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Boundaries and the Archaeology of Frontier Zones

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The study of boundaries and frontiers has been an important focus in geopolitical and historical geography and historical studies of social and cultural landscapes for almost a century (Bartlett and MacKay 1989; Jones 1964; Minghi 1970; Parker 2002; Pohl, Wood, and Reimitz 2001; Power 2004). Early geographical and geopolitical studies of borders had to contend with issues such as the relative efficacy of natural versus anthropogenic boundaries, while in recent years geographers have paid particular attention to functional aspects of boundaries and considered their impact on existing societies in modern times. For some historians and geographers, frontiers can also be “processes,” by which is generally meant the changes that take place during a period of colonization transforming a zone from border to heartland (Burns 1989). For politicians and civil servants, the growth of empire building and nationalism, proceeding hand in hand with the rise of map-making agencies and colonial administration, was an increasingly important focus of frontier attention in the 19th and 20th centuries (Given 2004: 70; Lamb 1968; Mellor 1989).

Fascinated by the processes of colonization on the American frontiers (Canny 1998; Dyson 1985; Mancall 1988), and mesmerized by the Roman Empire (Birley 1961, 1974; Whittaker 1994), as well as China and South-East Asia (Allard 2006; Lattimore 1962; Stark 2006), archaeologists have necessarily taken a longer view of frontiers and boundaries focusing on subsistence strategies, social identities, colonialism, the growth of nation-states, and defense (Baker 1993; Covey 2003; Elton 1996; Green and Perlman 1985; Hunter 2001; Rollason 2003; Wells 1999; Wigg 1999). Some of the most important work has taken place at regional and local levels and include city walls, the enclosing of private properties, areas of urban jurisdiction, religious units such as temple complexes, dioceses and parishes, private parks and estates, townships, burial mounds, deer parks, and royal forests (Beresford 1971: 23–62; Creighton and Higham 2005; Griffith, Reynolds, and Semple 2003; Moorhouse 1981; Reynolds 2002; Winchester 2000).

The archaeological literature also reflects a concern with boundaries in a wider sense of the term, although it is not always explicitly stated. For example, there is the transfigurative sense of boundaries whereby the process of dying, death, and burial crosses a line between this world and another. The location of burial mounds, execution cemeteries and, in Ireland at least, the deposition of bog bodies and metalwork on boundaries are cases in point (Kelly 2006; Reynolds 2002). Boundaries are also alluded to in myths and annals as being places of particular significance, sometimes supernatural, but sometimes as the venues of important political or diplomatic events. The labors of Cúchulainn in
the Táin Bó Cúailgne (Tarzia 1987), the meeting of Aethelstan and an array of kings at Eamont Bridge in Cumbria in A.D. 926, and the famed ancient oak of Gisors on the Epte in Normandy are examples.

There are many other ways of thinking about boundaries. Not only are achievements in sport or in science lauded, but pushing at the boundaries of physical attainment or knowledge is positively encouraged. Equally, the idea of same-sex marriages or transvestism may compel a reassessment of inherited social boundaries. In complex societies, behavioral limits and punishments for infringements may be set out in law codes, sometimes inscribed on stelae as if to say, you are now in the territory of X and these are our laws. Such boundaries are so deeply ingrained in the collective psyche that they have become linguistic clichés—"the boundaries of acceptable behavior," "the line in the sand," "the frontiers of knowledge." What is important here is that these examples challenge the notion that rules are always to be obeyed, that boundaries should not be crossed.

### Types of Frontier

Within academia there are increasing trends toward challenging the rules and fostering cross-disciplinary research, as Parker (2006) has recently observed, and definitions of frontiers and boundaries, borders, and borderlands are numerous. Parker’s useful model, “Continuum of Boundary Dynamics,” attempts to “characterize specific boundary situations” as an aid to scholars wishing to make comparisons (2002, 2006).

To me, frontiers and boundaries are territorial edges. By definition, they are at the margins of a heartland or a core territory that could be as small as a single valley containing a group of farms or imperial in scale. They also imply ownership or the presence of a leader, such as a king and government, intent on defense in the face of an aggressor, and the control of cross-border traffic. Frontiers, however, were not necessarily viewed as permanent arrangements, and although permanence requires international agreements (treaties) between countries together with the administrative infrastructure to police them, temporary frontiers could be defined by truces, as in Spain during the Middle Ages (Jiménez 1989). Temporary arrangements also require policing, usually by the military or by lordships centered on castles.

