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Boundaries, Borders and Frontiers: Contemporary and Past Perspectives

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Boundaries, Borders and Frontiers: Contemporary and Past Perspectives

Boundaries are a complex topic, with different categories being distinguishable depending on the language and with a number of terms often used interchangeably. This discussion paper offers an overview on definitions and introduces different types of boundaries such as geographic, political and social. Drawing on disciplines as varied as border studies, international relations, post-/decolonial thought, and on examples from anthropological fieldwork, insights can be derived for archaeological approaches. In this context, the role of boundaries in the dynamic construction of ethnic identities is highlighted. A discussion of ancient Egyptian terms and concepts of political boundaries underlines the comparative potential of studies in premodern political thought and lived experience.

boundaries; borders; frontiers; identities; interconnection; Ancient Egypt

Begrenzungen sind ein komplexes Thema, wobei verschiedene Kategorien je nach Sprache unterschieden und Begriffe austauschbar verwendet werden. Die vorliegende Diskussion liefert einen Überblick zu Definitionen und führt diverse Begrenzungstypen ein, wie der geographischen, politischen und gesellschaftlichen Art. Anhand verschiedener Disziplinen, wie Border Studies, internationaler Beziehungen und post-/dekolonialem Denken und anthropologischer Feldforschung können Erkenntnisse für archäologische Ansätze abgeleitet werden. Die Rolle von Begrenzungen bei der dynamischen Konstruktion ethnischer Identitäten wird herausgestellt. Eine Diskussion altägyptischer Konzepte von Begrenzungen unterstreicht das Potential für vergleichende Studien von politischem Denken und Lebenswelten der Vormoderne.

Begrenzungen; Grenzen; Grenzland; Identitäten; Interkonnektion; Altes Ägypten

I Introduction: a myriad of terms

According to the *Oxford Dictionary of English*,¹ a boundary is “a line which marks the limits of an area; a dividing line”, or “a limit of something abstract, especially a subject or sphere of activity”. The definition for border is “a line separating two countries, administrative divisions, or other areas”, or “the edge or boundary of something, or the part near it”. Frontier, for its part, is defined as “a line or border separating two countries”, although it can also be used in a figurative sense, for example when speaking about ‘the frontier between thought and reality’ or ‘the frontier of knowledge’. Limit is understood as “a point or level beyond which something does not or may not extend or pass”. Finally, a borderland would be “a district near the line separating two countries or areas”.

The English language has different terms for dealing with a similar – although not always identical – reality: boundaries, borders, frontiers and limits. However, other languages have a much more limited terminology, which means that nuances are more difficult to establish; e.g. in German there is only the term *Grenze*, which is similarly as inclusive as *frontière* in French – both of which can connote borders as well as frontiers. Interestingly, Mandarin Chinese might behave in a similar way to English with the

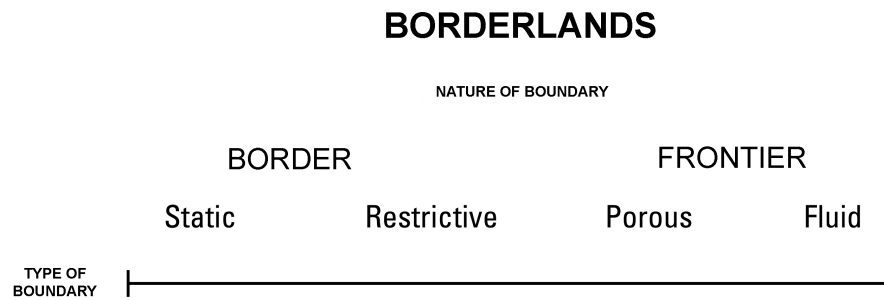


Fig. 1 | Continuum showing the interrelationships between borderlands (territories or regions around or between political or cultural entities), borders (linear dividing lines fixed in a particular space), frontiers (loosely defined areas or transition zones that lie between political or administrative entities or between one such entity and a hinterland), and boundaries (unspecific divides or separators that indicate limits of various kinds).

terms *bianjing* (边境) designating borders and *bianjiang* (边疆) designating borderlands or possibly even frontiers.

