Offa's Dyke Journal

A Journal for Linear Monuments, Frontiers & Borderlands Research

Volume 5

Edited by Howard Williams

Aims and Scope

Offa's Dyke Journal is a peer-reviewed venue for the publication of high-quality research on the archaeology, history and heritage of linear monuments, frontiers and borderlands. The editors invite submissions that explore dimensions of Offa's Dyke, Wat's Dyke and the 'short dykes' of western Britain, including their life-histories and landscape contexts. *ODJ* will also consider comparative studies on the material culture and monumentality of land divisions, boundaries, frontiers and borderlands from elsewhere in Britain, Europe and beyond from prehistory to the present day. We accept:

1. Notes and Reviews of up to 3,000 words
2. Interim reports on fieldwork of up to 5,000 words
3. Original discussions, syntheses and analyses of up to 10,000 words

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Front cover: Reconstruction of the Olger Dyke at Gårdeby Mark (Jørgen Andersen, Museum Sønderjylland, Arkæologi Haderslev). Cover and logo design by Howard Williams and Liam Delaney.

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Insights from a Recent Workshop on Walls, Borders, and Frontier Zones in the Ancient and the Contemporary World

Gideon Shelach-Lavi, Tal Ulus and Gideon Avni

This article reports on the 'Walls, Borders, and Frontier Zones in the Ancient and Contemporary World' workshop and its implications of transdisciplinary research for building comparative insights into the uses, meanings and experiences of border and wall constructions in the past and present.

Keywords: borders, dykes, frontier zones, migration, walls, historical analogies.

The workshop titled 'Walls, Borders, and Frontier Zones in the Ancient and the Contemporary World' was held at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 18–22 December 2022.[1] In recent years, borders, the crossing of borders by immigrants, refugees and asylum seekers, and the construction of walls and fences to stop or control their movement, have become contested issues and the focus of popular and academic debates. Nevertheless, we organised this workshop with the underline understanding that those issues are not new; they have deep roots in world history and are reflected in the archaeology and history of different cultures and communities affecting many different parts of the world. We argue that comparing past and present phenomenon, and case studies from different parts of the world can generate novel insights and fruitful discussions.

The workshop brought together more than twenty scholars, from Israel and abroad, including archaeologists, historians, geographers, sociologists, anthropologists, and political scientists who work in diverse periods and in (seemingly) dissimilar regions. The aim was to focus on thematic issues which were addressed from comparative perspectives. Part of the workshop was conducted in the field, in relevant sites located in Israel's modern and ancient frontier zone, the Negev. We organised the workshop as part of *The Wall: People and Ecology in Medieval Mongolia and China*, an ERC funded project that focuses on what is, perhaps, the most enigmatic episode of 'Great Wall' construction in China and Mongolia. The wall system in question is roughly dated to the tenth to thirteenth centuries AD and is located in present-day northern China and Mongolia. It covers a distance of over 4,000km, including walls and ditches, camps and other auxiliary structures (Shelach-Lavi *et al.* 2020a and 2020b). The project combines archaeological, historical and palaeo-climatic research aiming at a better understanding

[1] The workshop was sponsored by the Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities; The Wall (ERC grant agreement No 882894); The Hebrew University; The Confucius Center of the Hebrew University. For details of the workshop and papers' abstracts see: https://thewall.huji.ac.il/conferences

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of the purposes for the construction of this wall-system, how it functioned, why it was abandoned (Storozum *et al.* 2021).[2]

We invited participants in the conference to address two main themes: The first focused on walls and border demarcations and addressed such questions as: Why walls were built in the past and are being built today? Can we compare past wall-building episodes (such as the Roman Limes, the Chinese 'great walls', Iranian walls) to walls currently being built in different parts of the world? Where are border walls and fences usually located and why do states, in the past and present, willingly invest large amounts of resources in their construction? Is there a single universal purpose for building walls and border barriers, or do they perform many different functions? Should we see walls as military installations or should they be associated with social, economic, and even cultural functions? Are walls and other types of border barriers associated, for example, with the movement of refugees? Can specific conditions, such as climatic changes, be associated with wall construction in the past and present? Are walls typical of the dynamics of frontier zones between settled and nomadic communities and political entities? And finally, regarding the longevity of walls; how did they function and what happened when they fell out of use?

The second theme focused on the concept of borders through the ages: How did people and societies in the past and present conceive ideas such as 'border", 'borderline', 'frontier zone', 'buffer zone'? Has there been one clear definition for those concepts, or are they contested? Do political borders necessarily overlap with other types of boundaries such as ethnic, cultural, linguistic, and economic divisions? How do borders shape the identity of people within them and their attitudes towards those outside the borders? How do internal politics and propaganda affect the concept of borders? What was the role of borderlands in the formation of nomadic tribes, chiefdoms, kingdoms, and states? How did laws and political realities shape the concept of borders/walls, and how do immigration and asylum policies of modern nation-states shape a new understanding of borders?

