

Borders and Boundaries: proceedings of the first annual SHARE postgraduate symposium

An Introduction

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On the 27th of September 2013, the School of History, Archaeology and Religion (SHARE) at Cardiff University had its first postgraduate symposium. The event was designed to bring together Historians, Archaeologists, Conservators and Religionists in a context in which their various research interests could be discussed under a rubric that lent them a degree of mutual intelligibility. More than this, it was hoped that the event would help to develop a sense of interconnection between the diverse research activities undertaken within the school. On the day there were more than thirty postgraduate researchers from the school, as well as a large cross-section of academic staff. There was an address by the Head of School, Prof. Chris Williams, and a keynote lecture by the Director of Postgraduate Studies, Prof. James Whitley.

The theme was Borders and Boundaries. The theme was selected because borders and boundaries are critical to the organisation of both the world around us and our knowledge of it. Where a boundary is normally conceived as a relatively clear-cut point of separation between two things, a border is a more amorphous category, which can incorporate ideas of 'liminality' and admixture. Borders

and boundaries can be physical and might include fortifications, walls or any other physical divide. They also pertain to features of the physical environment, such as the distinction between valley and vale. Further physical boundaries include those that mark administrative regions or nation states (or areas within a given city, even), but these are, more often than not, notional divisions. Ideas of borders and boundaries also inform chronological sequences, such as the division between the Bronze and Iron Age or the Meso- and Neolithic. They even encompass thresholds between this-worldly and other-worldly locations (such as heavens and hells). The very distinction between fact and fiction is a boundary that everyone believes they understand, but which is, in many contexts, rather elusive. Borders and boundaries also speak to the zones of contact between an object and its environment or its visitors. Even here, at a chemical level, the assumed dividing line between a given object and its environment is, in fact, a dynamic frontier. When one adds to this the division between cultures, religions, languages, between words themselves, and – related to this – cultural typologies (of foodstuffs, animal or plant life, to name only a

few), one has a formidable list. This is without considering the borders and boundaries between academic disciplines and methods, which are particularly apposite for a school of History, Archaeology and Religion.

The papers that follow provide a snapshot of a wonderfully intellectually stimulating event, in which everything from Wales during the First World War to the state of modern historiography, via conservation, the crusades and the modern Welsh mosque was subject to discussion. The first paper was our keynote address, which was provided by Professor James Whitley, who is, as well as being the Director of Postgraduate Studies, a Classical Archaeologist in the School. In it, he addresses that most basic of boundaries: the one between self and other. Indeed, Whitley questions the suitability and universal applicability of the concept of the individual. He does this by posing what is, at first glance, an odd question: 'is Boris Johnson an individual?' His answer to this question takes us from modern Britain to Melanesia and the Homeric world (and back again). Whitley argues for, on the basis of a close reading of a series of ancient Greek textual sources and the examination of contemporaneous material culture, that there is a fundamentally fluid and 'distributed' sense of self in the world of Homer's heroes. At the end of the paper, Boris Johnson emerges as a figure who cannot quite decide what sort of individuality he wishes to subscribe to (fond as he is of both 'enlightened self-interest' and pre-modern, Homeric, references). This, in itself, allows Whitley to suggest that modernity, and late capitalism's faith in the universality of the individual may be misplaced. It further allows him to suggest that recent trends in the

interpretation of Homer's heroes are wrong headed in their 'common sense' approach to the 'bounded' individual.

The paper that follows this, by Alex Davies, a graduate student of Archaeology in the School, takes up both cultural and chronological boundaries in later Prehistoric Britain. Davies considers how such boundaries have been defined in secondary literature, drawing also on anthropological theories of culture. Davies makes a plea for a more 'grounded' approach to cultural and chronological boundaries in later prehistoric Archaeology and makes the important point that chronological periodisation on the basis of changes in material culture may not correlate to cultural change, as is often assumed. The paper concludes that the only way out of this impasse is to compile evidence as independently as possible (leaving behind presupposed cultural and chronological boundaries) and to make informed decisions as to periodisation and cultural change on the basis of more than just patterns of manufacture, usage and treatment of a given object or set of objects. Like Whitley, Davies emphasises the complexity and variety of the situation 'on the ground' and the danger of sweeping generalisations and neatly bounded concepts; the list of which now includes the individual, culture and chronology.

The final paper in the volume is by Susannah Deane. It returns to questions of individuality and the boundary between psychiatric well being and illness in Tibetan communities. Deane's paper explores how Tibetan understandings of the permeable boundary between an individual and their environment impact on their conceptions of mental health and ill-health. She explores the role of malevolent deities as an

explanation for mental ill-health in Tibetan communities alongside biomedical perspectives. Deane's work explores, in particular, changes in explanatory strategies amongst exiled Tibetan communities (in Darjeeling). As was the case in the papers that precede this one, it is clear that the situation 'on the ground' involves competing explanations, shifts of perspective and a tendency to blur categorical boundaries.

These papers, then, and the symposium at which they were

presented, demonstrate the capacity for researchers in the School of History, Archaeology and Religion to both question and cross borders and boundaries. It is anticipated that the annual research symposium will lead to further publications of this type and help to support the ongoing publication of the journal that was born out of it: SHARE - Studies in History, Archaeology, Religion and Conservation.