Frontier and Province in the Premodern World

Ancient Societies Workshop and YISAP Seminar

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Goals, Activities, and Outcomes:

The aim of this past year’s workshop and seminar was to examine the provincial and frontier experience in the premodern world – a continual tension between marginality and incorporation, domination and participation, centripetal and centrifugal forces – as a particularly productive avenue of historical inquiry through which to think about important questions of space, time, change, identity, exchange, and power; fertile ground for comparative research on the historical and cultural sources of contemporary developments. We hoped to explore social equilibria between governance and the governed in the pre-modern world, via the interaction – religious, artistic, linguistic, administrative, economic – between local units and large imperial frameworks. As an object of comparative study, the province, representing the intersection of imperial power and local communities, allowed us to combine ‘top-down’ and ‘bottom-up’ approaches to the ancient world, to investigate some of the key practices and discourses of empire while attempting to recover the agency and voices of subaltern provincial actors. Frontiers offered a chance to reconsider the “center-periphery” paradigm taken over from world systems theory, and to propose new models for understanding the complex relationships between an imperial ‘center’ and the governance of territories, or ‘cross-cutting’ relationships with other states and polities.

To these ends, one of our goals was, with the aid of the Whitney Humanity/Humanities grant, to organize a series of monthly workshops throughout the year to encourage our diverse group of participants – graduate students and faculty from a dozen different departments – gather and to continually reflect on and exchange ideas around the topic of ‘Frontier and Province’. We had hoped that this organization would facilitate a sense of collective intellectual ‘progress’ on this complex and multi-faceted topic over the course of the year, and would produce some robust ideas that would inform graduate and faculty research in lasting ways. We invited a lineup of distinguished speakers over the course of the year who spoke on a variety of related topics – the Greek novel and the Roman frontier in Egypt (Rob Cioffi, Dartmouth), conceptualizing the province in a neo-Assyrian context (Karen Radner, Munich), land assignments to soldiers in the Hellenistic Mediterranean (Alain Bresson, Chicago), rethinking the Roman *provincia* in the case of Spain (Alicia Jiménez, Duke), reassessing the frontier and imperial formation among the steppe nomads of ancient China (Nicola di Cosmo, IAS), comparative approaches to provincial spaces and layered monarchies in the Roman Empire and Han China (Carlos Noreña, Berkeley), and provincial participation in imperial culture and administration in Achaemenid Anatolia (Beth Dusinberre, Colorado) – and our sense was that these workshops were a great success, thanks in large part to the active and consistent engagement of the participants. In the spring term, these workshops were meant to dovetail with a graduate seminar around the same topic, which attracted several auditors and nine students (seven graduate, two undergraduate), who came together from a wide range of home departments (Classics, History, Art History, Law, Religious Studies, Anthropology).

Student-Generated Research:

In the course of the spring semester, students in the graduate seminar worked through the major methodological, historiographical, and theoretical questions concerning frontiers and provinces in three major parts. First we focused on frontiers, beginning with theoretical and comparative approaches to the frontier, and progressing to the intersection of frontiers with various other related concepts and problems: nomadism, ethnicity, knowledge (especially the intellectual discourses of ethnography and geography), and exclusion and domination. After this, we turned to the idea of the province: from theoretical and comparative approaches, we looked at the moment of incorporation and integration at which a frontier transforms into a province, strategies of domination and control, intermediate and local elites, and ultimately thought about how we might recover the voices, agencies, perspectives, and identities of provincials themselves. We concluded by exploring the legacy of the pasts of ancient frontiers and provinces in the present: the ways in which the modern world is heavily burdened by the premodern.