The comparison between the current construction of walls and fenced borders and the construction of linear barriers in the past yielded interesting insights. The place of political negotiation and rhetoric in the construction of border 'walls' is well known from recent events. For example, Massimiliano Demata (University of Turin) presented the discourse in the USA surrounding the so-called 'Trump Wall' and how different sides of this debate used images and rhetoric (rather than facts) to push forwards policies for and against the construction of border walls and the way they should be used (Demata 2022). Tal Ulus (The Hebrew University) examined public and official discourses about African asylum seekers around the globe, and how these discourses relate to climate migration. She demonstrated the change of this discourse in Israel, from a positive one,

[2] To learn more, see The Wall project's web site at https://thewall.huji.ac.il/

focused on the hardship and suffer of the refugees, to a negative one where they were called 'infiltrators' and stereotyped as 'security threat'. These discourses, in the USA and Israel have great affect on policy makers and on the construction of border fences. Very similar processes, including political disagreements and the use of rhetorical and historical analogies, were described by Johannes Lotze and Zhidong Zhang (members of The Wall project, the Hebrew University) in their analysis of debates in the Jin court during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries AD regarding the construction of long walls in China and Mongolia. Combining insights from past societies and contemporary wall-building and use, we believe that an important goal of future wall studies must be a better understanding of the negotiation and competition among different power groups, including not only governments, but also different sections of the public and interest groups, and how such debates shape (or prevent) the construction of walls and other types of border barriers.

Another interesting arena of comparison between the past and the present arose from discussions on the dynamics of border zones. A vivid debate evolved around the intended and unintended consequences of border demarcation. For example, Efrat Ben-Ze'ev (Ruppin Academic Center) argued that the recent fencing of the Israel-Egypt border catalysed an unforeseen escalation of drug smuggling activity carried out mainly by Bedouins (Ben-Ze'ev and Gazit 2020). Gideon Avni (The Hebrew University) showed how, in very similar ways, the formation of the eastern frontiers of the Roman and Byzantine empires shaped the way of life of the local (mainly nomadic) population and the equilibrium they reached with the intrusive imperial powers (Avni 2014). Those and other papers bring to our attention the fact that what we see as the consequence of border fencing is often unrelated or even contradict the reasons for which it was originally constructed. Noam Leshem (Durham University), on the other hand, argued that many of the harmful consequences of state abandonment in regions that are in-between states ('no-man's land') are, not unintended, but rather can be instrumental parts of the state's designs for those regions. The people living in those locations experience violence and neglect either because the government want to punish and suppress them or just because they were no longer deemed worthy of care (Leshem 2017). Such by-design consequences of policies probably also have a bearing on borders and frontier zones in the past and we should make more efforts to uncover them.

Another issue that was discussed mainly in regard to the past, but is, in fact, also relevant to the present, was the willingness of states to invest enormous resources in the construction of border walls, but also the limitations to the ability and willingness to invest in such projects. As expected, the most extreme examples of extravagant expenditure, not only in the construction of walls, but also in the maintenance of border control, came from Chinese history. Yuri Pines' (The Hebrew University) description of the earliest long wall in China (c. 450 BC) (Pines 2018) and David Robinson's (Colgate University) analysis of the famous Ming Great Wall and the efforts of the Ming dynasty (AD 1368–1644) to control its northern borders, provide ample historical evidence of

the scale of such investments, as well as to their consequences, including the corruption catalysed by such a large flow of resources to border areas. Another example of such expensive undertakings is the wall surrounding the oasis of Bukhara (a talk by Sören Stark, Institute for the Study of the Ancient World, New York University). However, other case studies from China and other parts of the world show that systematic research sometime reveals that the construction expenditures were much more modest than initially suggested. It turned out that many of the ancient systems did not include a formally constructed wall, and were made of linear ditches. Those system were quite extensive and could have additional elements such as palisades, but they were not as costly as the construction of large stone or earthen walls. Examples include the medieval wall systems in China and Mongolia (a talk by Gideon Shelach-Lavi, The Hebrew University), Offa's Dyke and other linear earthworks from early medieval Britain (a talk by Howard Williams, University of Chester), and similar monuments from Continental Europe during the fifth to the ninth century AD (a talk by Walter Pohl, University of Vienna) (Hill 2020; Squatriti 2021). The ubiquitous construction of ditches as border markers begs the functional question: What was the intended aim of those monuments? Could they stop invading armies or only smaller raiding parties? Or was their function associated with the movement of civilian populations, including preventing the entry of refugees, controlling trade and collecting taxes? Such questions are highly relevant to our current world as well.

We did not want the workshop to focus on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and territorial disputes. However, such issues cannot be avoided, especially since walls of separation between Palestinian and Israeli neighbourhoods are highly visible from the venue of the workshop, at the Mt. Scopus campus of the Hebrew University. A talk by Shaul Arieli, a former policy maker and one of the top experts on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, presented past attempts to demarcate a border between Palestinian and Israeli states. The failure to agree on such permanent borders, as Arieli describe it, was due to conflicting political interests (internal and external) and the lack of visionary political leadership (Arieli 2019). However, other aspects that are in play, such as the complexity of the intertwined demographic landscape, the symbolic meaning of fixed borders and the power of real and invented histories, are clearly relevant to our understanding of other instances of border disputes in the past and the present.

Other issues that were discussed in the workshop are highly relevant for our understanding of the past as well as the present. These included the nature and function of border crossings and the roles and significances of more pliable and ephemeral frontiers; the effects of cross-border interactions, including trade, migration, diplomatic missions, and the transformation of knowledge; and methods of identifying the political and socio-cultural borders of prehistoric and early historical societies. Many papers presented in the workshop alluded to the effects of environmental and climatic conditions, including climatic changes and periods of climatic instability. Understanding these affects and their importance in the past as well as in the present

requires us to adopt a cross disciplinary approach and develop new methodologies that advance such research beyond statements based on superficial correlations. We hope that the fruitful discussion that was established in the workshop among scholars working in different parts of the world, on different time periods, and from diverse theoretical and methodological perspectives will continue to enrich the interdisciplinary field of border studies. We are aiming to publish together some of the papers presented in the workshop and hoping that it will catalyse more cross-disciplinary publications and dialogues like those set up in the workshop.

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