

Hadrian's Wall and Border Studies: problems and prospects

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Abstract

Hadrian's Wall remains one of the most iconic elements of Roman frontier infrastructure, with considerable symbolic capital in all kinds of contemporary situations and representations. Whether inspiring the fictional ice wall in *Game of Thrones*, or illustrating debates about English-Scottish relationships in Brexit-era Britain, the Wall has a powerful legacy. In more scholarly circles, the Wall sometimes figures in the literature of the emerging field of Border Studies, too, and in this paper I examine some of these representations, as a prelude to discussing what Border Studies offers to Wall studies within Roman archaeology. While the interdisciplinary nature of Border Studies can mean that Hadrian's Wall is misunderstood when taken out of context, this does not mean that the broader insights of Border Studies have no value to Roman archaeologists in better interpreting the Wall and its place in Roman Britain. To the contrary, the combination of innovative theories of frontiers and borderlands with detailed, nuanced understanding of the Wall communities through time has much to offer the archaeology of Britain in the Roman empire. Indeed, this field has the potential to better connect frontier studies with other dimensions of Roman provincial archaeology than has been typical in our discipline over much of the last half-century.

Keywords: Frontiers, borderlands, Hadrian's Wall, imperialism

“The borderland is a place of paradox: of opportunity and poverty, promise and despair, love and violence, beauty and fear, sex and church, sweat and family. Even the frontier itself is a dichotomy, simultaneously porous and harsh.”¹

Introduction: Rome's iconic frontier

The legacy of Hadrian's most visible and lasting contribution to the landscape of mainland Britain is long indeed. The detailed history and functions of Hadrian's Wall within the Roman period have been long discussed and debated, while somewhat more recently its various manifestations in the Medieval and early Modern periods have been investigated, and – coming

¹ Vulliamy 2011, xxxi.

full circle – critical historiography of scholarship on the subject has been advanced.² In this paper, aspects of the most recent phases of the biography of the Wall are discussed in relation to its wider reception in the interdisciplinary field of Border Studies, before considering in turn what this field can offer to future scholarship on the Wall and its place in Roman Britain. The Wall has, of course, an even wider contemporary influence in popular culture, concomitant with its iconic status as a robust linear barrier, albeit that such influence is frequently rooted in misconceptions. Often an obvious focus in films about the Roman military in Britain (e.g. *The Eagle* [2011], *King Arthur* [2004]), it even famously became a geographically anomalous symbol of ancient Britain in *Robin Hood: Prince of Thieves* (1991), before going on to influence the enormous ice wall in George R.R. Martin's *A Song of Ice and Fire*, televised as *Game of Thrones*.³ The political undertones of these interpretations are more implicit than explicit, but in the 2010s, with the Scottish Referendum of 2014 and the EU Referendum of 2016, the internal divisions of the UK have brought this aspect more to the fore, both in media debate,⁴ and – as part of a broader perspective on issues of migration – imaginative fiction like John Lanchester's *The Wall* (2019). These varied popular perceptions of the Wall – amid numerous other examples – reflect much of the thematic content of academic discussion of the monument, too, at least outside of Roman archaeology. In particular, the emerging field of Border Studies has developed alongside the growing trend towards political 're-bordering' in the last two decades, and sometimes includes discussion of Hadrian's Wall as an early example of human boundary-making. While there are many useful insights to be gained from this field, as will be discussed later in the paper, misconceptions about Hadrian's Wall are also to be found here. Before illustrating some of these, some background to the Border Studies agenda will be helpful to set the scene.

The origins of this field of study are necessarily complex, given its inherent interdisciplinarity, but are at least twofold. One strand emerges from anthropological study of the lived complexities of border regions in the globalized era of the late 20th century, particularly on the US/Mexican frontier.⁵ Another is the developing recognition in political geography and international relations that the 'liquid modernity' of that era was in retreat in the early years of the 21st century, especially following the terrorist attacks of 11th September 2001. Far from globalisation leading to a 'borderless world', increasingly in the 21st century

² E.g. on the Roman period, e.g. Hodgson 2017; Symonds 2021; on later periods, and historiography, Breeze 2014; Hingley 2012, and in broader context Hingley 2000; Freeman 2007.

