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Debate Article

Archaeology and Border Studies: broadening the dialogue

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Hanscam and Buchanan (2023) have written a timely and important contribution to the evolving discussion about the politicisation of archaeology, and the prominent role that intersections with Border Studies might play in future debates. I concur with many of their substantive points. Focusing on boundaries and bordering processes is a natural extension of the work on identities that has been a dominant theme in archaeology since at least the 1990s; it also provides a counterbalance to recent trends that seek to extend globalisation deeper into the past, not least in Roman studies (e.g. Pitts & Versluys 2014). As Hanscam and Buchanan note for the public sphere, there are also numerous academic contributions within the Border Studies literature that draw upon archaeological or historical examples, though often framed within outdated understandings of the meanings of these boundaries (e.g. Nail 2016; see Gardner 2022). Our role in engaging with these contributions is not simply to point out mistakes, but also to learn from this range of perspectives on the significance of boundaries in human societies, to fuse them with our own interpretations of ancient borderlands, and to contribute to contemporary debates that crystallise many of the most important issues of our times.

From migration to sovereignty, from the pandemic to cryptocurrency and climate change, competing ideas of the role and reality of boundaries underpin political decisions that will have profound consequences in the current century. There are several different approaches within Border Studies scholarship, just as there are in contemporary archaeological theory, and I am less convinced that the assemblage approach, briefly discussed by the authors, offers the best tool for analysing what, as the authors also admit, are structures (material and conceptual) with very human costs. Indeed, as discussed in a recent *Antiquity* article (Fernández-Götz *et al.* 2020; cf. McGuire 2021), there are many questions to be asked of the efficacy of new materialist or posthumanist approaches in analysing the circumstances of imperial violence. These are matters to debate as, hopefully, the kind of agenda set out by the authors gains momentum.

When looking at ancient and contemporary frontiers and borderlands in a comparative perspective, there is much to learn along different axes. One dimension, perhaps the longitudinal or vertical dimension, is thinking about how ancient boundaries are influential in modern discourse on related topics, as the authors address with reference to Hadrian's Wall and the recent phases of the US/Mexico border fence. Along this axis, it is relevant to consider how, in much of the Border Studies literature, there is an emphasis on the profound role of border concepts in shaping societies, in the sense of having an impact far beyond

the actual boundary in space (e.g. Paasi 1998; Cooper & Perkins 2012; Haselsberger 2014). Thus, not only does the border play a significant role in Washington politics, but perceptions of it as a *frontier*—a historically loaded term implying an asymmetrical relationship between 'inside'/'civilised' and 'outside'/'other'—permeate many aspects of US culture and even strongly influence some scholarly discourse, which is often mostly about the infrastructure on the US rather than Mexico side (though see Anzaldúa 1987; Vulliamy 2020; Ganster & Collins 2021).

The idea of a 'frontier society', shaped by what goes on at its edges, has pedigree both in US historical scholarship and in Roman archaeology (Dyson 1988), and this is worth rediscovering as we pursue the comparison. This also introduces a more 'horizontal' or latitudinal comparison, which places examples such as these alongside each other, to evaluate how boundaries and borderlands work in the practical rather than rhetorical sense. As noted by Hanscam and Buchanan, recent studies of Hadrian's Wall reveal its complexity, and while debate continues as to how permeable a barrier it was, much progress is being made in understanding the different layers of perpetual border-making and border-crossing (Gardner 2022: 165–67; cf. Breeze 2018; Hodgson 2017; Symonds 2021). Similarly, there are countless studies of the US/Mexico border to draw upon, fleshing out the many dualities of borderland life. But it is also worth recalling that this border across the North American continent, like the northern borderlands of Roman Britain, changed over time, and fruitful comparisons might also be made with the period when this region was the northern boundary of the Spanish Empire in the Americas (e.g. Weber 2009; Heyman 2012; see Gardner In Press). Historical specificity must be integral to such comparisons, as no two borders are the same, but comparing the practices and processes of borderland societies will still yield much of relevance to contemporary debates.

What impact those results have in the wider world is a real concern, which the authors rightly consider at some length. Broadly, I agree that we need to lean in to attempts to politicise the discipline, and the academy in general, while remaining clear that this is because we acknowledge that our scientific work has political consequences. This is not the same as saying that all interpretations are equally biased and therefore that anything goes; rather, it is to say that interpretations based on evidence will point in certain political directions. This distinction is vitally important where much of the rhetoric and many of the decisions about borders have significant human consequences. The past can be used to make the present and the future better, and we must use our trained voices to help that happen. It may be hard to be heard amid the clamour around any issue such as this, but that should not stop us trying.

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