A borderland thus is a contact zone between polities more broadly. Gloria Anzaldúa expressed the reality of such a borderland based on her experience of growing up on the United States-Mexican border: “*una herida abierta* [an open wound] where the Third World grates along the first and bleeds”² This would result in the formation of a third country in the shape of a ‘border culture,’ rather than the sharp divide between *us* and *them* intended by an (international) border. ‘Boundary’ encompasses the more specific terms of ‘border’ and ‘frontier’ and is thus the most general term related to the issue.³ In any case, the oft-interchangeable use of these terms indicates that the distinctions are blurred or rather made fuzzy by imprecise use of terminology in scholarship, as fig. 1 shows.⁴

Bradley Parker already narrowed down the relevant boundary terminology to two terms, both of which were part of the subordinate concept of the borderland: borders and frontiers. Recognizing the need for precise terminology in anthropological research on borderlands and for uncoupling borders and frontiers, he theorized that the former possessed a static and restrictive character while the latter was more porous, fluid and overall zonal.⁵ In this sense, borders appear as linear, spatially fixed demarcation lines between polities whereas frontiers represent zones of various imbricating and interconnecting cultural, economic and political boundaries.⁶

To uncouple frontiers from borders even further, one can integrate a decolonial/post-colonial perspective on frontiers which also does justice to the history and use of the term as derived from the English language. The origin of the frontier goes back to the American Frontier during the colonization of the Americas by European powers. A feature of early modern European political thought, it pitted civilization against barbarism or, in other words, supposedly superior societies against inferior societies, embodied by Europeans and non-Europeans respectively. The Frontier thus demarcated spaces under European control (civilization) from those not (yet) under European influence (barbarism), i.e.

2 Anzaldúa 1987, 3 (emphasis original).

3 See also Parker 2006, 79.

4 Parker 2006, 79; note also the discussion in Feuer 2016, 11–23.

5 Parker 2006, 80–83.

6 Parker 2006, 79–80.

conquered spaces from those to be conquered/civilized.⁷ Walter Mignolo argued that frontiers are conceptualizations of both knowledge and space. Frontiers have thus been intrinsically linked to (military) expansion in the past five hundred years.⁸ Comprising more than simply contact zones between societies, they are a device of political thought to facilitate and legitimize domination. Hence, a frontier has an epistemological dimension not inherent in the border. The implication for anthropology and archaeology is thus to look for spatially bound ideologies that categorize the world along similar lines.

2 Categorizing complexity

Boundaries and borders constitute complex phenomena with an immense variety of possible situations, which in many cases may overlap.⁹ In light of the vast array of existing possibilities, it is hardly surprising that some attempts have been made to systematize and impose some kind of order on this complexity. An example is Parker's five general categories of boundaries with several possible subcategories:¹⁰ 1) Geographic boundaries (e.g. topographic features, physical characteristics, climate, flora and fauna, natural resources); 2) Political boundaries (e.g. political, administrative and/or military divisions); 3) Demographic boundaries (e.g. ethnicity, gender, population density, health); 4) Cultural boundaries (along linguistic, religious and/or divisions of material culture); and 5) Economic boundaries (e.g. extraction of raw materials, transshipment of commodities, production of finished products, agricultural production).

Political borders are often, although by far not always, a formalization of natural boundaries, i.e. geographical features which can represent topographical obstacles to communication and transport. Among examples are great rivers such as the Rio Grande – which forms part of the United States-Mexican border – and mountain ranges such as the Pyrenees – which mark the border between Spain and France – and the Himalayas – which separate China from India, Nepal and Bhutan.¹¹

Borders can also exist on water. Oceans were historically zones of free movement and contact, with states claiming only those maritime stretches that could be defended by coast-based weaponry. However, after the Second World War technological progress made the extraction of resources on the ocean floor viable and states began claiming more maritime areas as their territory. The UN-mediated 1994 Law of the Sea extended the maritime territory of coastal states from three to twelve nautical miles and created exclusive economic zones (EEZs) extending from twelve to 200 (in individual cases up to 350) nautical miles off the coast. In EEZs, movement on the surface is unrestricted while owning states control all resources below.¹² The claims of individual countries often overlap, as exemplified by the resource-rich South China Sea currently considered international waters, with the United States especially opposed to any challenge of the existing maritime order and intent on maintaining the status quo.¹³

Border disputes have been institutionalized on a global scale, which raises the issue of how similar disputes between major powers or communities were resolved in premodern times. It also raises the issue about in what way the seas were an area of contestation between countries or simply a transitional zone of free movement and exchange. For the ancient world, that would mean understanding the Mediterranean Sea as a vast contact