³ Kasten 2017; McIntosh 2019; Symonds 2021: 155-65; cf. Corbishley 2013, Henson 2013.

⁴ Hingley 2014.

⁵ E.g. Anzaldúa 1987; Scott 2020.

there has been both ‘re-bordering’ in the institutional sense of security apparatuses, and to some extent also in a more popular sense of resurgent nationalism and xenophobia – all now further exacerbated by the global pandemic.⁶ Grappling with these complex and often controversial issues is at the centre of much work in Border Studies over the last twenty years, but the relevance of its more general theoretical insights into processes of bordering in human societies certainly transcends the contemporary era.⁷ Indeed, it should be immediately apparent that archaeology is well-equipped to address the question of what features of contemporary border-making practice are universal, and what may be particular. There has been a great deal of work already on boundaries of different kinds in archaeology, of course, in Roman frontier studies and many other contexts, though understandably this has only recently started to align with the broader Border Studies debates.⁸ Moreover, a move to a closer engagement with those wider debates, for which I will argue in this paper, would be a natural progression for the theoretical trajectory of Roman provincial archaeology – especially in Britain. In the last few decades, we have successively deployed aspects of post-colonial, and then globalisation theories, both as ways of illuminating neglected aspects of the Roman past, and as ways of moving beyond the profound colonial entanglement of the discipline, as represented by the ‘Romanisation’ paradigm.⁹ Insofar as Border Studies represents a development of, and corrective to, globalisation theories of the 1990s, it is clearly a necessary step forward for Roman studies too. Furthermore, it might also help bridge the gap between ‘frontier’ and ‘civilian’ Roman archaeologies, which has tended to widen over the period from the 1980s onwards.¹⁰ Before exploring this potential in rather more depth later in the paper, we need first to address the more visible ways in which Hadrian’s Wall has already figured in some of the general works of Border Studies. This will, I believe, give added impetus to the pressing need to engage with this field.

The Wall out of place: problems with mis-interpretation

In this section, I highlight a handful examples of problematic interpretations of Hadrian’s Wall, and Roman frontier archaeology, in recent literature on borders. I do this not to nit-pick with

⁶ Bude and Dürschmidt 2010; Houtum and Naerssen 2002; Iossifova 2020; Mezzadra and Neilson 2008; Mignolo and Tlostanova 2006; Newman 2011; Paasi 2011; Rumford 2006.

⁷ Iossifova 2020: 91-2; cf. Barth 2000; Houtum and Naerssen 2002; Jenkins 2000.

⁸ E.g. Lightfoot and Martinez 1995; Mullin (ed.) 2011; Parker 2006; Stark (ed.) 1998; cf. Boozer 2013; Gardner 2017a; Hingley 2018.

⁹ Gardner 2013; cf. Hingley 2005; Versluys 2014.

¹⁰ Breeze 2018: 1-3; Collins 2012: 4; James 2002: 14-16; Gardner 2017a: 35-6.

particular authors, or claim some sort of scholarly high-ground for Roman archaeologists, but rather to show that interdisciplinary work is often fraught with the problems of keeping up-to-date with unfamiliar literature, and also that Romanists need to actively contribute to this field at the very least to address these kinds of misunderstandings, which reflect those common in wider society. That there is much more to be gained than that will be argued below. Here, I will focus on three works – a semi-popular, journalistic account of ‘re-bordering’, a deeper academic analysis of border theory, and an archaeological attempt to present a comparative theory of borders and frontiers. There are other works one could include, of course, with differing problems and merits, and countless Border Studies texts that make no mention of Roman frontiers at all,¹¹ but the point here is to show some of the challenges we face before addressing the benefits that an engagement with Border Studies can bring – and to demonstrate that these benefits would be mutual.