For their short midterm essay, students were asked to synthesize our previous discussions, and to work toward a definition of the nature and basis of the frontier, and specifically to address whether frontiers are theoretical concepts, produced and performed by discourse within and among cultures, or are instead better conceived as physical processes that give rise to such discourse. These response papers generated further lively discussion and debate, upon which each student built in his or her final research paper, on a topic of their choosing, closely related to their particular field of specialization: from sovereignty and practices of territory in the South China Sea, to identity and discursive constructions of boundaries in late antique Israel, to cultural appropriation and exoticism in the Nile Valley, to colonialism and the Greek imagination in Classical Sicily, to conceptions of resistance across the provinces of imperial Rome, to cultural change in the archaeological record of Roman Belgium, to ethnographic representation in Medieval writings about the rugged pilgrimage routes of northern Spain, to Roman legal traditions on the North American frontier, to material evidence for interaction in Classic southeastern Mesoamerica. The fact that across a remarkable range of original research conducted by the students in the seminar, in both geographical and temporal – covering five continents and almost three thousand years of history – as well as methodological respects – encompassing historical, legal, art historical, philological, epigraphic, literary, archaeological, and anthropological approaches to the premodern world – there was nonetheless a productive cross-fertilization and a broad conceptual coherence is, we think, a vivid testament to the importance and potential of the interdisciplinary goals of the YISAP initiative. We are very grateful to the Whitney Humanities Center for supporting this research, and the achievement of these goals in the academic year 2015-16. Below are abstracts of the research projects undertaken by our nine students.

Lester Stephens

Problematizing Resistance in Imperial Rome: A Concise Lexical and Historical Analysis of Opposition to Rome as Channeled through a Roman Conceptual Framework

This study examines resistance in imperial Rome from a lexical and historical standpoint, and investigates the notion of resistance as a means to understand how Romans would have conceptualized the phenomenon vis-à-vis contexts which preclude broad applications of resistance from a modern standpoint. An expanded window is provided into the Roman mind, which suggests flexibility and perceptional scales of opposition whose spectrum contains bona fide modes of resistance concomitant with an administrative backdrop that is structured to absorb tolerable levels of defiance. Historical anecdotes from ancient authors provide the lexical and contextual examples from which to derive insights concerning resistance, and modern scholarship is engaged with a view to establishing a broad canvas of viewpoints from which to hone insights and conclusions within the study. The current state of scholarship on the topic of resistance has provided cogent analyses of resistance in an attempt to grasp a sense of Roman motivations for actions. This study goes beyond the current approaches and problematizes the notion of resistance itself, as opposed to shifting terms between contexts and determining suitable applications and appropriate extents of range for each. Although concise in nature, the results from this investigation stand poised for development into a larger project that takes in more *comparanda* than was feasible for the size of the current treatment. Nevertheless, the methodological approach to resistance in this work has yielded what one can only hope will advance the scholarly discussion of the topic.

Grant Gabriel

The Final Frontier: Rome’s Legal American Provinces

This paper traces the descent and influence of Roman law on the North American colonial frontier. Roman law not only shaped colonial policy, its use transformed the colonizers. The paper demonstrates how the premodern world weighs heavily on the modern frontier. Its influence can be found in Canada, in Louisiana, in France. Such relationships are never linear; they are subject to bias, misinterpretation, and manipulation, but they are central to a more complete understanding of the dynamic between colonial center and colonized. Roman law facilitated central control and dominance while at the same time fostering a powerful, independent local legal identity.

Lillian Sellati

Interpreting the Obelisk of Antinous

Scholars have long debated when the Obelisk of Antinous was originally commissioned and where it was erected. This paper takes a set back from these arguments and instead considers what interpretations of the obelisk were available to viewers at each of the proposed sites (Rome, Tivoli, and Antinoopolis). The form and decoration of the obelisk drew on an extensive history of religious, political, and artistic interactions between Egypt, Greece, and Rome in order to communicate multiple socio-political statements simultaneously. The messages that received the most emphasis would depend on the audiences’ relationship to that shared history. For example, viewers in Antinoopolis would likely be inclined to see the obelisk as a symbol of Hadrian’s respect for Egyptian cultic traditions rather than as the symbol of Roman domination through military power which viewers in the city of Rome might favor. This universal legibility is typical of the visual culture that the Emperor Hadrian designed to propagate and legitimize the new cult of Antinous. It also confirms the overarching message that Hadrian wielded immense political and economic power would have been conveyed regardless of when or where the obelisk was viewed.