The word beloved of Roman archaeologists to represent a frontier capable of being defended is *limes*, but, as Isaac (1987) has shown, it was rarely used by ancient authors before the 4th century A.D. in Roman sources in the 1st to 3rd centuries A.D. show that they refer either to roads or a land border, but not a defensive frontier, and *limes* is not a word used in literary or epigraphic sources in connection with Hadrian’s Wall or the Antonine Wall. By the 4th century and afterward, the words are more frequently used, although by this time in the sense of a border district under the command of a *dux*. In fact the idea of a broad zone is not only a normal feature of the edges of the Roman Empire (Isaac 1990: 396–97; Wells 1999: 126), but, under the descriptions of client kingdoms, vassal states, buffer states, margrave-ship, marks, or marcher lordships, often politically subservient to a larger adjacent polity, they became a regular feature in the growth of empires and nation-states. Thus, at the northern extremity of the Carolingian Empire, Saxony formed a buffer between the heartland of Charlemagne’s lands against the Slavs to the east, and the Inka empire in Peru expanded from a core around Cuzco to include additional territories (Covey 2003).

In sociopolitical terms, the classification of frontiers and boundaries is fraught with problems. Kristof (1970: 134–35) cited the British Association Geographical Glossary Committee, according to whom *frontiers* are either (a) border regions, zones, or tracts separating two political units or (b) a demarcated boundary between states. *Boundaries*, the Committee held, are either synonymous with (a), or lines delimiting administrative units, or geographical regions. Kristof went further, claiming that *frontiers* look outward and constitute zones from which settlers looked beyond with future colonization in mind. American frontiersmen in the 18th and 19th centuries epitomized the concept, while nowadays we speak of space as “the final frontier.” *Boundaries*, however, are “inner oriented” and mark the edges of sovereign units. The difference can also be expressed as that between two opposed forces—the frontier being centrifugal in nature, whereas boundaries are centripetal.

Working from an anthropological perspective, Green and Perlman (1985: 3–4) defined frontier studies as being concerned with the peripheries of societies, while boundaries are more concerned with the interaction between societies at political, economic, and other levels. This is not very far from Lord Curzon’s (1907) definition in a famous lecture entitled “Frontiers” delivered in 1907. In this he argued that linear divisions between polities should be called “boundaries,” whereas the word “frontier” should be reserved for less precisely defined edges, buffer zones, and marcher lordships.

Many of these issues are as germane to post-
world where frontier zones were frequently, in Parker’s definitions, porous, if not fluid. He instances the Assyrian Empire setting up buffer states, esta-blishing strongly fortified towns, ruling their vassals by way of networks of officials obtaining tribute, monitoring activity, and gathering information on potentially hostile neighbors. A similar system was employed in Mesoamerica, where the Spanish appointed local native leaders to keep the peace, collect taxes, and provide a variety of services (Jones 2000: 366), but the natives could escape across the frontier into jungle or the mountains and desert.

Herodotus and Xenophon rarely referred to boundaries in their writings on long-distance travels around the eastern Mediterranean and Eurasia in the 5th and 4th centuries B.C. Exceptionally, in Book 1 Herodotus mentions the River Halys as the boundary between Cappadocia and Paphlagonia, but his description of the road to Susa in Book 5 makes no mention of boundaries, even though the road passes through many territories. The mention of rivers as boundaries is not confined to Herodotus. The River Tigris in northern Iraq acted as both a boundary and a major means of communication for the Assyrians (Parker 2002, 2006), and the Romans made use of the Rhine and Danube in a similar way, as did the Inka in the Vilcanota valley in Peru (Covey 2003). Xenophon wrote of “the country of the Carduchi” (IV, 3) and the “country of the Taochi” (IV, 7). Lands were identified by the people who lived there, and in some cases ste-leae or other monuments erected in public places, and incorporated the names of kings, telling travelers and others whose land they were in.

By the same token, Roman writers, concerned with emphasizing the differences between civilization and barbarism, or what was acceptable and what was beyond the pale, hardly ever refer to imperial frontiers. The empire comprised the peoples of Rome—populi Romani. To Caesar, Tacitus, and other Roman writers, polities were thought of in terms of the gens rather than the territories they inhabited. Rome negotiated with people, not states or land, and the people would, it was hoped, enrich it. Indeed, to Orosius in the 5th century the Empire had no need of a frontier because it was the world—orbis terrarum (Goetz 2001).