Tim Marshall’s book *Divided: why we’re living in an age of walls* is one of a number of semi-popular works on the theme of borders in recent years which reflect the same trends as those driving the more academic literature on the subject.¹² Several of these include discussion in broad terms of the political crises of the last two decades and issues such as the backlash against globalisation, and Brexit in the UK context, combined with travelogue narratives of particular borders, or comparative studies of several. Marshall’s book uses the latter approach, encompassing a range of geographical contexts through the book, concluding with a chapter on the UK. The title of this chapter – ‘The Groans of the Britons’ – is revealing, and the first few pages present an account of the northern frontier in Britain with the shadow of Gildas playing a surprisingly large role.¹³ Whilst the rest of the UK chapter presents a succinct and interesting account of later border issues, for example in Northern Ireland, and other social divisions in the country (albeit with rather limited interest in the legacy of empire),¹⁴ the pages on the Roman period are deeply problematic. The chapter opens with an imaginary vignette of an Italian legionary on the Wall in A.D. 380, getting cold, and finding it difficult to talk to his Gallic colleague who joined the military to gain citizenship after his service. Following a brief description of the Wall, and the conquest of Britain (complete with ‘Romanisation’), we come to the usurpation of Magnus Maximus, and then the Gildensian story of the appeals of the Britons for help rebuilding the Wall, granted twice and then refused. In short, in a section of

¹¹ E.g. Brown 2010, surprisingly.

¹² Marshall 2018; cf. e.g. Carr 2017; Robb 2019; Stewart 2017; Vuillamy 2011.

¹³ Marshall 2018: 245-248.

¹⁴ Cf. Dorling and Tomlinson 2019; Gardner 2017b; O’Toole 2018; Sanghera 2021.

just a few pages there are a remarkable number of factual errors. This is perhaps not surprising when the two sources listed for the Roman section of this chapter are a semi-popular book from the 1990s and John Collingwood Bruce's 1851 *The Roman Wall*,¹⁵ but this problem of out-of-date sources is, as we will see, not uncommon. A more important question is whether these sorts of mistakes matter. In the overall scheme of things in a wide-ranging book, which also speculates about future developments in a thoughtful way, perhaps not so much, though they do beg questions about the thoroughness of the underlying research. More importantly, though, the narrative presented is used to reinforce a notion of Hadrian's Wall in particular as a dividing line between 'civilised' and 'savage', right up until the 5th century, as part of a general emphasis in the book on borders as divisive. This, as will be shown later in the paper, is only half of their significance.

The other two volumes I will consider here are more academic, yet present many of the same issues. Thomas Nail's *Theory of the Border* presents an in-depth discussion of some of the complexities of border phenomena as part of an argument for a new theory of the dynamics of 'border kinopower'. This idea captures more of the duality of borders (see below), not only as "constitutive of and constituted by society",¹⁶ but also as entailing connection as much as division, depending on context. 'Kinopower' foregrounds the mutability and mobility of borders between the poles of these dualities, connecting them to wider power relations, and thus attempting to synthesise border theory with previous work on the social flows endemic to globalisation.¹⁷ In line with other Border Studies literature – and indeed as recognised by Marshall too¹⁸ – Nail's theory also addresses the layering of conceptual or social boundaries with their more geographical manifestations, though the bulk of the book is a typology rooted in the latter, and exemplified primarily via the US/Mexico border area, albeit with a deeper, comparative historical context. Amidst quite a lot of archaeological content in these typological chapters, some of which is reasonably well sourced, Hadrian's Wall figures primarily in Chapter 3, 'The Wall'.¹⁹ While not as poorly referenced as Marshall's section, and including some reasonable discussion of Roman boundary concepts and the multiple roles of the Wall, a relatively small and quite old reading list hardly captures the more current debates on these matters (Breeze's 1982 *The Northern Frontiers of Roman Britain* is the main source, while Cunliffe, Luttwak, Millar and Whittaker are also cited). There are also still some striking errors

¹⁵ Marshall 2018: 295.

