

## From Takth-i Sulaiman to the Banks of the Oxus: The Bounds of Afghanistan Studies, Past, Present and Future

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Louis Dupree, the famous American anthropologist, once apocryphally quipped that everything we know about Afghanistan is a mere footnote to the definitional work of Mountstuart Elphinstone. While knowledge of the country and its peoples owes much to, and in many ways remains trapped by the lines of inquiry laid down two centuries ago, the new scholarship is now breaking free of such restrictive bonds. This is an exciting time to be a student of Afghanistan as the last 15 years has witnessed a veritable explosion of serious and engaged research about the country. This new wave of scholarship, much of it produced by young Afghan scholars, promises to remake understandings of the place and its people for a generation to come. Yet this scholarship needs to be considered in its moment of knowledge production. It seems odd that the body of a national historiography is being enriched at the moment when a national frame of historical reference is being challenged within the academy. Further, the very idea of 'Afghanistan' studies carries with it certain implicit assumptions about the place, its people, and its past that are contested in contemporary politics. To explore these issues, this talk will critically consider the meaning of Afghanistan studies as well as how the new and forthcoming scholarship challenges, undermines and alternatively reinforces that meaning.

Benjamin D. Hopkins is a specialist in modern South Asian history, in particular that of Afghanistan, as well as British imperialism. His research focuses on the role of the colonial state in creating the modern states inhabiting the region. His first book, *The Making of Modern Afghanistan*, examined the efforts of the British East India Company to construct an Afghan state in the early part of the nineteenth century and provides a corrective to the history of the so-called 'Great Game.' His second book, *Fragments of the Afghan Frontier*, co-authored with anthropologist Magnus Marsden, pairs a complex historical narrative with rich ethnographic detail to conceptualize the Afghan frontier as a collection of discrete fragments which create continually evolving collage of meaning. He has additionally co-edited *Beyond Swat: History, Society and Economy along the Afghanistan-Pakistan Frontier* with Magnus Marsden. Professor Hopkins regularly teaches courses on South Asian history, the geopolitics of South and Central Asia, as well as World history.

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