

Submitted Abstract

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First Author First Name Last Name	Michael David Frchetti
Submitting Author First Name Last Name	Michael David Frchetti
Correspondence	frchetti@wustl.edu
Co-Authors >> E-Mails will be not listed	
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Abstract

Mountain environments are often portrayed as liminal spaces for human occupation. Yet extremities in seasonal resources, temperature, and other environmental factors often over-shadow the advantages that high altitude contexts provide for communities seeking political and ideological refuge. This paper examines the theme of political and religious refugia in mountainous regions, introduced broadly by James Scott in his book “The art of not being governed”, through the lens of two recently documented high altitude cities located over 2000m above sea level in the Pamir mountains of Uzbekistan. The sites of Tashbulak and Tugunbulak represent two large cities situated in an environment not easily supported by large scale farming, yet these cities functioned for centuries as trade intermediaries and political strongholds from ca.850-1125CE. Both centers have significant defensive structures, as well as a large Muslim cemetery, indicating both political and religious functions. These mountain cities further illustrate a suite of political and social advantages conferred on the nomadic polities who controlled them -- namely in terms of their ability to leverage religious participation for economic and political gain. By centering political power outside the (more typical) river deltas and oasis environments, Tashbulak and Tugunbulak show how small-scale communities could leverage their geographic location for economic, social, and ritual power, and illustrating how the ostensible refuge of mountain landscapes enabled the rise of medieval nomadic empires of Central Asia.