¹⁶ Nail 2016: 4.

¹⁷ Nail 2016: 21-43; cf. Bauman 2000; Urry 2000.

¹⁸ Marshall 2018: 1-8.

¹⁹ Nail 2016: 64-87.

in the description of the Wall's operation, for example: "[T]he wall was easily scaled, and its thirty-two guards per mile would have been easily defeated long before any help could come from Eboracum, Lindum or Deva".²⁰ Mistakes like these in the understanding of the Wall – completely missing the existence of the Wall or hinterland forts – are by-products of narrow research which, as above, also fails to appreciate the changing nature of archaeological interpretations. While these are again perhaps small details in a much bigger argument, they skew that argument in a particular direction, this time more towards boundary-crossing than boundary-making.

We might nonetheless be forgiving of scholars in different disciplines having limited capacity to be completely on-top of the relevant literature when dealing with Hadrian's Wall, and Roman archaeology more generally, or indeed any other particular example, especially as archaeologists are themselves frequently guilty of the same sin when it comes to theoretical approaches.²¹ However, archaeologists seeking similarly generalising perspectives can also fall into similar traps. Bryan Feuer's *Boundaries, Borders and Frontiers in Archaeology* is a broadly processual study of boundaries and related concepts. It is rooted more in traditional geographical approaches to territoriality than the recent Border Studies literature, and in world-systems derived approaches to core-periphery dynamics that have found application in archaeology, albeit peaking in the 1980s.²² In keeping with the style of generalising, comparative archaeology of the processual era, the book addresses definitional issues of border terminology in some detail, explores the social evolution of territorial concepts, and highlights some border processes, particularly acculturation, before examining several case-studies, including the Roman Empire. Hadrian's Wall is actually not a particular focus, but rather the kinds of approaches to Roman frontiers emerging in the 1980s and '90s are discussed (citing particularly Cunliffe, Dyson, Elton and Whittaker), in conjunction with a summary history of the Roman empire and some consideration of 'Romanisation'.²³ This latter theme is where the same issues we have seen before, of an incomplete argument emerging from a limited literature review, come to the fore, rather hampering the potentially promising direction of seeking to integrate frontier processes with those of broader transformation in the Roman world (which Roman archaeologists have themselves only recently connected to cross-frontier interactions).²⁴ Although acknowledging that there has been debate about the concept of

²⁰ Nail 2016: 80, here citing Divine 1969, apparently an earlier edition of a work used by Marshall (cf. note 15).

²¹ Cf. Gardner 2021.

²² Feuer 2016.

²³ Feuer 2016: 95-105, also esp. 61-5.

²⁴ E.g. González Sánchez and Guglielmi (eds) 2017.

‘Romanisation’, and citing one or two quite critical sources, Feuer absolutely sticks with a Romanisation-as-acculturation model which is now at least 30 years old;²⁵ the idea that “the process of Romanisation ceased at the boundary of the *limes*”²⁶ hardly conveys the complexity of the situation either within, without or across the frontiers as we would now understand it. Leaving aside our own culpability for insufficiently communicating more recent debates in Roman archaeology, there is clearly a need to engage ourselves with these wider attempts to understand borders, borderlands and frontiers. Outlining some of the ways in which we might achieve that is the subject of the rest of this paper.

