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Recent Work on the History of Afghanistan

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Thomas Barfield, *Afghanistan: A Cultural and Political History*, Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2010, 389 pp.

V. S. Boiko (Boyko), *Vlast' i oppozitsiya v Afganistane: osobennosti politicheskoi bor'by v 1919-1953 gg.* (English title: Government and opposition in Afghanistan: the features of political fighting in 1919-1953), Moscow-Bar-naul: Institut Vostokovedeniia, Rossiiskaia Akademiia Nauk, 2010, 391 pp.

Shah Mahmoud Hanifi, *Connecting Histories in Afghanistan: Market Relations and State Formation on a Colonial Frontier*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011, 270 pp. (Originally published as an e-book by Columbia University Press, 2008.)

B. D. Hopkins, *The Making of Modern Afghanistan*, Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, Cambridge Imperial and Post-Colonial Studies, 2008, 258 pp.

May Schinasi, *Kaboul 1773-1948: Naissance et Croissance d'une Capitale Royale*, Napoli: Universita degli Studi di Napoli "L'Orientale," 2008, 255 pp., plates and illustrations.

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It has been a banner last few years for the publication of scholarly works on the history of Afghanistan, a country often seen as peripheral, marginalized, not easily accommodated in one or another of the major area-studies compartments—South Asian, Central Asian, or Middle Eastern—and generally treated as a poor relation in Iranian studies. The books under review represent the rich diversity of historical research and the innovative approaches and interpretations that are intended to better help us grasp the complexity of that history and the complex nature of the interpretation of that history over the years.

The authors approach history from several different directions. There are the compelling and comprehensive interpretative analyses of the whole sweep of Afghan history (Barfield), or of segments of it (Hopkins, Boyko, Hanifi). There is Afghan history approached with new hypotheses (Hanifi, Hopkins),

and there is a detailed encyclopedic work of urban history focused on Afghanistan's most important city, Kabul (Schinasi). Each work has one or more arguments, some better sustained than others, but all well worth reading for the new and sometimes persuasive nature of the discourse.

But there are issues which arise in reading these works that include how questions are framed, historical logic, fidelity to one's sources, and selectivity in source use.

What we know of Afghanistan today has been shaped by at least three textual corpuses all more or less developing independently of one another and therefore important for an historian to explore, or at least be cognizant of, in framing and investigating any particular historical problem. These are: (1) Afghan texts—mostly Persian but in the twentieth century some Pashto language sources as well: books, documents, and artifacts (coins in particular); (2) British Indian and Russian colonial and diplomatic texts; although these developed independently they mirror each other's concerns (trade advantage, imperial expansion, Afghanistan as ally or buffer or vassal state) so closely as to be considered one kind of literature; and (3) field notes, books, and articles from anthropologists and folklorists (Euro-American and Afghan) which, though a phenomenon of the last half of the twentieth century, often are revealing of folkways of earlier times and, more importantly, help the historian 'see' and better parse the formal writing, for example, of chronicle-style histories, and biographies.

Coming after and resting atop all of these categories of course is the vast corpus of writing that has drawn its inspiration and material from them and, in the course of doing so, added new meaning, sometimes revealing, sometimes concealing. Historians who fail to problematize these sources, to know as much as it is possible to know of the context within which they were written, whose or what agenda they may be addressing, to investigate their authors, origins, and reasons for being written, and treat them as self-evident sources of factual material from which telling facts can be extracted, risk basing their conclusions on shaky foundations.

The non-Afghan writing a history of Afghanistan also has problems of a more technical nature. One is how Persian words are spelled in Latin letters, i.e. transliteration. This issue probably arose with the first attempt by a non-Persian speaker to record the name he just heard in a reasonable facsimile of its sound. Philologically-minded students of the Persianate world like precision, consistency, and transparency in their rendering into the Latin alphabet and this predilection has resulted over the years in a variety of systems. Today the tendency is towards simplicity (as with this journal) at the risk of possible confusion over the various *zees*, *esses*, and *tees* but then again why bother at