In the post-Roman world, Europe melted into an extraordinarily complex palimpsest of states, kingdoms, and tribal areas with varying degrees of political and ethnic identity, which did not necessarily correspond with one another. Although we may suppose that many kings from the 6th century on were well aware as to their territorial limits, the slowly. Offa, king of Mercia (A.D. 757–796), adopted the linear approach against the men of Wales, but his contemporary, Charlemagne, seems to have preferred “buffer territories.” Three centuries later, when William Duke of Normandy was crowned King of England in 1066, the northern limit of his kingdom was only vaguely defined.

Imperial and State Boundaries

The classic examples of imperial boundaries include the Great Wall of China and the limits of the Roman Empire, but in terms of scale they were the exception rather than the rule. In both cases, linear works, natural features, and buffer territories were used. Again, in both cases the Chinese and the Roman emperors were concerned with defense along the borders and the periodic threat of incursions threatening the stability of the core areas.

The Great Wall of China is over 7,000 kilometers in length, making it far and away the most impressive of boundaries in the ancient world. It comprises several walls, not all of which are linked but that served as frontiers separating the “barbarians,” “peoples without history” (Linduff 1995: 133) in Mongolia and Manchuria, from the Central Kingdom to the south. Although originating during the Zhou dynasty, one of the earliest Walls was built during the short-lived Qin dynasty (221–207 B.C.) and later modified during Han times (202 B.C.–A.D. 220), and again during the Ming dynasty, to which period many of the remains visible today belong. It was built over extremely varied terrain, including the Gobi Desert, river valleys, plateaux and mountains, as well as the coastal plains north and east of Beijing, and was constructed from materials obtained locally, including limestone, granite, brick, and timber. Essentially, it is a series of curtain walls with towers and battleforts at frequent intervals.

It is hardly surprising that the purpose of the walls changed over time given the enormous scale of the works. The walls certainly had a defensive function that was to delay, deflect, and hinder attacking armies and nomadic hordes until such time as Chinese forces could be mustered to counter the threat. However, the Chinese came not to rely on this so much as to establish a number of buffer states, many of which accepted an overriding Chinese authority but that were otherwise nominally independent (Lamb 1968: 21–38; Lattimore 1962: 97–118). Much archaeological attention has inevitably been directed toward “core” areas of China, but the peripheral kingdoms have also been examined. Cultural assemblages from these
have taken place in the higher echelons of society, it was far from uniform at lower levels in border regions, and this may have contributed to periodic unrest (Allard 2006: 250–51; Stark 2006).

The Roman Empire also utilized a wide range of natural features, mountains, rivers, desert, and the sea as well as walls, palisades, and ditches. In Lower Germany, the River Rhine became the boundary after the defeat of Varus in A.D. 9, legions backed up by auxiliary regiments being deployed in fortresses and forts linked by roads along its length (Carroll 2001; Millar 1981). In Upper Germany the frontier deviated at times from the Rhine in the Wetterau and Taunus regions where, during the reign of Trajan, the boundary comprised fortlets and towers to which was added a palisade. As the Empire expanded eastward, the Danube effectively became a frontier during the Dacian wars of Domitian beginning in A.D. 85, but Trajan also took in lands to the north. After his accession Hadrian redrew the administrative boundary at the Danube itself, designating the northern lands as extraprovinciam. Here, in the province of Moesia, it has been suggested that the frontier system was complex, with up to three lines of defense including one to the north, the Danube with the bulk of military personnel, and troops guarding the Balkan passes (Zahariade 1977). In Africa, climate and terrain helped determine the location and nature of the frontier works. The main period of construction of the Numidian frontier, the *fossatum Africæ*, belongs to the reign of Hadrian, who used a combination of ditch, forts, watchtowers, roads, and the mountains to mark administrative limits (Fentress 1979: 111). In the Middle East, the changing political geography was determined by external threats from the Parthians, nomads, and others who were contained by fortified cities such as Dura Europos, and Resafa in Iraq, as well as networks of forts (Isaac 1990; Kennedy and Riley 1990; Woolf 1998: 180).

A key feature of Roman frontier policy was the cultivation of tribal loyalties along the borders. In what are sometimes known as vassal kingdoms or buffer states, the Assyrians changed the nature of settlement and archaeological assemblages by importing new agricultural settlers and ceramics as part of their territorial expansion (Parker 2002, 2006: 85, 93). The Romans also adopted the idea with client kingdoms such as Judaea, Palmyra, Armenia, and many others existing throughout the Empire from Arabia to Britain, the idea first being promoted by Augustus (Ball 2000; Isaac 1990: 396–401; Wells 1999: 125ff). Whereas the activities of Assyrian client kings were monitored, a substantial degree of autonomy provided they retained a subservient relationship to Rome. Part of their treaty relationships was based on the need to maintain a peaceful frontier with minimal military interference by Rome. However, part of the relationships undoubtedly concerned profit and the ways in which the kingdom could be exploited for the good of Rome and its citizens. This is reflected in the archaeology, especially finds and assemblages containing Roman artifacts located well beyond the frontier, as can be seen in Scotland, or in princely graves in Thuringia, Poland, and Denmark (Carroll 2001: 97–101; Hedeager 1992: 156–7; Hunter 2001).

