

Global Histories

A Student Journal

Review: Everyday Cosmopolitanisms: Living the Silk Road in Medieval Armenia
-- by **Kate Franklin**
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DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.17169/GHSJ.2023.555>

Source: Global Histories, Vol. 9, No. 1 (November 2023), pp. 99-102.
ISSN: 2366-780X

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Publisher information:

Global Histories: A Student Journal is an open-access bi-annual journal founded in 2015 by students of the M.A. program Global History at Freie Universität Berlin and Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin. *Global Histories* is published by an editorial board of Global History students in association with the Freie Universität Berlin.

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**Everyday Cosmopolitanisms: Living
the Silk Road in Medieval Armenia.
By Kate Franklin. N.p.: University of
California Press, 2021. Pp. 204.
ISBN: 9780520380929.**

REVIEWED BY
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ABOUT THE REVIEWER

Clara Leeder has graduated from the BA program History and Political Science at Free University Berlin and is currently enrolled in the MA Global History at Free University Berlin and Humboldt University of Berlin. Since her study abroad at the Chinese University of Hong Kong, she has been working on modern Chinese history, colonial history and the history of empires. Her passion lies in uncovering interregional connections and analyzing power relations.

Kate Franklin's 2021 monograph discusses medieval Armenia from the 11th to the 13th century as a means to illustrate people's experiences of the Silk Road on different scales. In it, she shows how residents of Armenia's Kassagh Valley were cosmopolitans in their everyday lives and she traces to what extent its inhabitants considered themselves part of global lines of connections on these trade routes. Additionally, she further inquires about the origin and impact of Silk Road narratives from the Middle Ages to the Early Modern Period.

The Silk Road as a historical term is often debated in global history and is especially important for experts and the general public in an age of globalisation: Valerie Hansen, for example, wrote that the Silk Road transformed cultures in the east and west and transported not only goods, but also ideas, art and technologies.¹ How intertwined was the world in the early Middle Ages? And did people back then see and understand their impact on a global scale? The Caucasus lies at the crossroads of Europe and Asia, and it is a large area along which we find caravanserais, bazaars and artefacts from the Silk Road that show how diverse the people were who passed through it. It is not an outer frontier of Europe but rather its own regional centre within history, where empires competed over its rule and memorable conflicts took place. Yet mentions of it in current global historical research of the Middle Ages are still rare. If the Caucasus is already underrepresented, then there is almost nothing to learn of Armenia in the main literature on the Silk Road. Armenians' role as traders and hosts along the Silk Road is almost forgotten.

Kate Franklin has a background in archaeology, anthropology, and history and teaches at Birkbeck University of London. Her book concludes a ten-year-long archaeological research project, during which she undertook excavations in Armenia. Each chapter of the monograph describes the Silk Road at a different scale: the historical position of the region and the prevailing narratives about the Caucasus, the analysis of literary sources concerning Armenia such as travelogues, as well as more tangible descriptions of material experiences in everyday life. As a theoretical framework, Franklin introduces the term "spacetimes", which are imagined worlds built and shared by people along the Silk Road. These spacetimes, Franklin argues, expanded and connected communities much as objects or religious ideas do. She quotes Nancy Munn, whose work defined "spacetimes" as spaces that were created by the interaction of people and were maintained via memory and practices.² Kate Franklin further employs the terms "cosmopolitanism(s)", "globality", "worldmaking", and "material experiences", which open up a broad field of research themes in her book.

