupy the high-altitude Pamirian landscape where today Afghanistan, Tajikistan, China and Pakistan approach each other geographically, and where global and continental powers have been competing for geopolitical dominance for centuries. The second volume, *Wakhan Quadrangle: Exploration and Espionage During and After the Great Game* (2017), examines geopolitical competition between the British and Russian empires (and to a lesser extent Afghanistan and China) during the period of high imperialism, for intelligence about, influence on, access to, passage through, and ultimately control over the High Asian borderlands. The book focuses primarily on the intelligence-gathering efforts of indigenous “pundits” employed by the British, and constructs its narrative around a fascinating and informative, but almost unknown and largely forgotten intelligence report prepared in 1880 by Munshi Abdul Rahim by order of Major John Biddulph (Gilgit's Political Agent), titled “Journey to Badakshan, with Report on Badakshan and Wakhan”. A mimeographed copy of its Eng-

lish translation is reproduced in full, and much of the book is devoted to offering context for Abdul Rahim's assignment and summarizing important or novel aspects of the report he produced. *Hunza Matters: Bordering and Ordering between Ancient and New Silk Roads* (2020) is the final volume in the trilogy. Here Kreutzmann shifts his attention southward to the Hunza Valley, in what is presently Pakistan's Gilgit-Baltistan administrative territory. Historically, the Hunza Valley was comprised of two independent micro-states, Nagar and Hunza, which are presently separate districts within one of Gilgit-Baltistan's three administrative divisions. Although the volume encompasses both Hunza and Nagar, it focuses mostly on the former.

The overarching aim of *Hunza Matters* is to trace transitional processes in the Hunza Valley from the pre-colonial period to the present in order to show how these have “affected and altered the physical and infrastructure environment, influenced cultural processes, transformed living and socio-political conditions for the communities and inhabitants of the valley” (p. 28). The book's central argument is that, owing to the valley's relative insignificance in terms of population, economic resources and political clout, and its relative importance as a boundary zone and mobility corridor between greater powers, “all features of modernization were initiated outside the mountain valleys and followed external interests characterized as ‘pacification’, ‘opening-up’, ‘development’ and ‘globalisation’” (p. 48). Although the major players have changed, processes and logics established during the period of colonial interference continue to structure local power structures, economic developments and the lives of the Hunza Valley's inhabitants in a path-dependent fashion that leaves little opportunity for fundamental “change in personal dependencies and power relations” (p. 56).

Hunza Matters develops its arguments in four main sections, each of which traces a different route through the historical processes of path-dependent transition and continuity that constitute the book's central preoccupation. The first section, “From Hunza Road to



Pakistan-China Economic Corridor”, focuses on accessibility, mobility and infrastructure development in the valley and wider region from the mid-19th century to the present. “Resource Perspectives – Spatial Patterns in a Diverse Environment” weaves together a history of changing human ecologies and modes of production, settlement patterns and processes, and linguistic, cultural and religious differentiation, in the context of the valley’s geo-ecological environment. These two sections are the longest and most detailed at about 150 and 125 pages respectively. Together, they establish the contours of the book’s diachronic analysis, and elucidate its main arguments. The material in these sections may be familiar to students of Kreutzmann’s *oeuvre*, as some of it has been published previously, although not in as comprehensive, extended, and well-illustrated form, and without many of the details and ‘sub-plots’ he has been able to include in this extended treatment. Geopolitical strategies, internal political machinations and systems of exploitation employed by Hunza and Nagar’s ruling class in different historical contexts are traced and analysed in the third section, titled “From Factors to Actors – Karakoram Configurations”. This section, which is roughly 100 pages, also addresses the influential role of the Aga Khan in the region’s historical transformations and continuities. Although each of these sections has its own distinct theme and independently coherent narrative, there is also a high degree of integration among sections, which allows readers to trace insights and connections across the main perspectives offered; each perspective gains considerably in explanatory and descriptive value when examined in relation to the others. The book ends with a section titled “A Plethora of Hunza Myths Revisited”, which examines four prominent narratives about Hunza: ancestral links to Alexander the Great; exceptional health and longevity among its population; the ubiquity of a subsistence mode of production and an attendant lack of social and economic stratification; and the rumoured secret Chinese occupation of the Hunza Valley. Kreutzmann describes the interests behind the promotion of these narratives, and analyses their social and material consequences for the valley and its inhabitants. At just 30 pages this final section is much shorter than the others, and although it contents relate insightfully to the book’s main themes, it seems both less comprehensively developed and less integrated into the volume’s narrative and analytical arc than the previous sections.

In addition to sustaining and supporting the book’s overarching arguments, these four sections also provide astoundingly wide-ranging, precise and well-curated historical and geographical information at every turn. The book is encyclopedic, literally burst-

ing with empirical and interpretive detail. Much of this material derives from Kreutzmann’s extensive field studies in the region, which helps to give *Hunza Matters* a compelling sense of intimacy and ethnographic grounding that is unusual for a volume of this size and historical scope. Findings from the author’s own field research are integrated with material from a wide array of often obscure archival and secondary sources, including “personal diaries and travelogues, newspaper articles and grey literature, public and private archives, libraries and repositories in various locations” (p. 23). This combination of primary and secondary, historical and contemporary sources allows readers to glean an understanding of important aspects of the Hunza Valley’s historical trajectory and present circumstances from the perspectives of numerous actors, which Kreutzmann attempts carefully to compare, assess and corroborate, thereby addressing the important and epistemologically complex relationship between the valley’s history and knowledge production about it, both of which show strong and intertwined characteristics of path dependency.