The potential of Border Studies: theoretical insights

The range of approaches and perspectives within the large, and growing, Border Studies literature is considerable, and the risk of perpetuating the sorts of interdisciplinary mistakes made by the authors I have just criticised is equally great, but in this section I aim to highlight some of the key insights that this field might offer to Roman archaeology. Like ‘globalisation’ before it, Border Studies is more of a thematic umbrella than a particular set of theory, and scholars rooted in different theoretical traditions prioritise different aspects of contemporary or historical borders. Some also strive for terminological precision within the language of boundaries, while others are comfortable with approximate synonymy. What most share is a view of borders as actively constituted and dynamic – as part of a process of *bordering* – and as far-reaching in their involvement in societies.²⁷ For the purposes of this paper, I want to highlight work on borderlands and everyday practice, long-term social transformation, and colonialism. With respect to the first of these, while there are many features of contemporary border maintenance practices that are clearly irrelevant to the Roman world, like bodyscanners, biometric passports, and airport departure lounges, there are equally some more general insights from the detailed study of modern situations that are potentially valuable. Foremost is actually simply the emphasis on *bordering as practice*. More important than any physical structures are the things that people do along, across and around them, as part of their everyday lives in a borderland. Indeed, this applies well beyond such landscapes, as another important focus within Border Studies is the exploration of projections of ‘the border’ into spatial locations far from political boundaries, and also into the more abstract contours of identity which can shape everyday social interactions anywhere. A third significant emphasis concerns

²⁵ Feuer 2016: 100-102, citing particularly Millett 1990, curiously referenced throughout as Millett 1970.

²⁶ Feuer 2016: 102.

²⁷ Haselsberger 2014: 508-10; Kolossov 2005; Newman 2006: 171-3; Paasi 2012: 2303-4; Scott 2020.

the fundamental duality – or paradox – of borders, as always connecting as well as dividing, and thus facilitating complex juxtapositions of boundary-maintenance practices with boundary-crossing practices.²⁸ This is frequently reflected in the messy hybridity, vitality and violence of ‘borderscapes’, typically seen in the contemporary world as either exciting and cosmopolitan, or dangerous and frightening, depending on one’s political standpoint.²⁹ While not all of this complexity is, of course, likely to be readily evident archaeologically, the material dimension of such practices is far from insignificant,³⁰ and is absolutely within our reach.

Looking to the longer-term scale than the everyday, the duality of borders as simultaneously institutionalised and contingent has wide ramifications. Boundaries are often perceived as being generative of order, maintained through organisations, like police forces or militaries, and in turn giving shape to all kinds of other institutions which define a state or territory. Yet boundaries are also generative of movement and dynamism, sometimes violent and sometimes creative, and this can transform not only immediately connected institutions, but also the whole of a society – on both sides.³¹ This is necessarily an area that contemporary border studies is less attuned to; even though we might be quite aware of some of the interactions between recent social changes and re-bordering phenomena, the timescales are short compared to the kind of analysis which is possible with an archaeological perspective.³² Of particular importance here is the dynamic balance of power between different actors at the border – how the everyday practices discussed above articulate with local, regional and wider institutions from family structures and economic networks to state organisations and policies. This in turn relates border processes in the particular spatial setting of a frontier or boundary to more widely-held concepts of identity, difference, and otherness, again topics much studied in archaeology, but rarely connected to the kinds of core-periphery models which have captured some of the economic interactions between different regions.³³ Fundamentally, the mesh of interconnecting social boundaries both binds and subdivides societies, defining them over time but also potentially altering that definition with every interaction – or at least through the cumulation of many interactions.

²⁸ Haselsberger 2014: 511-14; Iossifova 2020; Mezzadra and Nielson 2012; Newman 2006; Paasi 2011; 2012; Parker and Vaughan-Williams et al. 2009.

²⁹ Donnan and Wilson 1999; Vuillamy 2011.

³⁰ Kurki 2020; cf. Gardner 2017a.

³¹ Cooper and Perkins 2012; Newman 2003; Paasi 1998; 2012.

³² Cf. O’Dowd 2010.

³³ Houtum and Neussen 2002; Newman 2003; Paasi 1998: 75-83; cf. Feuer 2016: 27-35; Gardner 2013: 9-18, on institutional archaeology.

