The Colonial Politics of Water: Mapping Afghanistan’s Indus and Oxus Rivers

Lauren Palmieri

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Introduction

Throughout the nineteenth century British colonial epistemology engendered conceptions of Afghanistan’s rivers as modes of economic and militaristic gain in broader South Asia. This perception of the country’s rivers was not only portrayed in British travelogues of Afghanistan but also in visual representations of the country, many of which accompanied such works on Afghanistan. These reductive views of Afghanistan contributed to a hyper-emphasis on exploitable resources and the politicization and ‘territorialization’ of Afghanistan’s rivers.1 Afghanistan, thus, was mapped into existence as the frontier between British India and the potential foreign encroachment into Central Asia. Such conceptions extrapolated Afghanistan’s rivers, primarily the Indus and the Oxus, as the nation’s relative borders.2 In assembling these maps and travel accounts, British colonial officials repeatedly disregarded information from local, indigenous informants, resulting in the neglect of indigenous boundaries in exchange for borders that buttressed the colonialist imaginary. Utilizing nineteenth-century British colonial cartography, sketches, and photographs, this paper aims to conduct a comparative study of these colonial visual representations of the Indus and Oxus Rivers during the First Anglo-Afghan War (1839-1842) and the Second Anglo-Afghan War (1878-1880), respectively.

1 “Territorialization” here is meant to convey Britain’s claims to rivers in Afghanistan and how Britain made national claims to resources in the empire’s periphery.
2 The Indus River is located in modern-day Pakistan. However, nineteenth-century British colonial literature and cartography included the Indus River in Afghanistan’s geography. Therefore, this paper will adopt the geography of these maps to provide insight into the British colonial presence in broader South Asia. Moreover, the native name for the Oxus River is the Amu Darya River. The term “Oxus River” will be used in this paper on colonial visual representations, since this phrase was the term that Britain prioritized.
As mapping reflected a desire to control, British imperialists were guided by larger colonial economic and military incentives that secured the empire’s presence in South Asia. The First Anglo-Afghan War witnessed intensive studies of the Indus River which were dominated by a longstanding interest in the river as a pathway to commercial activity in Central and South Asia. By dominating the Indus River, colonialists maintained that the empire could secure the transport of British-Indian goods with ease. The Second Anglo-Afghan War, however, marked a discrete shift in epistemology. Rather than emphasizing the profitability of Afghanistan’s waterways, the dominant colonial epistemology of the Second Anglo-Afghan War concerned itself with territorial occupation. With ever-increasing Russian advancement into Central Asia, British colonialists conceived the Oxus River as a political border that protected Afghanistan’s existence as a frontier to India. Whether the mentalities surrounding these geographic portrayals were economic or political, representations of both the Indus and Oxus River embodied the dominant colonial epistemologies that accompanied the militaristic gaze of the First and Second Anglo-Afghan Wars. In such depictions, Britain “re-wrote” the history of Afghanistan and South Asia to confirm and justify its perceived longstanding presence in the region. By pursuing linear narratives of history, British colonial agents imposed their understanding of civilization onto Afghanistan, regularly neglecting Afghanistan’s peoples and traditions.

Mountstuart Elphinstone’s Precedent for British Colonial Cartography

Within a discussion on British colonial mapping of Afghanistan, it would be a remiss to neglect Mountstuart Elphinstone’s impact on the field. First published in 1815, Elphinstone’s

3 Mountstuart Elphinstone (1779-1859) was the British ambassador to Afghanistan. He wrote extensively about the country, even though he himself had never ventured beyond Peshawar. His work An Account of the Kingdom of Caubul (1815) became akin to an ‘encyclopedia’ for understanding Afghanistan.
An Account of the Kingdom of Caubul set a precedent for colonial mapping of Afghanistan and Central Asia. As with the vast majority of British colonial officials, Elphinstone employed a severe “mistrust locals and the information they provided, while also retaining confidence in [his] own superior rationality and reasoning abilities.” This complacency privileged his own imperial conceptions of South Asia, embedded with a colonialist agenda, even when lacking or faulty. In highlighting his conformity to the British colonial agenda, the preface of An Account of the Kingdom of Caubul expressed that “the acquisition of general information” from his journey into the Kingdom of Caubul (Afghanistan) “[was] likely to be useful to the British government.”

