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## CONGRESS

Middle East and Muslim Worlds  
Studies

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## Panel 51

## Rivers in the medieval Islamic East: boundaries or traffic area?

Whereas rivers play a major role in societies' everyday life and imaginary in the medieval Islamic East, there are very few studies about the place they hold in relations between societies and space, as close to the waterways as possible. This panel offers to analyze ways and means as well as challenges related to transportation linked to the river's presence. Indeed, rivers, which are both obstacles and areas for traffic (on water or on land roads alongside the river and transversal ones), are at the heart of economic and strategic concerns of the East (understood here as stretching from Egypt to Central Asia en Anatolia). This raises the question of political control on these specific places and areas, sometimes moving, and which often get a strong symbolic significance. In which way does the government in power order layout to control transportation on the river or to make it easier? Does this control necessarily goes through infrastructures' construction (bridges, fortifications, warehouse, customs office, others) and can we find mentions about it in the texts? At which political scale are taken these decisions? How does political power show its commitment to rivers integration in its territory? In space representation, waterways are also frequently used to mark out territories or to separate populations: in the field, do we find any tangible response to these mental representations, in a context in which what is on the other side of the river is much more familiar to local populations than it is suggested in theoretical literature about fringes. Through investigation of all these various thematics, the three papers of this panel aim at examining the relevance of a comparative approach.

**Person in charge : Rhoné-Quer Camille (University Aix-Marseille, IREMAM)**

### Program

#### **Jean-Charles Ducène (EPHE-PSL, PROCLAC)**

*The Aras and the Kurr for the Arabic medieval geographers*

The Arax and the Kurr, which flow from west to east in the South Caucasus, seem to have played a double role in medieval times. First of all, they appear in the texts as limits that one reaches or crosses, thus defining regions such as Azerbaijan or Arran; all the more to once the Araxe has joined the Kurr, the latter flows into the Caspian Sea through a delta whose various branches form a plain that is easier to cross. But paradoxically, linking the shores of the Black Sea to the Caspian Sea, notably through Georgia, Armenia and the Alains territory, the valleys of these rivers also played the role of east-west communication routes. Our paper would like to take advantage of Arab, Persian and Armenian geographical texts to see how these rivers were conceptualized in medieval times both as markers of population movements in the South Caucasus and as «natural» borders of certain regions.

## **Rocco Rante (Louvre Museum)**

### *The river at the frontier between the Limes and the Trames*

Central Asia and Eastern Iran have always known a historical reality that was strongly linked to the benefits and constraints of their natural environment. Between mountainous reliefs, steppes, oases and rivers, this large territory has seen the birth of different civilizations and cultures, which have fought, mixed or divided, sometimes with the help of their own geographical and topographical elements. It is here discussed of the Oxus, today Amu Daria, as a border or passage, but always a resource for the civilizations which crossed it, since the prehistoric times until more recent Islamic times.

## **Camille Rhoné-Quer (University Aix-Marseille, IREMAM)**

### *Navigating on the Amu Darya in preseljuk times : challenge and practice*

The possibility of navigating on part of Amu Darya is quite often mentioned in texts from the medieval Islamic world. Yet, practical aspects and challenges about navigating (territory control on boundaries, goods' or travelers' transportation, constructions, political investment and commitment) are still little knowns. This paper aims at marking a step forward an investigation relying on various textual sources (geographical texts, chronicles, local histories, travelers stories) to get a better understanding of interactions on this river which is both one of the main roads for trans-Eurasian exchanges and one of the most tangible boundaries in the preseldjuk Islamic East.

## **Robin Seignobos (University Lyon II, CIHAM)**

### *Sharing the Nile: fluidity and control of cross-border mobility between Egypt and Nubia during the Fatimid period (969-1171)*

Arab geographers of the Middle Ages the southern border of Egypt is located at the first cataract of the Nile, these rapids are far from being the insurmountable obstacle that some like to describe. Arabic documents discovered at Qaṣr Ibrīm, in Lower Nubia, testify to the fluidity of traffic and the vitality of exchanges between the border town of Aswan and the neighboring Christian kingdom during the Fatimid period. This corpus, consisting of approximately fifty texts, is mainly made up of letters exchanged with the Eparch of Nobadia, who administered the region between the 1st and 2nd cataracts on behalf of the Nubian king. The use of this unpublished documentation makes it possible to analyze the practical modalities of movements on either side of the border, as well as the controls exercised by Nubian authorities. The navigable section of the Nile between the two cataracts thus resembles an "airlock" allowing to benefit from the presence of Muslim merchants, either passing through or permanently settled, while controlling the flows heading towards the heart of the Nubian kingdom. Bordered upstream by the second cataract – a much more difficult barrier to cross – this section of the river formed an active trade route as well as a border zone placed under the close surveillance of the Nubian power.