7 Langer 2018, 48, 53–56; Mignolo 2012, 298–299; Ropp 1980, 245; note also Feuer 2016, 16–18.

8 See Mignolo 2012, 299.

9 On boundaries and borders, see generally Parker and Rodseth 2005; Rösler and Wendl 1999.

10 See Parker 2006, 80–89.

11 On borders in the Himalayas, see Pardesi 2011; Scott 2008, 5.

12 Jones 2016, 103–106.

13 Morton 2016.



Fig. 2 | Photograph of the Berlin Wall, 1985.

zone – or even a multitude of smaller contact zones.¹⁴ Indeed, attention has been brought recently to the local and inter-regional interaction of Mediterranean island communities during the Bronze Age, although several aspects have not been well-understood; e.g. the geographic extent of the island communities' (political organization), the reach and nature of their interaction among each other and with the mainland, and the negotiation of space.¹⁵ In other words, the boundaries on the sea, their role in human interaction and their regulation by adjacent communities are unclear with respect to premodern times. Yet, it stands to reason that they also fit in with the network of mutual interdependence in facilitating long-distance exchanges as proposed for the Bronze Age,¹⁶ incorporating cities, rural communities, coastal and island communities and possibly providing for softer borders between polities than under the current nation-state framework.¹⁷ Research agendas focusing on the Mediterranean could probably also be adapted to suit research on the premodern organization of other island communities, such as in Southeast Asia or the South Pacific.

Whereas certain borders are open, unguarded and porous, others are partially or fully controlled, and may be crossed legally only at designated checkpoints.¹⁸ Some disputed borders may even lead to the establishment of buffer zones like the Saudi-Iraqi neutral zone of more than 7000 km², which existed from 1922 to 1991. A border can be something very clear and tangible, as in the case of Hadrian's Wall and the Berlin Wall (Fig. 2), and at other times something rather fluid and imprecise. On occasions, a simple line, physical or imagined, can have an important legal, political and sacred significance, as in the case of the ancient Roman *pomerium* – traditionally believed to be the line ploughed by Romulus around the walls of the original city – with its associated restrictions.¹⁹

In this sense, borders have also been used to create pockets where different laws apply. One example is labor regulations, where the fact that labor standards and wages in the global South were/are often lower than in the global North has been a driving factor in

14 On the issue, see generally Broodbank 2013.

15 Dawson 2016.

16 Kristiansen 2018; Kristiansen and Larsson 2005, esp. 38–39.

17 In political science, the term nation-state is often synonymous with territorial state. Indeed, the case has been made that nation-states are code for nothing other than territorial states (see Agnew 1994).

18 Pavlakovich-Kochi, Morehouse, and Wastl-Walter 2004.

19 Rykwert 1976, 91–92.

the deindustrialization of the latter and the outsourcing of production to poor countries in the wake of neoliberal reforms. Borders, in this sense, have helped create and maintain an artificial wage imbalance between countries.²⁰ In other words, borders are used for territorially binding wealth and regulating access to that wealth. Another example is the use of such pockets to advance political agendas by projecting a country's superiority over another in an attempt to make the opponent's society susceptible to one's ideas. In this sense, West-Berlin and the British colony of Hong Kong – also known as 'Berlin of the East' – were used as territorial pockets in the Cold War to showcase the alleged superiority of Western-style democracy and capitalism over Soviet socialism, targeting East Germany (and, by extension, the Soviet Union) and China right next to their own inhabitants.²¹ Borders can thus also function as a medium to align those dwelling within and those outside along a political agenda.

It is important to note that the comparatively hard political borders of today are a feature of modernity. It has been argued that the idea of setting up fixed borders in the shape of territorial states derived from Early Modern European political thought under emerging capitalism,²² which may indeed be a case in point for Mignolo's argument that Europeans exported their local thought across the globe over the past centuries.²³ Accordingly, the European-style organization of polities was institutionalized globally, with the UN effectively seeking to freeze the post-Second World War borders and maintaining the status quo, only allowing border shifts in special cases.²⁴

The boundaries of premodern societies probably functioned differently. Medieval Europe, for instance, was instead characterized by regional networks of kinship and interpersonal affiliations. Borders, regulated by these networks, were thus fuzzy, could change according to the political situation and the wider population was used to that, although most border changes came about – at least in Europe – by organized collective violence.²⁵

Over and above the differences, a common denominator is that boundaries and borders are areas or places 'in between,'²⁶ and therefore they embody the loci within which contact takes place.²⁷ The key idea is that they do not only divide, but also connect and serve as interfaces of contact,²⁸ resulting in the emergence of a double-consciousness on the part of those inhabiting the borderlands.