Even with his distrust of local informants, Elphinstone did acknowledge the limits of his own knowledge. When in need of supplementary information, he borrowed from maps and accounts by other colonial officials. According to Elphinstone, his portrayal of the geography was derived from Lieutenant Macartney, the “climate, soil, produce and husbandry” from Lieutenant Irvine, “the trade and revenue” from Richard Strachey, and the history from Robert Alexander. However, Macartney and his map loomed particularly large in Elphinstone’s mind and work. While introducing his own cartography, Elphinstone confessed that “part of [his] geographical

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5 For more information on the construction of British colonial maps in India, see Matthew H. Edney’s Mapping an Empire: The Geographical Construction of British India, 1765-1843 (London, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997). Although he does not address the question of Afghanistan, he details the professed superiority of British maps of India that were often based upon arbitrary surveys, faulty technology, and skewed visual depictions.

6 Mountstuart Elphinstone, An Account of the Kingdom of Caubul, and its Dependencies in Persia, Tartary, and India (London: Longman, Hurst, Rees, Orme, and Brown, 1815), p. iii.


7 Ibid.
knowledge was borrowed from [Macartney].”\(^8\) While there were several inconsistencies between the maps of Elphinstone and Macartney, the influence of Macartney’s map on Elphinstone’s work is pivotal for situating Elphinstone’s account in the larger context of the imperial imaginary; one in which colonialist works built upon each other in the interests the British Empire.

The appeal of the Indus River to the British Empire was overwhelmingly commercial. As communicated in the preface of *An Account of the Kingdom of Caubul*, Strachey was assigned the task of surveying revenue and trade, while Irvine detailed soils and flora. These categories

\(^8\) Elphinstone, *An Account of the Kingdom of Caubul*, p. v.
themselves were indicative of colonialists’ concern with the economic profitability of Afghanistan, which, in time, became epitomized in geographic representations of the Indus River. Elphinstone, admittedly, encompassed little knowledge of the Indus River himself. Much of his information depended upon descriptions by Mr. Foster who “had no instruments” and was considered to “not be so good a judge” but was nevertheless “superior . . . to the natives” in regard to providing information worthy of a reliable map. Elphinstone dedicated much of his description of the Indus River to discussing its branches, which were just as pivotal as the river itself in colonial mapping. He elaborated on the land surrounding these branches in the Punjab territory, stating that the “quantity of rich land uncultivated” was “excessively rich with black clay.” In illustrating this lush territory, he expressed that “It is rather odd that there should be scarcely any on trade” utilizing the Indus River and its branches. By highlighting the land’s cultivability and potential for trade, Elphinstone established Britain’s earliest commercial interests in the Indus River territory.

This importance placed on the Indus River and its branches was further accentuated in his reduced scale map of the neighboring countries of the “Kingdom of Caubul.” This map embodied an early emphasis on the Indus River by darkening the Indus River in comparison to other rivers and territories included on the map. Its inclusion in the Kingdom of Caubul indicated that this river and its branches were valuable assets to Britain. The fertile lands surrounding the branches of the Indus River were situated towards the eastern side of the

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9 Elphinstone, An Account of the Kingdom of Caubul, p. vi.
10 Elphinstone, An Account of the Kingdom of Caubul, p. 652.
11 Elphinstone, An Account of the Kingdom of Caubul, p. 654.
12 Ibid.
13 Mountsuart Elphinstone, Caubul on a Reduced Scale Shewing its Relative Situation to the Neighboring Countries [map], scale not given, in An Account of the Kingdom of Caubul.
Kingdom of Caubul territory, marking a border between the Kingdom of Caubul and Hindoostan. This professed division of territory established the Indus River as a relative political border in subsequent colonial mapping. Supporting this illustration and the colonial assumption of the Indus as a political border, Elphinstone included the Indus River in his list of the “boundaries of Afghaunistaun,” located in his table of contents.14

