

## RETHINKING THE MEDIEVAL FRONTIER

WORKSHOP 1, 24.vii.2017

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## DIGEST

While this isn't necessarily the form they took or the order in which they were discussed, it seems useful to me to break our concerns into five dynamic categories, areas within which we saw it as useful to focus or where things needed to be clearer. These areas, not all of equal weight in our discussion, seem to me to want verbs as headings, and they are 1) Define, 2) Create and Claim, 3) Experience and Use, 4) Contest and Change, and 5) Theorise. Where particular participants drove the discussion on a theme or contributed the whole insight I've tried to mark that, but hopefully we can all agree that this was a joint effort.

## DEFINE

Our earliest discussion and a recurring theme throughout the workshop was what definition or definitions of frontiers we can accept and which will be useful to us going forward. The main division is between geopolitical boundaries and more conceptual ideas such as liminality (HH; LZ). We pretty much all seem happy to stay on the geopolitical side, although LZ wisely stressed the Church or churches as points of entry or a frontier guard with the spiritual world, a division more unreal to us than our subjects. There are ways in which literary scholars handle their concepts of boundary-crossing that may still be useful to think with (JJ), and there seems to be quite a lot of mileage in the anthropological literature on 'Borderlands', even if the term is usually used by historians without the specific Anzalduan valence that makes it useful to us.

Once within the geopolitical sense of the terms we use, it's easier to think of problems than solutions; many surprising and category-defying cases exist (AVM!). The binaries JJ set up in the agenda document can often be found co-existing (zones with lines through them, closed borders people move through, unmarked borders with points of entry maintained anyway [1]) and some just defy categorisation within those binaries (most especially islands--LZ--but with them enclaves and exclaves and AVM's example of the modern town of Baarle-Hertog) and things these ideas just don't really cover (AM suggested fishing rights, mining rights and access to irrigation water). NS argued powerfully that the binary conceptions force upon us a two-sided frontier that leaves little room for the undefined space or the space within the zone, and while it's hard to think of a three-sided military frontier (JAJ) and many a frontier was in fact a 'divisa' between two other things (AM), there's no denying that that formulation doesn't cover everything and by focusing on the powers beyond it as the things that define a frontier, defocuses attention on the communities there who actually make it by living in it.

One particularly strong thread within this was one of these simultaneous binaries, conflict and contact. Historiography has often emphasised conflict; anthropology has tended to focus on contact, and in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century contact and 'connectivity' have become the focus of attention for many a medieval scholar as well, with trade and cultural exchange assumed automatic goods, even though many of the communities we could instance regarded them with suspicion or fear (especially the Romans). Another place where we run up against our sources is with clear and blurry divisions between things like ethnicity, language, culture and membership of a polity: our sources describe ethnic, linguistic and political groups as absolutes so happily (even though they also sometimes show us people switching or crossing such categories) that the historiography even now often accepts those categories and then (crucially) assumes that they could be distinguished clearly enough to be mapped and limited to particular demarcated areas. Even when medieval groups and people laid down a line between two such things, however, be it of fortresses, marker stones, a regularly performed walk or even ink on parchment (albeit as words not images, till quite late), all of which they clearly did sometimes do, there's really no indication that this conceptually implied that everyone within one or other of the demarcated groups was on one or other side of the line! It's still too easy for us to

assume versions of the concepts in play here which are our own but don't match the medieval ones.

As a result of this, several of us concurred that one of the most important things for us to explore is the medieval terminology of borders and frontiers (AM, AVM, HH). What did they call them and what, as far as we can say, did they mean? Not what we do, most likely, especially not right across the zone. Both JAJ and AM have a sense that Arabic terminology of frontiers might be the most descriptive, for us, but that is not least because unlike Latin 'limes' we have some pretty good explanations from the time of what people thought it meant!

#### CREATE AND CLAIM

A further result of the above is that one of the processes that seems to interest us most is that by which borders or frontiers are made or established. The place of agency here, as the anthropologists have found, is contested: while many of us think of a border or frontier as a thing created by opposition of larger powers or their encroaching governmentality, NS argued powerfully that it is the inhabitants of the zone that make any of that happen, and that if they leave or ignore it then the line on a notional map is no more than that. From there it's easy to reach a Borderlands-like formulation where the frontier creates itself, because it is in fact something other than what its distant governors claim it to be; it is the creation of its inhabitants. Some of us will be wanting to explore further down this route, but it also opens up the question of what kind of claims were made by medieval powers over their border areas, and how they could be enforced, if at all. We several times butted up against the question of no-man's land, unclaimed spaces, the gaps on the map (AS), and JJ raised the question of whether such an area can self-define or if it can only be so termed from outside (spatially or temporally): if it pulls together to resist outside definition, has it not by that act been claimed as somebody's? Can passive resistance and banditry maintain such an area in an \*undefined\* state? If so, the disaggregative processes might be as interesting as the aggregative ones.

These are concerns that also apply to the historiography, of course. Turner's open frontier and the Catalan 'terra de ningú', to name the two I know best, might both have been contested by the people living in the spaces that a historiography (and in Turner's case a politics) refused to acknowledge as instantiated; NS had Chinese examples as well. The modern politics of historiography can always use examination, and we could all think of areas where this is true (especially where words like 'barbarians' and 'gates' are in play). It may not be rocket science spotting such instances but because they affect the discourse they still need recognition. Since the people we study can't speak directly, the historian's role in creating the frontiers of the past has to be recognised as being perhaps even more important in historiography than the actions of state or non-state agents.

#### EXPERIENCE AND USE

This is perhaps the area where the agenda document survived best, with many of its matrix of questions being aimed at evaluating how a border space was used, though NS laid stress on experience as well as utility, where again literature-based enquiries and Anzalduan Borderlands may help. This is also something that the exploration of medieval terminology we have already determined as necessary may help with, getting us closer to the mental toolkits of those who lived and thought in such spaces. The most basic questions about what people did here that they could not do elsewhere may also get us at a functionalist definition of frontier that has some basis in fact rather than being conceptually derived. Here diplomatic meetings, trade and markets, colonisation, boundary-marking, raiding and pillage and (not least) pastoral exploitation (ACC) all came up in our discussions.

#### CONTEST AND CHANGE

NS wisely argued that any models we're trying to derive here (and see below) must be able to accommodate change: very few of the spaces we mentioned were static in the periods we study and many were indeed precisely the creation of moving processes of development, destruction or alteration. Several instances above have already been mentioned where it would be possible for a frontier to be contested, not just as space to

occupy and claim but as an existent and distinctive zone, a 'middle ground' (LZ) that might not be either core or periphery but a third thing apart from the gradient of control from centre to edge. If we wind up establishing concepts of frontier which an area might shift between, therefore, it will be as important to see what the forces against that were as why it happened, as well as the more normal questions about change of outside political domination.

#### THEORISE

JJ had of course set all this up with the aim of eventually deriving something like new theory, but HH was only the most pessimistic about our chances of doing that, and AM and others thought that tools for others to use in thinking the next steps would be the most likely thing of use that we could produce. I hope that we (some, all, or a selection supplemented by others) might still have started ahead of the curve and so be the best people to take those next steps as well, but I readily acknowledge that tools to think with was all I'd tried to create so far. I do think, though, that the very fact of us getting into a room and talking this stuff out showed that we all gain by thinking comparatively even at this outline level. If we only go from this with our own pet case studies being mentally weighed against other cases we know at least vaguely, with an eye to whether what we are seeing in our patch is also visible (or even viable) there, we'll still be working at a more theoretical level than many!

[1] <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SbWg-mozGsU> (contains strong language)