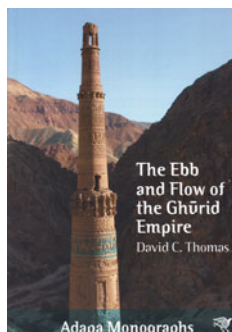


DAVID C. THOMAS. 2018. *The ebb and flow of the Ghūrid Empire*. Sydney: Sydney University Press; 978-1-7433-2541-4 A\$85.



The archaeological landscapes of Afghanistan, despite their superlative richness, are critically under-researched; this applies doubly to the material record of Islamic, medieval and early modern societies within Afghanistan, which have been long neglected by archaeologists

and historians—although not by art historians (and, unfortunately, looters). *The ebb and flow of the Ghūrid Empire* provides a new and much-needed synthesis of research undertaken just before the war-inflicted moratorium on excavations at major sites such as Jam (the focus of the book), with data generated in subsequent years through remotely sensed survey and historical research undertaken by the ‘Archaeological Sites of Afghanistan in Google Earth’ (ASAGE) project. Through the interleaving of these datasets, David Thomas presents a useful resource both for tying central Afghanistan into historical narratives of one of Central Asia’s lesser-known medieval nomadic states, and for rooting the Ghūrids, and in particular the Shansabānīd dynasty, within tangible architectures, material assemblages and landscapes. This book will be hugely helpful to students of Central Asia and of archaeological methodology, as well as to multi-disciplinary specialists.

The core of the book consists of substantive chapters engaging with the Ghūrid question at incremental scales. Developing a synthetic historical narrative of the Ghūrid polity and its shifting influence through military fortification and expansion, architectural patronage and urban culture, Thomas examines the material correlations within archaeological datasets. Tacking between the scope of the regional and the breadth of a single looter’s pit, the book assesses the evidence for the development of new modes of urban life under the Ghūrids, especially in the form of seasonal capitals such as the historically attested Firuzkuh, which Thomas argues should be identified as the UNESCO World Heritage Site *the Minaret and (significantly) archaeological remains of Jam*. Repeating an observation by long-term Afghan researcher Warwick Ball,

Thomas cautions that our ability to retrace the patterns of past society in Afghanistan is critically shaped by the access achieved by a limited number of survey projects with inconsistent reporting practices. Thomas cannily points out that the ‘archipelagic’ model of territorial sovereignty that he applies to the Ghūrid Empire is likewise useful for characterising the patchy and often tenuously intersecting ‘hold’ on the past attained by archaeologists. This patchiness is placed in high relief in the chapter on excavations at Jam, which were limited by UNESCO prohibitions to exploring only the strata exposed by looters’ holes. Thomas’s observation also invokes the issue of the methodological parities between imperial surveillance and archaeological ‘sensing.’

A major pertinent contribution of this work is a focus on how conflict archaeology and remote sensing can reflect on complex historical questions and vice versa. The interlocking realms of heritage and archaeological research need updated techniques, both for the recording of sites, features and objects, but also for the collaborative sharing of these records. Meanwhile, archaeologists who work on remotely sensed imagery need more nuanced ways of integrating our remote observations with published research and with historical data; Thomas’s book shows a possible way forward. Yet the book retains some links with past paradigms, particularly a persistent attachment to formulaic ways of framing Central Asian medieval states in terms of their *nomadic-ness*. Thomas’s methodological reflection that “Nomads possess minimal material culture” (p. 27) jars with, for example, historical descriptions of nomadic courts on the move; likewise, the author muses that the collapse (or perhaps ‘ebb’) of the Ghūrids was ultimately linked to an inability to “reconcile their traditional, seasonal nomadic lifestyle” with the requirements of a territorial state (p. 100). Thomas’s *Annales*-style approach to the archaeology of nomadic society, tempts tautology in developing an environmentally framed social aetiology for peoples who are all-too often reduced to timeless subsistence. Thomas’s work thus contributes to ongoing archaeological framing of the discovery of ‘nomadic cities’ in Central Asia as surprising or abnormal, even while railing against the dusty canard of ‘steppe vs sown’. The discussion of remote discovery of the broader Ghūrid landscape risks falling into old traps related to the