*The Economic Viability of the Indus River*

With Elphinstone’s work fueling British perceptions of and engagement with Afghanistan, Britain believed that it could benefit politically, militarily, and economically from the Indus River. Beginning in the 1830s, British officials adopted an “anti-Russian British policy toward Afghanistan,” weary of the recent Russian advancement into Central Asia.15 By targeting the Indus River, British colonial agents were confident that they would secure access to the broader Central Asian market. In efforts to combat Russia’s economic advancement, Britain undertook its own “commerce-based colonial strategy,” one that prioritized a study and subsequent monopolization of the Indus River.16 With this perception, the Indus River became “the gateway to that (Central Asian) market” and “the future highway of British commerce into Afghanistan and beyond.”17 The nomadic trader Sayyid Muhin Shah was consequently transformed into an agent for British “commercial experiments . . . that validated the profitability of sending Indian and European goods” to Afghanistan via the Indus River.18 The hyper-emphasis on the Indus River throughout the 1830s was a product of the broader Indus Scheme,

16 Ibid.
“which came to dominate policy circles in the 1830s and envisaged the establishment of a free trade empire via commercial navigation of the Indus River.”\textsuperscript{19} Although the colonialists seeking economic gain from the Indus River knew little of its navigability, the river became a symbol of both “the expansion of British commerce” and “the projection of British power.”\textsuperscript{20} Through steam technology, Britain strove to exert control over the Indus River so that it could profit from its market and commerce. The country enacted imperialistic “Indus Projects” to secure dominance over the river, as well as foster Afghanistan’s economic dependence on British India. Specifically, British colonialists targeted Afghanistan’s Lohani nomadic traders to enact its “colonial project to ‘open up’ the Indus River for commercial navigation.”\textsuperscript{21} Referred to as the “Mithenkote scheme,” Britain conceived Afghanistan as a commercial market and subsequently emphasized “commercial migration” in which the Lohanis “were imagined as being able to run multiple shorter trading circuits to the banks of the Indus during one year.”\textsuperscript{22} It was in this commercial-centric environment that British colonial mapping of Afghanistan and the Indus River emerged, establishing economic gain and market profitability as the dominant epistemology of British colonial cartography.

\textit{Mapping the Indus River}

British colonial agents attempted to expand the British market in Afghanistan through the Indus River, ultimately undertaking militaristic endeavors. In December of 1838, Britain deployed an Anglo-Indian force, titled the Army of the Indus, into Afghanistan under captain Sir Keith Alexander Jackson. According to Hanifi, the “Army of the Indus was a manifestation of

\textsuperscript{19} Hopkins, \textit{The Making of Modern Afghanistan}, p. 47.
\textsuperscript{20} Hopkins, \textit{The Making of Modern Afghanistan}, p. 48.
\textsuperscript{21} Hanifi, \textit{Connecting Histories in Afghanistan}, p. 61.
\textsuperscript{22} Hanifi, \textit{Connecting Histories in Afghanistan}, p. 63.
the colonial imagination then dominated by the Indus commercial navigation project.”

Preceding the First Anglo-Afghan War, Britain’s ultimate goal of this campaign was to replace the Afghan amir, Dost Mohammad Khan, with Shah Shuja who Britain felt was more sympathetic to their aims and less subject to Russian influence.

In the Army of the Indus’s campaign, Jackson kept a book of sketches, excerpts, and maps, elaborating on various Afghan cities and their proximity to the Indus River, as well as their profitability in terms of irrigation and fruit production. Simply the name “the Army of the Indus,” in both the actual army and in the map’s title, showcased the tunnel-visioned focus Britain had on the Indus River. The first image in Jackson’s account was a map of the route of the Army of the Indus, taking precedence over his other sketches and any text included in his work. Much like Elphinstone, Jackson immediately highlighted the Indus River as one of Britain’s primary foci simply by darkening the river as the relative border of Afghanistan. While Jackson’s account was not as detailed as Elphinstone’s encyclopedic descriptions, he referenced Elphinstone’s work in describing the tribal relations of Kabul, indicative of the prolonged influence of Elphinstone’s map in establishing the Indus River as Afghanistan’s eastern border. Jackson’s map likewise illustrated cities, such as Caubul, Mukran, and Sinde. These cities were discussed in his book in larger, capitalized fonts, situating them with near equal importance as Afghanistan itself, further mapping the colonialist imaginary of Afghanistan into existence.

Jackson’s map labeled cities along the Indus in great detail, especially in comparison to how he

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23 Hanifi, Connecting Histories in Afghanistan, p. 55.
25 Jackson, Views in Affghaunistaun, p. 2.
labeled other rivers and cities. Again, these were not innocent stylistic choices; such portrayals in mapping exemplified the river’s perceived importance for imperial Britain, as well as the limits of colonial knowledge and mapmaking.