Within some of the border studies literature, the connection between border practices and institutional features of wider societies, in the contemporary world, is viewed as firmly situated within the legacy of imperialism and colonialism.³⁴ In terms of the origins of the field, indeed, there are many connections between studies of borderlands, particularly in the Americas, and post-colonial literature more rooted in Asia and Africa – the latter, of course, having been significantly influential in Roman archaeology.³⁵ These fields share concerns with inequality, power relations and the interweaving of identity, politics and economy in the structuring of imperial and post-imperial societies, all themes which are obviously of continued relevance to our discipline. Highlighting how borders and boundaries articulate these phenomena only adds to their analytical utility. Crucially, as I will argue further below, it also offers the potential to heal the fractures within Roman archaeology.³⁶ Among many relevant points of potential comparison between colonial societies, the relationships between boundaries imposed and boundaries perceived, resisted or appropriated are very significant, as is the way in which spatial or administrative boundaries can become internalised and contribute to the conflicted colonial psychology of ‘double consciousness’.³⁷ Furthermore, in terms of the wider significance of boundaries which permeate colonial societies, the transformative effects of colonialism on ‘core’ identities and institutions, and power inequalities even within such regions (studied in the UK, for example, as ‘internal colonialism’), are clearly significant.³⁸ In short, major aspects of the Border Studies agenda continue the de-centering of empire which post-colonialism encouraged, connecting this with contemporary debates about decolonisation. It balances some of the useful insights of critical globalisation approaches with a much sharper political edge – quite literally, in encouraging us to see the empire from the edges.³⁹ In the next section, we will examine how the Hadrianic frontier in northern Britain affords us such a view.

Moving forward: an emerging agenda for Hadrian’s Wall and beyond

One positive aspect of trying to place Hadrian’s Wall in a Border Studies context is that much of the recent archaeological work on the Wall and its wider landscape is already highlighting exactly the right kinds of themes. There is, though, much more still to be done, and the relative novelty of some research avenues perhaps makes some of the kinds of omissions noted above,

³⁴ Kearney 1991; Mignolo and Tlostanova 2006; O’Dowd 2010.

³⁵ Chávez 2011; Moyo 2010; Paasi 2011: 14; cf. Given 2004; Naum 2010; Webster 1996.

³⁶ Cf. Breeze 2018.

³⁷ Du Bois 1903 [1982]; Mezzadra and Nielson 2013: 14-15; Mignolo and Tlostanova 2006.

³⁸ Chávez 2011; Hechter 1975; Kearney 1991.

³⁹ Mignolo and Tlostanova 2006; O’Dowd 2010; cf. Hingley 2005; Gardner 2013.

by outside scholars looking in, more understandable. In this section I will first address the Wall ‘system’ and its immediate ‘borderland’ environment, before looking at opportunities to explore some of the connections between the frontier, Roman Britain, and the wider Empire. While many of the features of the Wall curtain, adjoining elements like the *Vallum*, and of course the forts, have long been understood in terms of both morphology and sequence, there remain quite a few details which are still emerging, or remain enigmatic.⁴⁰ These, along with the evidence needed to fully understand the social communities living on and around the Wall, are all potentially vital elements in reconstructing the everyday practices of frontier life. Long-standing debates on the function of the Wall encompass relevant issues, of course, but many of the points raised in the previous section encourage us to look for more nuance – for a multiplicity of different engagements with the Wall, according to location, time-period, and individual situation.⁴¹ As we know well from the large-scale changes of plan during the construction period, through to the later blocking of some gates at milecastles and forts, the Wall did not have a singular purpose or meaning, perhaps even not for Hadrian himself.