While archaeologists, understandably, attempt to construct cultural groupings from the data they have available—that is, the artifacts—a difficulty in attempting to distinguish buffer zones on the basis of artifactual evidence is that archaeological distributions do not necessarily reflect other facets of local cultures. We certainly cannot assume that ancient societies lacked dynamism and models need to build in factors that take this into account, as Hedeager (1992) has attempted. In other words, since any frontier zone is likely to contain a variety of overlapping but not necessarily congruent frontiers, there is a clear need to understand the social contexts within which different categories of artifacts were moved about (Elton 1996; Parker 2002). Parts of that argument will, in turn, require us to understand the need for and purpose of borders in complex societies.

Fragmentation of the Roman Empire resulted in the emergence of numerous polities and regional groupings presided over by officials or kings, many of whom did not invest in expensive construction works on the fringes of their lands, partly because they did not need them. In Merovingian Gaul, especially after the division of the kingdom following the death of Clovis in A.D. 511, differences from kingdom to kingdom could be subtle or even non-existent. Across Gaul and neighboring lands, as in the ancient Middle East, distinctions between groups may have been apparent in linguistic terms, styles of dress, or greeting, or by the nature of public posts and administrative machinery, as Wood and others have discussed in relation to the Franks, Jutes, Alamanni, and others (Halsall 1998: 141–65; Wood 1994, 1998). Doubtless such distinctions worked for contemporaries, but they present problems for archaeologists, especially for those dealing with peoples who borrowed cultural traits from neighboring groups. Although much earlier in date, Herodotus's disarming comment that "no race is so ready to adopt foreign ways as the Persian" (Book 1, 70) is as applicable for the
Nevertheless, physical boundaries that may have had a political function become a feature of the landscape in some areas. A number of substantial linear earthworks in the United Kingdom fit this category, although few are datable (Arnold 1997: 224). One such is the Wansdyke in Wiltshire and Somerset, some 45 kilometers in length; part of it overlies a Roman road, showing that some of it at least is Roman or later in date. The Aberford Dykes in West Yorkshire may have defined the British kingdom of Elmet (Faull 1981: 172–74). One of the most well-known linear works is Offa’s Dyke between England and Wales (Hill 1974, 1985). At 103 kilometers (64 miles) in length, and with a bank 10 m wide at its base and a 2-m-deep ditch on the Welsh side, texts associate it with Offa, king of Mercia in the 8th century. Asser, and the later Brut y Tysgôgwyn, record that Offa ordered a great vallum to be made from sea to sea and that, if true, must include Wat’s Dyke, some 62 km in length, taking the line to the estuary of the River Dee.

There are numerous dyke systems in Ireland, many of which are also difficult to date accurately. The Black Pig’s Dyke extends in a discontinuous fashion from County Down in the east to County Sligo in the west (Lynn 1989a, 1989b; Raftery 1994: 83–97; Walsh 1987; Williams 1987). The Doon of Drumsna, which extends over 1.6 kilometers and consists of a rampart up to 30 meters wide at the base and some 6 meters high in places, is another example (Condit and Buckley 1989: 12–14). The precise function of these earthworks remains uncertain, although some are thought to be provincial boundaries, as between Ulster and Connacht. The construction of The Dorsey in County Armagh, dated by radiocarbon determinations to the early 1st century B.C., may have been linked in some way with the building of the royal site at Navan (Lynn 1989: 9, 18; Raftery 1994: 97).

One of the greatest continental examples is the Danevirke in Schleswig. It is 30 kilometers long and was first constructed in A.D. 640–650 (cited in Hamerow 2002: 112) but was modified by Godfred in A.D. 804, according to the Annales regni Francorum. It linked western Jutland with Schleswig next to the major Baltic trading port of Hedeby. The huge scale of the Danevirke is one of the most impressive post-Roman monuments and is testimony to the emergence of the state of Denmark and the consolidation of a single leadership in the 9th century (Hedeager 1992: 2, 250–55).