The text accompanying this map was equally revealing in demonstrating Great Britain’s economic motives for securing the Indus River. In describing the city of Maidaum, Jackson extensively discussed the valley that encompassed “groves of luxuriant trees” and the abundance of fruit, labeling it as “a perfect paradise” for the Army of the Indus.26 His account of Kwettah was similar in that it detailed “the gardens surrounding the town” as being “full of English flowers and fruits . . . and many other varieties of English field vegetation,” further emphasizing Britain’s concern with agriculture for economic gain.27 By referring to the vegetation as “English,” he showcased Britain’s entitlement to and attempt to

26 Jackson, Views in Affghaunistaun, p. 27.
27 Jackson, Views in Affghaunistaun, p. 47.
exert control over Afghanistan, assuming that the country’s agriculture could be inherently “English.” Such descriptions also embedded colonialist narratives into British popular culture by making the periphery, Afghanistan, known to the unfamiliar readers of the metropole, Great Britain. Kandahar fell victim to the same patterns in elaborating on the “well cultivated” gardens that “supply fine fruit and vegetables.” However, Jackson’s report of Kandahar was particularly notable because he attributed the gardens’ success to the irrigation system, based in the Indus River. Associating agricultural success solely the Indus River represented Britain’s claim to this river as a clear path to the “Afghan and Central Asian markets.” This effort to secure the British pathway along the Indus as the most viable one was a product of the Indus scheme that prioritized the sale of British and British-controlled goods.

The latter half of Jackson’s work focused on the Indus River more explicitly, specifically in his descriptions of Bukkur, Roree, Sukkur, and Tatta in which he situated all four of these cities in relation to the Indus River. His accounts of Roree and Tatta elaborated on and emphasized the agricultural products of the region, as many British colonial works of the Indus River had in this period. In the “vicinity of Tatta,” there were “thriving” products, such as “the grape, the pomegranate, the fig-tree, the apple, &c. &c.” “On the south side of [Roree],” were “date trees, and the grape, orange, and pomegranate, abound in its gardens and orchards.” Sukkur was located in a similar vicinity as these other luxurious cities, resting on the “western bank of the Indus.” While it utilized the Indus River, it was namely “for security” rather than “any natural

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28 Jackson, Views in Affghaunistaun, p. 51.
30 Jackson, Views in Affghaunistaun, p. 91.
31 Jackson, Views in Affghaunistaun, p. 75.
32 Jackson, Views in Affghaunistaun, p. 79.
or artificial strength.” Following this observation, Jackson rendered Sukkur “necessarily weak and unimportant,” due to the lack of its agricultural productivity. Although all cities that Jackson referenced in his work rested directly along the Indus River, he placed primary importance on the ones he deemed profitable based on their production of fruits. His instinct to deem Sukkur as drastically less important than its neighboring cities demonstrated Britain’s commercial interest in Afghanistan through capitalizing on the Indus River and markets attached to it.

In conjunction with his maps of the Indus River, Jackson included several sketches that further emphasized the themes embodied in his maps. His images holistically militarized Afghanistan, portraying Orientalist narratives of the country as barren and lacking in ‘civilization’. His title page alone immediately sketched a canon as a representation of the Indus River and Afghanistan. He dwarfed the natural environment of the Indus River compared to the grandiose forts. By emphasizing the ‘modern’ fortresses in relation to Afghan tribal life, Jackson displayed Orientalist themes that fueled Britain’s ‘entitlement’ to Afghanistan and its resources as a ‘civilizing’ mission.

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33 Ibid.
34 Ibid.
35 Jackson, *Views in Affghaunistaun*.
36 See figures 4 and 5 on p. 13.
Beyond the Indus’s profitability, Jackson ‘re-wrote’ Britain’s history by establishing historical connections to Alexander the Great as a metaphor and justification for Britain’s own colonial expansion. He offered his historical perspective by detailing, “On the north side of the town is the ruined castle or fortress of Sehwaun, by which it is completely commanded; this is perhaps the most extraordinary building on the Indus, and no doubt existed before the invasion by Alexander the Macedonian.”37 By evoking Alexander the Great’s conquest along the Indus River, Jackson related it to Britain’s own establishment of the castle that was under British command. His own perception of Alexander the Great’s longstanding history in Afghanistan reinforced narratives of the nation as a site of conquest and invasion.