3 The fluidity and persistence of ethnic boundaries

When we think about boundaries, we usually do so in terms of political or territorial borders, for example the political border between two states, or a geographical boundary such as a mountain range. However, we also need to consider other, frequently more invisible kinds of boundaries, for example social boundaries between members of different ethnic or religious communities which live within the same settlement or region.²⁹

Historical, anthropological and sociological research shows that social boundaries, far from representing insuperable barriers between uniform groups, often act as channels of communication that facilitate interaction and encourage the reworking of collective

20 See e.g. Jones 2016, 108–124.

21 Castillo 2005; Tsang 2008.

22 Chaichian 2014, 15; Jackson and Zacher 1997, 2.

23 Mignolo 2012, 299.

24 Jackson 2000, 316–335.

25 Agnew 1994, 60; Jackson 2000, 325–32; Jackson and Zacher 1997, 16.

26 Mullin 2011a.

27 Parker 2006, 77.

28 Rösler and Wendl 1999; Scott 2008, 5.

29 E.g. Tilly 2006; Stark 1998.

identities.³⁰ Moreover, it should be taken into account that, while the boundaries between groups can be determined by treaties or agreements, they are never entirely fixed and immutable. Quite the contrary, both internal and external divisions and the content on which boundaries are constructed are dynamic, and in a constant process of redefinition.³¹

The issue of boundaries between ethnic groups and intergroup and individual identities was most influentially addressed in a volume edited by the Norwegian anthropologist Fredrik Barth.³² Barth believed that ethnicity was a product of a situational construction in contexts of interaction, which he defined as ‘borders’, emphasizing the importance of ethnic boundaries and consolidating an emic perspective on ethnicity. Thus, ethnicity turned from an ascriptive category, with its own associated battery of traits, into a personal sign of identity. It was neither clear-cut nor collective, but a fundamentally subjective option made by individuals according to contexts of interaction.

Whereas previous studies of ethnicity had assumed that ethnic identities were maintained as long as little or no contact existed between the groups, Barth’s fieldwork indicated that, even when ethnic boundaries had people continually moving across them, people within the groups could still maintain their ethnic identities. In fact, he stressed that ethnicity can sometimes be more evident at intergroup borders, where interaction with the ‘Other’ reinforces the construction and re-elaboration of identities. Attention fell to the fact that ethnic distinctions are not the result of isolation but depend on the interaction between groups.

A good ethnoarchaeological example is given by Ian Hodder in his famous study of the ethnic limits in the district of Baringo (Kenya),³³ where he pointed out how the boundaries had been maintained for several generations, despite the movement of entire families from one group to another. In a similar way, research in Tajikistan has shown that the collective displacement of populations of different origins to the same region did not result in an ethnic mixture of the groups, but, on the contrary, reinforced the sense of distinctiveness between Gharmis, Koulabis and Pamiris by accentuating endogamic practices and even creating new cultural differences that did not necessarily exist before the movements.³⁴

Archaeological studies of boundaries have often been based on insular models of cultural change that treat borders as passive recipients of core innovations and expect sharp boundaries visible in material culture.³⁵ In contrast to these traditional views, in many cases we should not expect to find clear boundaries, but rather complex mosaics (‘patchworks’) which overlap and interact – corresponding with the borderlands described by Anzaldúa as discussed above.³⁶ These patchworks or borderlands have been prominently addressed by a variety of post- and decolonial scholarship. The concepts of hybridity and third space have been an object of postcolonial studies,³⁷ while decolonial thought has dealt with borderlands. Both deal with either the presence or emergence of a double-consciousness based on the experience of the borderland. In this sense, the borderland can also be used in a figurative sense in that a boundary is experienced, e.g. between individuals from South America and Europe. According to Mignolo,³⁸ recognizing these border(land)s is the prerequisite for the emergence of a new consciousness he termed *border thinking*, i.e. thinking from and within the border to challenge and eventually

