

BIWEEKLY COLLOQUIUM
Monday, October 30th, 4:15 p.m.

THE SPREAD OF CROPS ACROSS CENTRAL ASIA
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The mountain foothills of Central Asia are marked by an ecologically rich mosaic of environments, which have fostered an equally diverse array of human cultural traits. As far back as the third millennium B.C., people were transporting items, ideas, technology, and genes along this trans-Eurasian mountainous corridor, spanning from the Kopet Dag and Hindu Kush in the south to the Tien Shan and Altai Mountains in the north. The prehistoric cultural diffusion through these mountains played a significant role in shaping human developments across the Old World. As one component of this early trans-Eurasian exchange, recent archaeobotanical research is illustrating that domesticated crops from the disparate ends of Asia spread through these mountain foothills starting in the late third millennium B.C. The East Asian millets and southwest Asian cereal crops were intermixed into a multi-cropping farming system in northern Central Asia. In addition to domesticated plants and animals, cultivation and culinary techniques spread across Asia, shaping Eurasian cuisines.

These same mountain river valleys also supported the historical northern routes of trans-Eurasian exchange, often colloquially referred to as the Silk Road. By the late first millennium B.C., this historically documented exchange relied on established vectors of interaction, including organized caravans, caravansaries, and government regulation of goods. Central Asian commerce centers, such as Bukhara, Samarkand, or Merv, were nodal points in a network that connected Central Asia to East and South Asia. Historical sources emphasize the wide range of goods that moved along these exchange corridors, and they illustrate that fruits, nuts, and cultivated crops were among the most important commodities transported between markets in Asia. During this period, every major urban center in Central Asia was surrounded by irrigated orchards and vineyards; archaeological evidence suggests that many of the alpine slopes were also under cultivation. Looking at new archaeobotanical data from several sites, I will talk about the spread of crops, such as wheat, barley, the millets, peaches, apricots, apples, Russian olives, walnuts, and melons. Archaeobotanically tracing the path that plants followed on their long journey across the Old World, helps us understand how these foods ultimately reached our dinner plates today.

Venue: Leibnizstraße 1, Seminar Room 204