Other works delineating the Army of the Indus, specifically Sir Henry Havelock’s

Figure 4: One of Jackson’s sketches that highlighted Britain’s emphasis on its military presence along the Indus River.

Figure 5: One of Jackson’s sketches that emphasized the perceived size and power of Britain’s presence along the Indus River.

Narrative of the War in Afghanistan, in 1838-39, similarly contained maps of Afghanistan that focused overwhelmingly, if not exclusively, on the Indus River. The title of Havelock’s map, Sketch Map of the Route of the Army of the Indus in 1838-39, placed priority and value on the

37 Jackson, Views in Affghaunistaun, p. 85.
The militaristic climate of the First Anglo-Afghan War directly impacted these cartographic representations of Afghanistan in title, descriptions, and the map itself. Havelock’s map too reflected the trend of framing eastern Afghanistan by the Indus River, with Havelock forming a more distinct border than previous maps. This effort prioritized the Indus River and the fertile territories surrounding it, manipulating political boundaries along the Indus to suit Britain’s commercial interests.


Akin to the vast majority of colonialists, Havelock put forth his own historical narrative of Afghanistan that reinforced the veracity of a continual British presence. For instance, he credited Alexander Burnes (1805-1841), British explorer and diplomat, with being the first “who explored the feelings of a genuine traveler” in detailing the Indus River.\(^4\) Havelock’s account repeatedly utilized information by Alexander Burnes, thereby positioning Burnes as a definitive, objective source on Afghanistan, an effort that privileged Burnes’s own militaristic and commercial narrative over the knowledge of local informants. Havelock’s third chapter devoted attention to “[Kabul’s] fruit bazaars and shops,” a destination reached after his journey alongside the Indus River. It cannot be overlooked that this commercial activity in Kabul was the very target of the Indus Scheme. By dominating the Indus River, British colonial agents employed a stratagem that availed “the dominance of British goods in the Kabul bazaar.”\(^4\) In his description of the bazaar, Havelock equated the display of vegetables in the Kabul market to “the markets of the British capital.”\(^4\) Ovens in the market “were drawing loaves made up in the European fashion . . . in which the inhabitants of Cabool and Candahar delight.”\(^4\) Much like Jackson portrayed Afghanistan’s vegetation as “English”, Havelock too participated in an analogous method of detailing Afghanistan; the primary aim of which was to make the colonial periphery familiar to and attainable by the metropole. Beyond solely fostering accessibility to a wider British audience, Havelock’s report also indicated the penetration of British material culture into the Kabul market. With frequent references to British Indian-dominated routes and markets, his map was symbolic of the epistemology surrounding the First Anglo-Afghan War, one that linked the expansion of economic and military gain as achievable through war and conquest.

\(^4\) Havelock, *Narrative of the War in Afghanistan*, p. 133.
\(^4\) Ibid.
The Russian Threat: Transitioning to the Oxus River

While Britain’s concern with the Indus River did not disappear in the latter half of the nineteenth century, its focus did shift towards securing and mapping the Oxus River. Leading up to and surrounding the Second Anglo-Afghan War (1878-1880), Britain became increasingly concerned with the Russian presence in Central Asia, a threat that could be sensed in British literature. In 1871, T.G. Montgomerie published his work “Report of ‘The Mirzas’ Exploration from Caubul to Kashgar.” Focusing heavily on the Oxus River and Kabul, he emphasized Russia’s expanding presence along the Oxus River and its surrounding territories. He repeatedly referred to a Russian frontier, narrating a Lohani merchant’s description of the frontier and elaborating on the routes to Russian posts and forts. He cataloged the Narain River over which “the Russians have built a bridge, protected by a fort with 500 men” and continued to describe Russia’s military presence, clearly indicating the threat of “the Russian garrisons increasingly rapidly.”