Ryan Mitchell

Contingent Vocabularies of Sovereignty: Imagining (and Arguing Over) Territorial Authority in China and the West

A focus on sub- and transnational identities in the social sciences has helped to illuminate the extent to which the nation functions as a “false unity” reliant upon favoring some narratives and suppressing others. International law, however, often continues to see itself as the kind of “transparent medium of understanding” that the nation per se no longer constitutes. In particular, the principles of territorial sovereignty and self-determination of peoples are often taken to be neutral descriptions of reality when they are in fact contingent ideas dependent upon specific political settings and intellectual-historical *milieux*. A closer examination of the origins of both the European and Chinese conceptions of territorial sovereignty, particularly as regards their use as rationales for political administration and the suppression of non-state identities, illustrates the above dynamic. As shown in this paper, both European and Chinese conceptions of sovereignty relied on notional “centers” and “peripheries” by means of which those groups, lands, and individuals outside of the sphere of sovereign administration were reduced to the status of “frontiers” – *objects of* rather than *participants in* – the development of juridico-political regimes. China’s interstate disputes today often continue the clash between these two provincial legal vocabularies.

Asia Del Bonis-O’Donnell

A Center-Periphery Seesaw:

Perceptions of Sicily in Archaic and Early Classical Greece

This paper uses the center-periphery model to analyze the Greek understanding of Sicily and the place the island occupies in the wider Mediterranean world. Acknowledging that this metaphorical relationship can be categorized spatially as well as conceptually, involving human attitude and perception, literary and archaeological sources are evaluated for what they imply about mythological and historical thought about the island. Evidence from the 8th through 5th centuries B.C. exemplifies notions of Sicily as both center and periphery; sometimes the two ideas are simultaneously implied. Socio-political contexts of these testimonia provide further support for why these shifting perceptions might be occurring. Ultimately, the interconnectedness of center-periphery and civilized-barbarian dichotomies are found to contribute to these seemingly mixed attitudes of Sicily’s cohesion with mainland Greece.

Jocelyn Burney

“For the whole inhabitable world, be sure, lies before you”:

Land, Boundary, and Identity Through the Lens of the Rehov Synagogue Inscription

In this paper, I examine a 6th-7th century CE inscription from the narthex of the ancient synagogue at Rehov, Israel, approximately 7 km south of Beth-She’an. The inscription consists of quotations from rabbinic literature concerning the laws of agricultural tithing and sabbatical years (laws that apply to the land of Israel but not the diaspora), including a passage from the Palestinian Talmud that outlines the boundaries of the land of Israel. I analyze the historical and theological background of agricultural tithing, as well as primary texts dealing with the relationship between the land of Israel and the diaspora in late antiquity in order to argue that the Rehov inscription should be viewed as a polemic against the growing importance of diaspora communities and the imposition of imperial boundaries on ancient Palestine.

Marc Cugnon

The Question of Romanization: Uncovering Gallo-Roman Culture

In many respects, Roman Gaul was a microcosm of the empire at large. This culturally diverse and ethnically disparate land represented a new frontier for social interactions between Romans and the various Gallic tribes that inhabited it. As the Romans and Gauls interfaced and collaborated to greater and greater degrees, new identities were forged as two seemingly divergent cultures began to exchange ideas with one another. To label the adoption of Roman traditions in Gaul and view the cross-cultural exchange that occurred within the province as “Romanization” does a tremendous disservice to our understanding of the complexities behind these provincial interactions. Roman Gaul represented far more than just cultural inculcation. Instead, the province provided a new site for unique forms of art, agriculture, tradition and development. While the term “Romanization” provides a convenient catchall in describing how Gallic culture changed following Roman conquest, it fails to accurately reflect the depth and degree to which Gaul became a breeding ground for a new hybrid culture, featuring mixed societal hallmarks.

This paper surveys the various evidence – in the form of art, architecture, religion and customs – and demonstrates that the concept of a culturally monolithic or exclusively “Romanized” Gaul is ultimately untenable. Acculturation was a multilateral and fluid process of interaction that varied throughout Roman Gaul by region, people and exposure to urbanized life. Indeed, as we argue, the term “Gallo-Roman culture” is, in itself, something of a misnomer. There truly is no such singular combined culture, but rather there existed numerous blends between Roman and Gallic customs and traditions.