archaeology of nomadic peoples. Thomas maintains, for instance, that hundreds of nomadic campsite foundations recorded in the Rīgīstān probably pre-date the twentieth century, or may even be the remains of the early Islamic nomadism upon which the Ghūrīd Empire was built; ongoing comparative research has, however, shown this to be extremely unlikely. In avoiding the trope of nomadic ephemerality, Thomas risks backing right into the trope of nomadic timelessness. A final, related issue is that Thomas strongly implies that the decline of the Ghūrīds marks the effective end of significant urban life in Afghanistan. This impression leaves later periods largely undiscussed, including historically attested early modern (Safavid and Mughal) urbanism in Afghanistan. While Timurid Herat has certainly received plenty of attention elsewhere, the elision of the early modern is perhaps an artefact of the period classifications used by the ASAGE remote sensing, which struggled to differentiate the ‘premodern’ bracket between Timurid (ending early sixteenth century) and Modern (marked by Corona Satellite imagery dating to the 1970s).

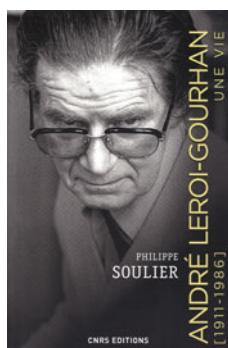
Despite challenges (many of which Thomas himself acknowledges), this work of synthesis is quite significant, constructing an interdisciplinary image of Ghūrīd urbanism at Jam as well as the broader material footprint of Ghūrīd territorial politics through multiple Afghan landscapes. So the reader is somewhat nonplussed when Thomas offhandedly states in the conclusion, “whether Jam is Firuzkuh (as the evidence strongly suggests) or not is of secondary importance” (p. 316). Notwithstanding the amount of work Thomas puts into tethering historical mentions to material data in the study of routes and landscapes, he seems content to pull the linchpin out of his own argument. On the other hand, is this the humility required by research that is now remote in multiple nodes, removed from the possibility of ground-truthing or from continued excavations for the (un)foreseeable future? In the face of blocks to ongoing academic research posed by a daily deteriorating situation in Afghanistan, as well as the dwarfing of research challenges against the significance of the humanitarian crisis there, Thomas has provided an example of how to do thoughtful work, to argue for the historical and material relevance of Afghan’s heritage, and to develop tools both for current preservation and future research.

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PHILIPPE SOULIER. 2018. *André Leroi-Gourhan. Une vie (1911–1986)*. Paris: CNRS; 978-2-271-07228-3 €27.



André Leroi-Gourhan (1911–1986) was one of the most influential French archaeologists of the twentieth century. Originally trained as an anthropologist, he devoted most of his career to the study of the European Palaeolithic and, specifically, Upper Palaeolithic cave

art from southern France and northern Spain. There is a widespread consensus that he made significant contributions in a number of fields, including technology, lithic studies, archaeological excavation and the study of Palaeolithic art and symbolism. Furthermore, some of his books (such as *Le geste et la parole* (1964, 1965a) and *Préhistoire de l’art occidental* (1965b)) are today considered classics of archaeological literature.

While Leroi-Gourhan’s work has received increasing attention during the last 30 years, we still have a very fragmentary knowledge of his life. Given this lacuna, the publication of Philippe Soulier’s biography constitutes a very welcome addition to studies of Leroi-Gourhan and his work. Leroi-Gourhan had a particularly rich and productive life, and made significant contributions to a range of different areas of research. This productivity complicates the task of retracing his career, but Soulier meets the challenge, tracing in a meticulous and detailed way the main events of Leroi-Gourhan’s life, from his beginnings as a student of ethnology and linguistics in the École Pratique des Hautes Études, to his years as professor at the prestigious Collège de France. Based on an extensive analysis of unpublished sources (including a number of documents dispersed among several archives in France), as well as personal communications from Leroi-Gourhan’s