Although some features of the Wall, such as how it was patrolled or how its surface was rendered, remain subjects of debate, our understanding of the turrets, milecastles, berm obstacles, *Vallum* and other features, not to mention the forts, has only been increasing in recent years.⁴² When combined with the evidence of the outpost and hinterland forts to the north and south of the Wall, and the more recent discoveries of significant settlement pattern change in the Northumberland plain, the Wall’s image as a robust boundary – within a broad militarized zone – seems well-justified. The walls of the forts, too, seem to have remained significant boundaries within this zone, with reinforcement of some of these constituting a significant part of the limited late Roman construction activity at several sites.⁴³ And yet, there are other indications that the duality of frontiers – the balancing of boundary-crossing with boundary-making – holds good. The fort *vici* obviously afforded some kinds of interaction, defining the wider military community beyond the soldiers, and potentially connecting to even wider social networks to both north and south. Even after these seem to have been abandoned in the 4th century, market activity continued at several forts, while other assemblages, for example of animal bone at Binchester, may relate to communal feasting, cementing social relationships.⁴⁴ Not all elements of the Wall system persisted – the *Vallum*, for example, stopped being

⁴⁰ Bidwell 2008; Breeze 2018; Hodgson 2017.

⁴¹ Cf. Breeze 2018: 3-4; Hodgson 2017: 157-75.

⁴² E.g. Bidwell 2008; Hodgson and Bidwell 2004; Symonds 2013.

⁴³ Collins 2012; Gardner 2007: 119-22; Hodgson et al 2012; Symonds 2021.

⁴⁴ Hodgson 2017: 150-52; Petts 2013; James 2001: 79-82.

maintained from around the end of the 2nd century – and other material culture patterns highlight the permeability of the frontier region to objects at least, most visibly metalwork, going in both directions, and even the development of fashions spanning the frontier zone.⁴⁵ Clearly, societies on both sides of – and straddling – the Wall changed during the Roman period precisely as a result of the complex interplay of accommodation and exclusion that is characteristic of borderlands. Our evidence for the detail of this interplay remains imperfect, but this can only change for the better, and as it does we will also illuminate the wider penetration of this social dynamism into the institutional fabric of the rest of Roman Britain and the Empire.

The military is an obviously important strand of this, and when we amplify the evidence we have in the Hadrian's Wall zone with that from Wales and the Irish Sea, and the Saxon Shore,⁴⁶ the prominent role of frontier processes in the shaping of Roman Britain through time is apparent – and the bifurcation of military/frontier and civilian archaeologies all the more lamentable.⁴⁷ Again, though, emerging research agendas and methods are pointing in the right direction. For example, alongside recent work on changes in material culture patterning in military communities over time – which has explored both connections between Britain and other frontiers, as well as significant changes in military identities⁴⁸ – there is now increasingly common use of isotope studies to examine mobility, or the lack thereof.⁴⁹ While this may yield different sorts of results in different cases, this is to be expected when we think of Britain in its totality as a frontier, subject to all of the various processes described above. In turn, this leads us into thinking not just of the economic connections between the Wall zone, or other areas of military activity, and the southern part of mainland Britain – which have of course, particularly via pottery studies, long been recognised – but also the interaction of state and local institutional structures in every part of Romano-British life.⁵⁰ This is not to return to the dominance of military history-led narratives of Romano-British archaeology, rightly critiqued from the late 1980s,⁵¹ but rather to connect the recent work on identities in the province(s) with identities on – and beyond – the frontier, and to identities across the Empire. Most visibly, the multiplication of ways of being 'Roman' through time develops because of the processes of

⁴⁵ Collins 2010; Hunter 2007; 2008; Hodgson 2017: 153-56, 166-70; cf. James 2014.

⁴⁶ E.g. Cahil Wilson 2014; Pearson 2002; cf. Gardner forthcoming.

⁴⁷ Breeze 2018: 1-3.

⁴⁸ Collins 2012; Gardner 2007; James 2014; Swift 2000.

⁴⁹ Chenery et al. 2011; Eckardt et al. 2015; cf. Eckardt (ed.) 2010.

⁵⁰ Cf. e.g. Gardner 2013; Mattingly 2014; Perring forthcoming.