30 Parker and Rodseth 2005; Pavlakovich-Kochi, Morehouse, and Wastl-Walter 2004.

31 Parker 2006.

32 Barth 1969a; Barth 1969b.

33 Hodder 1982, 13–36.

34 Roy 2004.

35 Lightfoot and Martinez 1995.

36 Anzaldúa 1987, 3.

37 Introduced by Bhabha 1994.

38 On the issues, see generally Mignolo 2012; also Mignolo and Walsh 2018, 194–210.

decolonize existing (international) norms perceived as destructive. Some of these concepts have already been incorporated by archaeology, especially in relation to research on ethnic encounters. Unfortunately, many archaeologists are still unaware of the variable nature of boundaries; so, in the absence of inviolate and impenetrable limits they usually conclude that there were no limits at all. This situation has been rightly described by Anthony: “we have failed to recognize that we have internalized the modern nation-state’s basic premise by insisting that ethnic borders must be inviolable boundaries or they did not really exist.”³⁹ The archaeological study of borders still has a long way to go, although some remarkable recent contributions are showing the way.⁴⁰

Despite the enhanced interest of anthropology and archaeology in matters of ethnic boundaries and interconnectedness,⁴¹ it is worth pointing out that precisely this focus has become an object of criticism from outside these disciplines, for instance in pedagogy; the contention being that these foci hearkened back to the ideals of (neoliberal) globalization and the ethnic politics of liberal democracies that are said to create ethnic boundaries in the first place to separate people in any possible social way.⁴² The message to take home for anthropologists and archaeologists may be to be more reflexive in this regard and to consider the possibility of whether we are not applying liberal ethnic politics to premodern contexts in looking for segregations or ethnically informed discourses that might not (always) have been present. In this context, it is worth raising another hitherto unmentioned type of boundary: that between academic disciplines, which – perhaps not unlike nation-states – often have their own methodologies and agendas (or myths) that are reproduced and reaffirmed in the face of other disciplines in interdisciplinary settings. It thus seems that boundaries pervade most, if not all, aspects of life.

4 Case-study: border narratives in ancient Egypt

After the discussion of modern terminology related to boundaries, borders and frontiers, we can pose the question of how different terms, encompassing diverse spatial or ideological conceptions, were used by ancient states. In the case of Late Bronze Age pharaonic Egypt – the so-called Egyptian New Kingdom (c. 1550–1069 BCE) – the expansion into the Levant in the North and Nubia in the South was accompanied by a correspondingly suitable ideological narrative that included a discourse about borders, as Fig. 3 shows. Its main premise was that the state of Egypt embodied divine order (*Ma’at*), facing chaos (*Izfet*) on its outside as represented by foreign lands and peoples which generally embodied ‘unculture.’⁴³ In principle, it was the Egyptian king’s sole task to ensure the continued existence of divine order and thus the Egyptian state.⁴⁴ As outlined above, border studies indicate that boundaries and borderlands are grey areas with all sorts of intermingling rather than clear-cut divisions. With the common border between the realms of *Ma’at* and *Izfet*, however, it was the opposite: this border was regarded as absolute. Once something (or someone) no longer fully adhered to divine order, it was already considered as being ridden with chaos.

Connected with the border between divine order and chaos, we find the terms *t3š* and *dr.w. t3š* referred to the borders of Egypt in the proper sense of the word or its sphere of influence, as it encompassed the territory both directly and indirectly controlled by the state. *dr.w* referred to the lands beyond Egyptian control, i.e. those where chaos was