The fruits of Kreutzmann’s many visits to the valley, his broad-ranging primary scholarship, and his perseverance in tracking down archival sources, are amply evident in the staggering number and variety of maps, photographs, sketches, paintings, graphs, tables and other illustrations that liberally populate the volume and lend visual support to its lengthy text. Almost every page contains some sort of illustrative material, including many of the author’s own carefully-printed photos, diagrams and maps. Readers may be especially delighted by the large number of historical photographs and sketches included in the volume, and a sizeable collection of beautifully-reproduced landscape scenes and portraits of local personages painted by Aleksandr Yakovlev during 1931’s *Expédition Citroën Centre-Asie*, which passed through Hunza in a pioneering effort to travel the distance between Beirut to Beijing by motor vehicle. Each illustration is carefully described in a lengthy caption that provides context and detailed bibliographic information. Clearly, much thought was devoted to the selection and layout of this visual content in relation to the central text, and no expense was spared in terms of the paper, printing and binding used in the book’s production; the result is a beautiful and elegantly-produced volume – a work of art – as well as a richly informative one.

The publication of *Hunza Matters* coincides with skyrocketing English literacy rates in the Hunza Valley, burgeoning interest in local history, ancestry and genealogy, and increasing efforts among Hunza’s population to develop social scientific understandings of

the region's present and recent past. In this context, the volume's contents – and indeed, its very existence – are of considerable fascination to the people whose histories and geographies it represents, both local intelligentsia and the general population. Its publication was widely heralded in local social and news media, and scanned or photographed copies of its rare historical images were posted and enthusiastically discussed in a variety of on-line fora, as natives of Hunza accessed hitherto unavailable visual artifacts of their history. The author was generous in distributing hard copies of the book to historians and other intellectuals in Hunza and Nagar, and pirated scans are circulating widely, fanned by a minor controversy surrounding the book's launch event in Hunza.

Locals I have spoken to appreciate *Hunza Matters* for several reasons. They especially value the old photographs and paintings, many of which depict ancestors whose likenesses they had never previously seen, or aspects of the built landscape that no longer exist in the form depicted. The volume's many historical and newly-drafted maps are also highly valued, and are sure to be used locally for a variety of practical purposes. Individuals I spoke with were keenly interested in the book's detailed description and analysis of the historical processes that shaped Hunza's 'traditional' irrigation and pasture governance systems. Beyond that, locals appreciate the extent to which the volume gathers, selects and organizes historical material from disparate sources, much of which would otherwise be inaccessible to people living in the Hunza Valley. Finally, I was told by several individuals that the book's title, *Hunza Matters*, is a source of validation for the valley's inhabitants, which they feel is reinforced by the book's size, production quality and informative contents. There is a widespread feeling locally that Hunza and Nagar have lost stature and influence as political entities since their full incorporation into what is now Pakistan's Gilgit-Baltistan administrative unit, especially given the valley's small population relative to other parts of the district. *Hunza Matters* helps local readers to better understand the historical processes that led to the region's current situation, reminds them of a time when Hunza and Nagar were political forces in their own right (if only because of their value as buffer zones and transit routes), and reassures them that Hunza continues to matter enough beyond the valley to merit rigorous and sympathetic scholarly treatment.

In a more critical vein, some local inhabitants with whom I corresponded wished for a book that relied less heavily on sources sympathetic to the colonial enterprise, although they were also quick to recognise the paucity of indigenous sources available for much of the

period covered. Others were disappointed that the volume gives Hunza more detailed descriptive and analytical attention than Nagar, which is also in the Hunza Valley. Kreutzmann recognizes the latter imbalance in the book's preface, attributing it to five interrelated factors (pp. 22-23): Hunza's more frequent representation in published literature and archival sources; a larger number of local authors writing on Hunza than on Nagar; longstanding efforts by Hunza's elites instrumentally to promote the microstate beyond the valley's borders and thus keep it in the public eye; his own more frequent and extended field visits to Hunza; and, importantly, owing to the specifics of its geographical location, Hunza's greater importance to the Great Game geopolitics and subsequent modernization strategies that constitute the book's main thematic arc.

Although inhabitants of the Hunza Valley have been eager to discuss *Hunza Matters* in communication with me and on social media, most of their commentary has focused on its illustrative material and descriptive content. They have had little to say about the book's central arguments. This is perhaps unsurprising, given most locals' lack of fluency with English-language academic writing and the short time since publication, but it does highlight a challenge I think the volume presents for almost any reader. It is an extraordinarily long, exceptionally detailed and unrelentingly informative work, which also develops numerous complex arguments woven around an ambitious central theme. Digesting this varied material takes considerable commitment, and given the continuous interplay between text and illustrations, also requires constant discipline to avoid getting sidetracked by the fascinating details presented in the many content-rich maps, graphs, tables, etc. It took me almost three weeks of full-time reading to do the book justice, even though as a long-time student of Hunza I was already familiar with some of its main arguments and a large proportion of its descriptive content. I fear that few readers, local or otherwise, will persevere in reading the book from end-to-end, and will instead opt to jump from illustration to illustration, or search the index or table of contents for sub-sections or passages that interest them most. This is both possible and productive, given that these resources are thorough and well-designed, but is not the recommended way to approach this remarkable volume, which must currently stand as the *definitive* English-language reference work on the Hunza Valley, both for its wide ranging descriptive content, and for the sensitive, insightful, and well-supported analysis it presents.

DAVID BUTZ