Beyond the menacing presence of Russian-secured territories, he underlined Russia’s cultural and material presence in these territories, namely in the clothing market. Men’s caps were “generally made of plain Russian broadcloth,” elite women wore clothing “embroidered with twisted silver thread got from Russia,” and elite men and women alike wore boots made of Russian leather. In contrast to Russia’s material culture, Montgomerie idealized and glorified Britain’s presence in Central Asia and its technologies. He elaborated on when the Mirza met

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44 T.G. Montgomerie was a lieutenant-colonial who assisted British surveys of South and Central Asia.
46 Ibid.
local officials and merchants in Yarkand to discuss relations between the British and Russian governments. While Montgomerie makes no mention of the Mirza’s response to the Russian government, he claimed that the Mirza “pointed out the great power, resources, &c. of the British.” He articulated that the matchlocks imported from Russia were “inferior,” while the arms that Britain produced were “much prized.”

Montgomerie was not the only British colonial official to write of Russian threats along the Oxus River. Sir Henry Creswicke Rawlinson, an army officer in the British East India Company, wrote a book entitled *England and Russia in the East*, justifying the book’s necessity due to the “encroachments of Russia in the East.” More explicit in his fear of Russian expansion than Montgomerie, he maintained that Russia’s progress fostered a sense of “impending gravity” of the situation along Afghanistan’s Oxus River. Throughout his work, he discussed the methods by which Russia had established a presence in “the fertile valleys of the Oxus.” Specifically, Russia secured the mouth of the river and had sent Russian steamers along it as well.

Poets echoed these competing narratives in securing Afghanistan. Sir Alfred Comyn Lyall, in his poem “The Amir’s Soliloquy”, wrote, “Shall I stretch my right hand to the Indus, that England may fill it with gold? Shall my left beckon aid from the Oxus? the Russian blows hot and blows cold;” In these lines, he politicized and territorialized the two ‘primary’ rivers of

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Afghanistan. He extended the colonial competition for Afghanistan to these rivers, granting Britain the notion of ‘saving’ Afghanistan. However, Russia, associated with the Oxus River, was radicalized in unpleasant environments of hot and cold. More symbolically, Lyall’s poem extended metaphors of good and evil to Britain and Russia by associating Britain with the right hand, the hand of ‘saving’ grace, and Russia with the left, the ‘demonized’ hand. As with many colonial works, this poem implicitly attempted to vindicate Britain’s goal of controlling the Oxus River by implying that Britain could grant it fortune as opposed to Russia’s unpleasant conditions.

Although Britain’s anxiety surrounding Russian expansion was exaggerated in many regards, it was not entirely without warrant. Russia did have a relatively secured presence in Central Asia, as demonstrated by the swelling Russian economic threat in the years before the First Anglo-
Afghan War. However, the Second Anglo-Afghan War and the years preceding it were met with heightened attention to the Oxus River by both British and Russian powers. Russian powers held a militaristic presence along the Oxus River and participated in its cartography, as Britain had. Nevertheless, Russian mapping did not seem to employ the British tactic of ‘re-writing’ history to justify its presence. The Russian map, *Map of the Khanate of Khiva and the Lower Reaches of the Amu Darya River*, emphasized the Oxus River in its construction, as well as included the river’s name in the title of the map itself. Published in 1873, this map was a symbol of the Russian military presence and its newly annexed territory, the Khanate of Khiva and Emirate of Bokhara, along the Oxus River. While this map is only a singular example of Russian cartography concerning the Oxus, it referred to the river as the Amu Darya River, its local name. In contrast, Britain almost exclusively utilized the name the Oxus River, a term of Greek origin. By employing a Greek term, as opposed to the native term, British colonialists reflected the perennial themes manifested in mapmaking: the mistrust of indigenous information and the process of “re-writing” history to convey Europe’s supposed longstanding presence in Afghanistan.

Wanting to prevent Russian expansion and viewing Peshawar and “the sources of the Oxus” as matters “of considerable interest,” Britain attempted to exert control over the Oxus River. With the common understanding of science as an objective field untainted by colonialist prejudices, British officials latched on to racialized sciences to prove their dominance. Just as Britain had previously referenced Alexander the Great in attempts to achieve a historical narrative of

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conquest, colonial officials began to craft an Aryan-homeland identity to the Oxus River and its surrounding territories. Namely, German linguists sought connections to Indo-European languages in Central Asia. The British Empire, therefore, asserted itself as the culmination of all civilization, seeking control over territories that had fallen from their former Aryan “golden-age.” These ideas concerning linguistics reached Britain relatively quickly and were popularized in Friedrich Max Müller’s *Lectures on the Science of Language.*

He professed that “there was a small clan of Aryans settled probably on the highest elevation in Central Asia.” Originating in this location along the Oxus River, the Aryans expanded outward, populating Central Asia. Racial theorists rapidly followed in supporting this theory. The Oxus River was subsequently positioned as the “one locality on the earth’s surface to which . . . the Mosaic narrative points, in unison with the traditions of Aryan nations, as the cradle of our common race.”