David McCormick

Frontiers & Boundaries: a Moving Target in Defining Interaction in Southeast Mesoamerica

I focus on a variety of data or *traits,* primarily ceramic, to provide a picture of Southeast Mesoamerica as a *frontier*, with no distinct *border,* from the Formative to the Late Classic Period. While there are certainly more vectors to explore (namely lithics, architecture, prestige goods, etc.) ceramics are perhaps the most extensively investigated. The formation of Southeast Mesoamerica is also best seen through the lens of the Usulután ceramics, as local traditions of architecture tend to remain more-or-less salient during the Formative and Early Classic. There is little evidence of large scale migrations and/or conquests as evidenced by sweeping changes in material culture in Southeast Mesoamerica, except of course at the “Classic Maya Centers” of Copán and Quirigúa. When these Maya sites are founded, they bring with them the trappings of Classic Maya Lowland society. However, even those sites in Copán immediate hinterland to not adopt these trappings wholesale. Copán and Quirigúa account for the vast majority of monumental inscriptions in Southeastern Mesoamerica. Ulua Polychromes with their imitation of Maya iconographic programs and glyphs show considerable contact with Maya peoples, although a concrete understanding of ‘Mayaness’ is absent. Similarly, Copador exhibits pseudo-glyphs and profile figures which are Maya-like but lack the legible glyphs and familiar programs of lowland Maya polychromes. The use of these pseudo-glyphs can thus be seen as a larger Southeast Mesoamerican characteristic. These pots were used despite knowledge and use of Maya writing was known in many polities of the Southeast (Copán, Quirigúa, Los Higos, and El Abra at the very least). Adoption of outside, *novel* symbols and objects were a choice made by members, generally elites, of polities in Southeast Mesoamerica.

Southeastern Mesoamerica is best thought as a *frontier* as more localized traditions seem to be conservative in the face of larger comings and goings of foreign influence. Usulután ceramics became widely spread, without disrupting utilitarian ceramic traditions, and for the most part did not bring with them the *practices* observed at western El Salvadoran or southeastern Guatemalan (macro-Maya) sites. When Classic Maya dynasts came to Southeastern Mesoamerica they continued many preexisting Southeastern Mesoamerican, such as the use of Usulután fine-ware serving vessels, river cobble construction, and perhaps the elite practice of turban headdresses (although turbans may have been a case of ‘ethnogenesis’). Local non-Maya elite also adopted some of the trappings of their Maya contemporaries at Copán and Quirigúa, such as dressed stone architecture, hieroglyphic writing, assuming Maya titles (i.e. *ahaw)*, and at some sites using almost exclusively obsidian (ixtepeque) blade-core technology as opposed to expedient flake technology. The shifting *frontier* of Southeastern Mesoamerica can be viewed as a place where interaction between Mesoamerica and the Intermediate Area culminated in a zone of interaction that created its own distinct cultural unit. At all times it exhibits *traits* and *practices* of both larger cultural units but even in the most Maya sites of Copán and Quirigúa a negotiation takes place wherein many local elements remain at the expense of larger Mesoamerican ones.

Burton Westermeier

The *Pilgrim’s Guide* as Ethnography

The twelfth-century *Pilgrim’s Guide* is a text which has long puzzled scholars of pilgrimage, who have interpreted the work in a wide variety of ways. In this paper, I will advance a number of arguments in an attempt to suggest a better way of looking at this text. First, I argue for the importance of viewing the text as not a single text with a single genre, but rather as a mixture of several genres combined in service of promoting pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela. Second, I argue that chapter 7 of the *Pilgrim’s Guide* are best understood as ethnography, as demonstrated by both their content and comparison with other ethnographical works from the twelfth century. Finally, I argue that these chapters were included in the *Pilgrim’s Guide* due to the influence of an ongoing collaboration between Spanish royal and ecclesiastical elites, French monastics, and the papacy to settle Basque-speaking areas with French people as a strategy for consolidating royal control and acquiring resources and manpower for the *Reconquista*.