It was not only the artificial frontier in Europe. There is growing archaeological evidence, supported by radiocarbon and dendrochronological dates, that Charlemagne, alarmed at movements of Tène hillforts along the Elbe and the Saale rivers. One site, Hohbeck near Magdeburg, even resembles Roman fortifications and raises the question of whether Charlemagne attempted to emulate the Roman model (Hardt 2001: 223). Further east, Tsar Symeon defined his Slavic Bulgarian state from that of Byzantium with inscribed boundary stones (Stephenson 2000: 18).

In northern England, William the Conqueror and his successors consolidated their respective claims with a series of strong castles as well as secular and ecclesiastical lordships. From A.D. 1080, what was essentially a buffer state, the Palatinate of Durham, ruled with regalian authority by the Prince Bishops and earls of Northumberland, was formed in the east, and in 1133 the See of Carlisle was carved out of the former diocese of Glasgow in the west. Eventually, the Anglo-Scottish border was formally defined in the Treaty of York in 1237 as a line between the Tweed at Berwick to the Solway. On either side of that line, from 1249, the frontier zone comprised buffer territories in the form of lordships of the Western, Middle, and Eastern Marches in which the Wardens ruled as de facto kings (Jack 2004). The union of the crowns in 1603 finally resolved the precise position of the frontier.

**Discussion**

It is probably true to say that societies have been criss-crossed with frontiers and boundaries in all walks of life for the entire span of human existence. Nonetheless, we can identify monuments defining territories through the use of walls, cairns, or other markers, clearly beginning at the domestic level in circumstances, such as the need to exploit and to manage animals and plants. Good examples are Bronze Age garden plots and early field systems. Over time, the need to mark out estates or other units on the ground can be linked with chiefs establishing their own territories, as well as the need to control the movement of livestock and protect crops. In some cases, these required more substantial earthworks. Unlike many portable artifacts, the distributions of which are very difficult to interpret, such territorial markers are contextually rooted in that they are tied to a landscape with specific topographic, soil, drainage, and climatic elements.

It is arguable that at the level of the state, the most sophisticated means of territorial and administrative definition was the solution adopted by the Chinese and Roman Empires. Yet, as impressive as monuments such as Hadrian’s Wall may be, the
ditch but the maintenance of good relations with client states beyond and the stationing of military units along its length.

With the collapse of Empire and the removal of the military, notwithstanding the problems of dating, we see the periodic use of dykes, ramparts, and hillforts in the second half of the 1st millennium A.D. apparently acting as political boundaries, but, in some cases, they were relatively short lived. In the case of linear boundaries the questions are these: Why were they constructed? How did they work? What message was being conveyed by the builders?

Territorial definition in medieval Britain was not dissimilar to that of the Roman period. The castle supplanted the fort, lordships the civitates, and in some places new towns, as in north Wales or bastides in Gascony, the civitas capitales. Buffer territories, the equivalent of Roman client kingdoms, were also created, but neither the great Palatinate of Durham nor the marcher lordships lasted indefinitely. From the 11th century on, populations grew; new states were formed; aristocratic, crusading, colonizing adventurers established wide networks of family influence; towns proliferated; trade routes moved toward a worldwide network; and money and the growth of banking facilities assumed an even more prominent role. Peoples were also moved, not least in order to populate the new towns, but the emphasis gradually shifted toward the protection of territorial resources and the control of goods. Regulation and the payment of tolls probably controlled this more effectively than walls, palisades, and ditches. From the 16th century, changing views as to the nature of monarchy and its relationship with the Pope and increasing cartographic expertise gradually gave rise to concepts of international law and the rights of governments to annex territory that it had not previously held (Jack 2004). This is the point from which a phase of greater precision in the delineation of national boundaries is ushered in.

**Conclusions**

Despite the considerable archaeological and historical research achievements on borders and frontiers in the ancient world, there remain many problems for archaeologists aiming to explore the history of social landscapes, as a number of writers have pointed out. Among these definitions the adoption of a common language is a frequently raised issue, but perhaps more important is the need for writers concerned with state formation and socioeconomic dynamics to shift their emphasis from

_and regions peripheral to the heartlands. Here, archaeology certainly faces challenges. Themes adopted by many scholars of recent frontier and border issues include the question of Indigenous compliance to imposed structures with their border structures, as well as identity, and the problems they create (Hartshorne 1970). However, as an archaeologist, it is fair to say that we need many more large, well-dated, stratified datasets capable of serving as “benchmarks” against which other material can be matched. Scholars of the 19th- and 20th-century frontiers and boundaries have this, but the archaeological database is slighter, different in character, and more difficult to penetrate._

**References**