*Visual Representations of the Oxus River: Photography and Cartography*

Backed by the premise of preventing Russian expansion and rightfully restoring an Aryan homeland, Britain sought to secure the Oxus River. Due to perennial conflicts and disputes, Britain and Russia agreed to name the Oxus River Afghanistan’s northern border in 1873. However, this process was never formalized, thereby contributing to future disputes. Given the colonial epistemology of competing powers, the Oxus River became highly politicized, not for commercial purposes, as in the Indus River, but for matters of territorial dominance. British cartography shifted towards emphasizing the Oxus River in the sheer abundance of maps

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56 Ibid.

centered around the Oxus, just as it had done with the Indus River a few decades earlier. Borders were explicitly dictated by the Oxus River, namely due to the Russian ‘threat’ that sparked a sense of urgency in British mapping. Moreover, photography gradually replaced sketching as one method of visually portraying these rivers. The use of photography marked a critical shift from hand-crafted visual portrayals to other forms of geographic representation. Nonetheless, photographs of the Oxus River echoed themes akin to sketches of the Indus River. Additional photographs simultaneously portrayed Afghanistan as lacking in technology and demonstrated the perceived ‘superiority’ of Britain’s presence along the river.

As with sketches of the Indus River, photographs of the Oxus River portrayed the region as barren in efforts to condone British intervention. The photographs from the Afghan Boundary Commission emphasized this position of an ‘uncivilized’ Afghanistan considerably more so than earlier sketches of the Indus River had.58 As Britain was facing augmenting Russian expansion in northern Afghanistan, its photographs of the Oxus River attempted to undermine Russia’s position. By portraying Russian territories along the Oxus River as immensely lacking in technology, the photographs suggested that Russia’s presence along the river was largely ineffective, if not ‘detrimental,’ in terms of ‘modernizing’ Afghanistan. By including these types of photographs, the Afghan Boundary Commission emphasized many of the contemporary,  

continual themes, demonizing Russia, while glorifying British technology in hopes of gaining control over the Oxus River.

British cartography of Afghanistan, thus, became framed by its rivers, almost always utilizing the Oxus and often the Indus, the consequences of which will be discussed in the following paragraphs. While maps of the Indus River often included the river’s name in the title, many British maps of the Oxus River did not. Instead, the Oxus River was not associated with borders as the Indus River was but the Oxus River itself was the border, hyper-emphasized, politicized, and territorialized in this cartography. Such representations of the Oxus as a border were perpetuated by the colonial epistemology of the fight for Afghanistan between Britain and Russia, subsequently engraining these mentalities into geographic representations.

Britain repeatedly outlined its desire to establish a military presence along the Oxus River and emphasized Russia’s presence along it as well. The Oxus River was detailed extensively, but not in terms of agriculture and profitability, as the Indus was. Instead, the Oxus River was detailed geographically in relation to territorial occupation. Valleys were not considered in regard to
what fruits they could produce but, rather, in how they divided the Oxus River. To illustrate, in
*Letters from the Afghan Boundary Commission*, Kara Bel was described as the territory “which
divide[d] the watershed of the Murghab from that of the Oxus.” In this collection, very rarely,
if ever, were themes such as fruit production mentioned. There was some mention of the Oxus
River’s “slow-running” nature and the presence of sheep and cattle along it; nevertheless, the
Oxus was overwhelmingly emphasized with regards to occupation, specifically the threat of
Russian encroachment. Unlike Indus River cartography, Oxus River cartography became
highly politicized maps of political borders between colonial powers, as Britain’s competition for
dominance intensified.