⁵¹ E.g. Scott 1993.

cultural interchange in frontier provinces and the regions around them.⁵² The deep involvement of the frontiers in the long-term political and cultural transformation of the Empire has been acknowledged before,⁵³ but we have so many more methodological tools at our disposal now, not to mention vastly more evidence, that combined with highly resonant insights from Border Studies give us enormous potential to push our understanding of the Roman world in new directions. At the same time, as we explore the dynamics of the Roman Empire from the outside-in, we will contribute to precisely the most urgent contemporary debates that are driving Border Studies.

Conclusion: boundaries past and future

Roman frontiers remain, as we saw in the Introduction to this paper, one of the more resonant aspects of the ancient world in popular, political, and scholarly spheres well beyond the specialisms of Roman archaeology.⁵⁴ In commemorating 1900 years since Hadrian left a mark on the north-western provinces, this special section of *Britannia* shows just how indelible that mark has been. In this paper, I have focused on aspects of the interdisciplinary reception of Hadrian's Wall, noting some problems, but primarily seeking to highlight how much work in Border Studies aligns with recent aspects of frontier research in Roman Britain and beyond, and to argue that making this interaction more explicit and more thorough would be mutually beneficial. It is at the least ironic that the Wall which sometimes features in Border Studies literature would be unrecognisable to specialists, whilst our emerging understanding of the Roman frontiers would actually be a lot more useful to the Border Studies agenda. Equally, though, within Roman archaeology, there is irony in the way that the alternative theories of Roman imperialism which emerged from the late 1980s onwards rather sidelined frontier studies, albeit in an understandable effort to recover different voices. In doing so, though, they risked neglecting institutional structures which facilitated both the incorporation and hybridisation of different cultural traditions over time. These processes were messy and sometimes violent, but they were also transformative of the Empire as a whole.⁵⁵ Ideas from Border Studies help us to see these connections, but at the same time in developing our understanding of them we have something distinctive to offer to the study of the equally complex and influential borders of today.

⁵² Cf. e.g. Mattingly 2004; Wells 1999.

⁵³ E.g. Dyson 1988; Miller 1996.

⁵⁴ Breeze 2018; Hingley 2018.

⁵⁵ Breeze 2018; Gardner 2013; Haynes 2013; James 2011; Scott 1993.

I began this paper with a quotation from a book about the US/Mexican border, which remains one of the most newsworthy frontiers in the day-to-day life of 2021, and has become an icon of modern boundaries much as Hadrian's Wall has for those of antiquity. Clearly there are many aspects of the way this frontier works that are unique to it, or at least are thoroughly modern, from its entanglement with trade in guns and hard drugs, to the specifics of settlement pattern in a largely desertified landscape.⁵⁶ Nonetheless, there are resonances between this situation and an ancient frontier which similarly cut across a landscape, dividing communities and clearing land, but also generating new ways of living for a new population who are simultaneously 'of the border' and 'of the state'. The mixture of inequality, violence and interaction on the frontier creates local dynamics with far-reaching consequences. In the US, even thousands of miles away from the border, its impacts are felt, whether in gradual cultural shifts in language or cuisine, or in the right-wing rhetoric of exclusion and illegal immigration, where reinforcing the wall provides a superficially easy fix for problems which are actually endemic to American society, intimately connected to other social boundaries of class and race. When we see echoes of that rhetoric in the *Codex Theodosianus*, for example, banning the wearing of trousers in the city of Rome at the end of the 4th century,⁵⁷ we might also not only ponder, but actually investigate, the ways in which, as Rome defined the frontiers, so the frontiers defined Rome. In doing so, we can illuminate the continual duality of borders: not only dividing and fixing, but always also connecting and changing.

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⁵⁶ Anzaldúa 1987; Donnan and Wilson 1999; Vuillamy 2011.

⁵⁷ Codex Theodosianus 14.11.1 – Pharr 1952.

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