



Debate Article

Borders and politically proactive archaeologies

Emily Hanscam^{1,*} & Brian Buchanan²

¹ Archaeology, Linnaeus University, Kalmar, Sweden

² Department of Geosciences, Eastern Washington University, Cheney, USA

* Author for correspondence (✉ emily.hanscam@lnu.se)

We are grateful for the participation of the respondents and heartened at the general agreement on the importance of a politically proactive archaeology. Inevitably, the authors offer differing perspectives on how best to achieve this goal, including the degree to which political engagement may foster the strength and relevance of the discipline (McGuire 2023), the limitations of landscape or assemblage perspectives for analysing these issues (Gardner 2023; Amilhat Szary 2023), and whether or not such a call is even necessary because many archaeologists are already engaged with this type of research (Soto 2023). We appreciate the opportunity that these comments provide to us for critical reflection on our arguments; here, we briefly engage with the major themes raised as part of the ongoing dialogue.

We use borderlands and frontier spaces as an example of how archaeologists not only can, but must, engage with contemporary issues. Having advocated for a deeper historical contextualisation of borders among fellow political geographers, Amilhat Szary (2023) welcomes our approach as evidence of an analogous debate among archaeologists. Amilhat Szary appropriately draws attention to the difficulties in visualising border zones, observing that the maps and illustrations used in our article do not entirely serve our purpose, as they inevitably make such zones seem linear. This then leads to an unrealistic expectation of borders as continuous. There are real challenges in visualising an ancient frontier work such as Hadrian's Wall in ways that do not directly or indirectly structure expectations about contemporary border walls and *vice versa*. In illustrating the Wall, we are constrained by the necessity of representing its material features accurately, just as we are influenced by the popular imagination of the monument. One way forward could be to insist on presenting Hadrian's Wall in the wider context, noting that while the northern border did move over time, the whole region of northern Roman Britain was understood as the frontier. The Wall projected power across this region as a zone, rather than concentrating power in a line that was not meant to be crossed.

Soto's (2023) perspective on our article is grounded in the perception of a gap between the important work of contemporary archaeologists and cultural anthropologists on the US/Mexico border and archaeological approaches to ancient border zones. Soto focuses on the specific example we use to illustrate the existence of political comparisons between Hadrian's Wall and the US/Mexico border and finds it unconvincing in isolation. It is worth emphasising that the example used is only one of many to equate Trump's border wall with Hadrian's Wall (for an excellent analysis of this discourse, see Bonacchi 2022: Chapter 6)—a phenomenon that fits into a longer tradition of appropriating the Roman wall with later national

borders (Nesbitt & Tolia-Kelly 2009). As scholars working on ancient border zones, we need to work harder to identify and demonstrate how these ancient landscapes have been used within historical discourses that, often implicitly, shape contemporary debates. Soto rightly notes that the role of archaeology in contemporary political discussion is not new and that many archaeologists have already advanced these ideas. The global context continues to evolve, however, and these are issues that must be continually revisited—and which must draw in a larger number and range of archaeologists, creating connections between specialisms widely separated in time and space. Soto's work, for example, aptly highlights the very real humanitarian cost of the US/Mexico border and its wider landscape. This emphasis is both welcome and challenging for archaeologists working on ancient border zones, and one we must internalise; we must be more aware of not only how past frontiers, such as the Roman *limes*, shape the present, but of how modern frontiers can help us to understand the past.

Gardner (2023), meanwhile, focuses on the limitations of using new materialist approaches to analyse the human costs of imperialist violence. We agree that human agency must remain a key aspect of archaeological border studies; our suggestion of drawing on assemblage theory is not a proposal to replace or offset human with object agency. Rather, the approach we advocate aligns with Cipolla's (2018) positioning towards new materialism, which emphasises pragmatism and common ground. If we can de-emphasise the pastness of material remains such as Hadrian's Wall, we can better understand the living nature of ancient border landscapes and how they continue to have a human cost in the contemporary world.

The significant challenges that lie ahead for archaeology pale in comparison to the global challenges facing humankind. There is, however, a bridge between the two. Archaeology, as the study of the past, can contribute to a more inclusive and just future; we concur with McGuire's (2023: 1024) laudable goal for a political archaeology to “chip away at the ignorance, alienation and oppression of the contemporary world”. It is precisely this purpose and relevance that is also central to the survival and strengthening of archaeology as a discipline. In political climates such as the present-day USA and in many other countries, it is easy to lack faith that archaeology as political action can simultaneously better the world and secure its own disciplinary future. Our hope is that we may build a wider recognition of archaeology's importance, in part by persistently emphasising the impact that the material remains of the past can have on the present. A better popular awareness of what archaeology in all its diversity can accomplish, beyond the ‘treasure-seeking’ trope, is one step forward. Sharing his perspective from the Global South, Chirikure (2021: 1075) highlights the need for archaeologists to directly translate knowledge about the past to contemporary problem solving. The politicisation of ancient borders is one concrete area where we can achieve this, by recognising and addressing the imagined continuities of border landscapes and pushing back on the popular narratives surrounding border spaces.

References

AMILHAT SZARY, A-L. 2023. Borderlands archaeology and the quest for an improved ‘walled-off salad’ recipe. *Antiquity* 394: 1026.
<https://doi.org/10.15184/aqy.2023.64>

BONACCHI, C. 2022. *Heritage and nationalism*. London: UCL Press.
<https://doi.org/10.14324/111.9781787358010>

- CHIRIKURE, S. 2021. Making archaeology relevant to global challenges: a Global South perspective. *Antiquity* 95: 1073–77.
<https://doi.org/10.15184/aqy.2021.72>
- CIPOLLA, C. 2018. Earth flows and lively stone: what differences does ‘vibrant’ matter make? *Archaeological Dialogues* 25: 49–70.
<https://doi.org/10.1017/S1380203818000077>
- GARDNER, A. 2023. Archaeology and Border Studies: broadening the dialogue. *Antiquity* 394: 1017–19.
<https://doi.org/10.15184/aqy.2023.43>
- MCGUIRE, R.H. 2023. Border walls, imagined and real. *Antiquity* 394: 1023–25.
<https://doi.org/10.15184/aqy.2023.46>
- NESBITT, C. & D. TOLIA-KELLY. 2009. Hadrian’s Wall: embodied archaeologies of the linear monument. *Journal of Social Archaeology* 9: 368–90.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/1469605309338428>
- SOTO, G. 2023. Historical erasure and archaeological possibilities. *Antiquity* 394: 1020–22.
<https://doi.org/10.15184/aqy.2023.51>