The *Letters from the Afghan Boundary Commission* included a map of northern Afghanistan at
the conclusion of the book. Entitled *Map of the North West Frontier of Afghanistan*, the map
was limited exclusively to the Oxus River territory, but the river itself was hardly visible. This
label was hidden under an abundance of boundary lines between competing powers that
emphasized Britain’s position above all others. The map referred to the marked British line as
the “actual” boundary line, while deeming the Afghan and Russian lines as only “perceived”
boundary lines. Within this map and others similar to it, the Oxus River became a political,
territorialized entity, with British colonial sources paying little to no attention to the role of the
Oxus River for its local inhabitants. The map isolated this limited portion of Afghanistan,

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59 Charles Edward Yate, *Northern Afghanistan or Letters from the Afghan Boundary Commission*, (Edinburgh and
60 Yate, *Letters from the Afghan Boundary Commission*, p. 228.
61 *Map of the North West Frontier of Afghanistan* in *Letters from the Afghan Boundary Commission*. 
neglecting the country’s remarkable extraterritoriality, plurality, and mobility. These necessities in Afghanistan’s history and culture were similarly absent in the Afghan Boundary Commission's texts that accompanied these maps, demonstrating how Britain had very little knowledge of the territory it was attempting to occupy. British colonialists, instead, emphasized the Oxus River in the method that was most valuable to its current political situation, predicated on defining boundaries between colonial powers in the competition for Central Asia. Author of *Letters from the Afghan Boundary Commission*, Charles Edward Yate, underlined the border-driven purpose to Britain’s colonial presence along the Oxus River. Despite passing attempts to

![Figure 9: Britain’s Map of the North West Frontier of Afghanistan that maps the Oxus River territory based on political boundaries.](image-url)
Oxus River, hence, became the primary object of discourse, serving as “the end of [the Afghan Boundary Commission’s] boundary-line.”62 In examining Britain’s military campaign along the Oxus River, he acknowledged the Russian threat that inspired such British intervention. Again, he projected a sense of inferiority and decay onto the Russian-occupied territories in Afghanistan. Bokhara, a city at risk of being “permanently annexed by Russia,” “did not look so flourishing,” as “the canals were slovenly, walls tumbled down, and houses poor-looking.”63

Conclusion

As demonstrated by nineteenth-century colonial sketches, photography, and cartography, the contemporary British political and economic climate was extended into its visual representations of Afghanistan. In other words, dominant epistemologies of economic profit and colonial competition became absorbed and engrained into maps of the region. To varying degrees, these colonial dilemmas were broadened into the politicization of the Indus and Oxus Rivers as definitions of Afghanistan’s borders. No matter how much detail British colonial agents included about the Indus River’s agricultural profitability or the Oxus River’s strategic location, they failed to account for Afghanistan’s extensive migratory history and culture in the territories they strove to occupy. These reports focused too exclusively on these rivers as tools of colonial manipulation while homogenizing and disregarding the native populations that surrounded them. Colonial mapping of Afghanistan was reduced to British perceptions of modernity, profitability, and global conceptions of power. Throughout the 1830s, Britain’s motive to control the Indus River was fruit and nut production and profitability. Consequently, mapping came to reflect the cities that fostered this trade, as well as the fertile valleys that

62 Yate, Letters from the Afghan Boundary Commission, p. 226.
63 Yate, Letters from the Afghan Boundary Commission, p. 242.
encompassed the Indus branches. The Oxus River had a different experience, becoming so politicized that the river itself was hardly distinguishable underneath the plethora of mapped political borders. However, like the Indus River, Oxus River cartography reflected the British colonial climate, objectifying Afghanistan and the Oxus River as tools for global dominance. Within these processes, there was little attention to Afghanistan’s peoples and how they perceived their own identities and positions within their own country. Reductionist narratives offered a simplicity that eased British control of South Asia. By situating these rivers in terms of exploitability, Britain could support a linear narrative of history that suited its dominance of Afghanistan. Nineteenth-century British colonial mapping was overwhelmingly dependent on self-interest, choosing to view Afghanistan in whatever light would suit its political agenda.

However, these are not phenomena limited to nineteenth-century Britain. With the emergence of ethnic mapping, narratives of a Pashtun-dominated state, and an overall post-9/11 Orientalist climate, it is crucial to question how the current political atmosphere impacts visual representations, especially the mapping of Afghanistan.

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