In the first chapter, Franklin sets out to describe Armenia in its historical and geographical context. The region of which Armenia is part was located in a network of routes and trade routes travelled by merchants, explorers, and armies. But in Franklin's perspective, stories of conquests and the reshaping of borders are only one possible type of narrative about the region. Instead, she uses a different historical scale to inquire about people's everyday lives or their travels. In the second chapter, Franklin undertook an analysis of literary spacetimes that created imaginary worlds which still prevail today in the

romanticised image of the Silk Road. Metaphors, motifs, allegories, eyewitness accounts, and wonderful tales are integral parts of contemporary travel accounts. Assigning great importance to these, Franklin did not analyze sources based on their historical accuracy, but on the imaginary of the world that emerged from them. The concept of everyday spacetimes concerns not only protagonists of classic, well-known travelogues, but also encompasses their hosts or even antagonists. The third part of the book, spanning chapters three and four, introduces material culture that portrayed imaginary worlds in Armenia. A wide and diverse range of sources such as the locations of monuments, inscriptions on buildings, and even the remains of pottery, show how people experienced landscapes and illustrate the everyday and political worlds of the Kassagh Valley. From this, Franklin creates maps showing significant locations. The fourth part, consisting of chapters five and six, analyzes specific objects and the structures of caravanserais as a proof of hospitality and as a starting point for understanding the networks and microcosms within travel inns. This is an opportunity for delving deeper into people's material lives and for understanding food, objects, and the situations that surrounded them.

The book at its core proclaims that the Kassagh Valley of Armenia represented more than a subordinate, local site within the global Silk Road.⁸³ The term cosmopolitanism should no longer only be used to describe “western, male protagonists of travelogues,”⁴ but also for the local population; people who lived on the Silk Road, who showed hospitality, and thus made possible the creation of spacetimes, transcending traditions and cultures. The chapters analyzing relevant travelogues and texts were easiest to understand but the chapters reaching into the everyday experiential worlds of the Silk Road really surprised me. This part of the text is very vivid and lets readers feel the ambiance of the region and the Silk Road. The author brings together different disciplines, such as archaeology, history, anthropology and literary analysis - producing a more holistic approach and an engaging analysis.

Given the limited research literature on the region, the work's bibliography provides an excellent overview of previous materials and helps us understand different identities within the Caucasus. Franklin has collected a large amount of sources on Armenia and made them available to a wider audience - this effort alone should be appreciated. She has also developed new materials and prepared them for further research. She has created her own maps, analyzed the distribution of artefacts and inscriptions. Overall, perhaps this constitutes a new approach to the region. Especially in the field of medieval Caucasian history, her work, especially the creation of sources, lays the foundation for further studies. Her descriptive analysis contains many of her own sensory impressions during her travels in Armenia, and she has connected the memories and lives of present-day inhabitants of the valley with their predecessors during the mediaeval period. She has described streets and smells today that echo possible past impressions travellers could have had, and gives very personal, up-close insights into her subject. By embedding her own impressions and travels within the discussion of historical worldmaking she has enhanced the historical study and analysis of events in her chosen region. While it was hard to understand the meaning of the

term “spacetimes” initially, it really tied together the different parts of the book. In my opinion, it provides more of a possibility to experience the region than a streamlined analysis of documents alone.

Franklin’s work promotes a new perspective on the Silk Road: not merely as an east-west highway or as a historical actor that moves others, but rather as a collection of zones of interaction and influence. Franklin has further demonstrated the potential that an analysis of local perspectives and research on everyday encounters holds in helping us to understand historical connections, developments, and globality: “Hospitality and the sharing of meals were everyday encounters that actually produced the conditions of possibility for global cultures at local scales.”⁵ By tracing people’s environments and spacetimes, parallels between the premodern “cosmopolitanism” of the Silk Road and the “cosmopolitanization” in the modern globalised world become visible. She not only shows how Armenians could be seen as cosmopolitans but also generally enhances our view on the horizons individuals in the Middle Ages had when imagining the world around them and their position in it.

NOTES

¹ Valerie Hansen, *The Silk Road: A New History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

² Nancy D. Munn, *The Fame of Gawa: A Symbolic Study of Value Transformation in a Massim* (Papua New Guinea) Society (Durham: Duke University Press, 2007).

³ Kate Franklin, *Everyday Cosmopolitanisms: Living the Silk Road in Medieval Armenia* (n.p.: University of California Press, 2021), 63.

⁴ Franklin, *Everyday Cosmopolitanisms*, 12.

⁵ Franklin, *Everyday Cosmopolitanisms*, 113.