39 Anthony 2007, 107.

40 See e.g. McCarthy 2008; Mullin 2011b.

41 E.g. prominent in the discussion of borders in Feuer 2016; Mullin 2011a; .

42 Friedman 2007, xix–xx; Rata and Openshaw 2007.

43 Loprieno 1988, 23.

44 Gundlach 1998, 23–25.

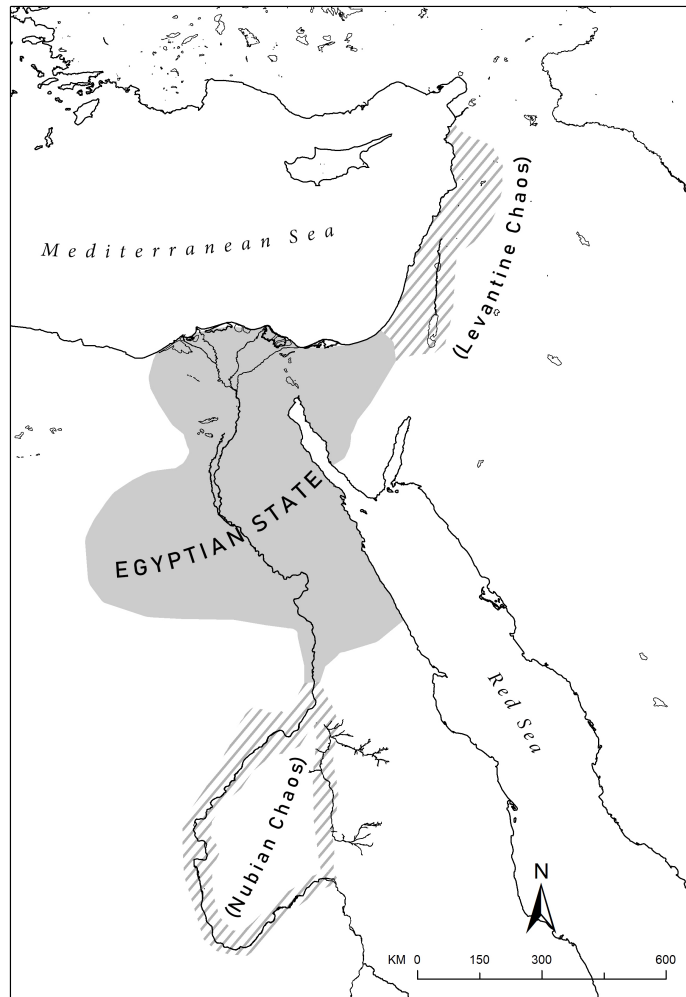


Fig. 3 | Egypt's expansion of divine order into foreign lands and reduction of (foreign) chaos during the early New Kingdom (1500–1450 BCE).

rife.⁴⁵ Both types of borders/territories were changeable, as through the expansion of *t3š* the territory of *dr.w* was reduced and incorporated into the Egyptian state. Aware of the changeable nature of their border, the Egyptians had terms for both the establishment (*jrj t3š* – to make the border) and the expansion of their borders (*s.wsh t3š.w* – to extend the borders).⁴⁶ The border between divine order and chaos was hence continually negotiated between Egypt and the bordering lands. Echoing the definition of a frontier as discussed above, ancient Egyptian thought surrounding these terms appears quite similar as it pitted a ‘civilized’ Egypt against a ‘barbarian’ rest. Unilaterally conceived rather than the result of bilateral negotiations,⁴⁷ it is fair to consider the interplay between *t3š* and *dr.w* as an Egyptian frontier concept.⁴⁸ However, in reality, Egypt's actions based on its political thought likely resulted in the creation of borderlands characterized by hybridity or colonial entanglement. This was most prominently the case in Nubia,⁴⁹ an example that challenges the clear-cut dichotomy between divine order and chaos as expressed in Egyptian thought.

45 Galán 1995; Galán 2000, 25.

46 Galán 1995.

47 Quirke 1989, 262–263.

48 See Langer 2018 for a more extended study of the topic.

49 On Nubia as a theatre of hybridity/entanglement, see Smith 2003; Van Pelt 2013.

The implication for research may be to approach the topic of boundaries and borders in pre-modern contexts from two angles. On the one hand, ancient concepts can be studied from the perspective of political thought and the history of ideas, paving the way for fruitful comparative endeavors. On the other hand, material culture analysis can focus on issues of hybridization in borderlands, thus researching lived experiences and forming a means of comparison vis-à-vis the according political thought. Such a combination of approaches could be reflexive of the complexity of boundaries as objects of human thought, speech and lived experience across time and space.

5 Conclusion

Far more than (real or imaginary) lines on the ground, sea, air and space, we need to acknowledge that boundaries, borders and frontiers are the results of diverse interactions between humans. They are based on different rationales and hold diverse implications for coexistence, in both cases contingent on specific historical circumstances. They are not only areas of conflict but also cooperation. As contact zones, they are a vehicle for various exchanges as well as the formation of complex collective and individual identities. Scholarly awareness of these complexities should improve and render clearer debates associated with spatial and ideational divisions. While related input from social sciences and modern history can produce new insights into the organization of premodern societies, researchers should be careful in order to avoid anachronistic interpretations.

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1 After Fig. 1 in Parker 2006 – with permission of the author. 2 https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Berliner_Mauer_August_1985.jpg. 3 C. Langer.

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