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## National Borders and the Contours of Historical Knowledge

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Travel—across political or cultural borders and into fresh social settings—is so often transformative because it brings us into direct contact with unfamiliar ways of thinking and doing and, through those confrontations, we find ourselves prompted to reflect anew on our own peculiarities, limitations, and even failures. I recently had just such an experience when attending the semi-annual meeting of the Association Internationale pour l'Étude de la Mosaïque Antique (AIEMA), which was held in Lyon and Saint-Romain-en-Gal, France from October 17–21, 2022.<sup>1</sup> As a scholar trained primarily in textual sources for the study of religion in the ancient Mediterranean world, I am relatively new to the field of mosaic studies and thus came to the conference as something of an outsider. I knew that being a neophyte in a professional setting always has its challenges, but I was nonetheless excited to engage with the well-established community of art historians and archaeologists that forms the core of the association.

What I had not quite been prepared for was the degree to which the contours of the field of ancient mosaics map directly onto the national borders of the contemporary Mediterranean world—though, in hindsight, I guess I was naïve not to be. With several notable exceptions, most participants at the conference presented work on materials located in their countries of origin or residence. Moreover, only very few presenters made any reference to mosaics or other archaeological finds from beyond the borders of the modern nation-state in which they both live and work, despite obvious opportunities for contextualization and comparison. This preference for keeping to one's own national borders held true even in cases where the

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1. The program for the conference is posted at <http://garom.fr/aiema-2022/>.

mosaics under discussion belong to wider regional and transregional visual and craft traditions that cut across various modern borders.<sup>2</sup>

In most cases, the nationality of the archaeologists and art historians at the conference corresponded directly to the location of the mosaics. In some cases, the correlation between scholar and object of study could best be explained with reference to specific histories of colonization and decolonization, which had forged particular institutional networks as well as cultural and linguistic affinities. This pattern held true across the length and breadth of the Mediterranean, from Portugal and Spain in the Iberian Peninsula to Israel and Syria in the Levant and from Switzerland in the north to Algeria and Tunisia on its southern shores. Of course, as an American Jew working on synagogue mosaics from an excavation located in modern Israel and overseen by the Israel Antiquities Authority, I could see perfectly well that I was quite fully implicated in this mapping of personal status and affiliation onto academic specialization. I guess people who live in glass houses shouldn't throw stones (even if those stones are tiny tesserae!).

And yet, this rather bracing experience in my newly adopted field of study prompted me to reflect on just how profoundly modern national borders—in facilitating or restricting the movement and exchange of scholars and scholarship—continue to serve as powerful filters for knowledge about the ancient world. It is widely acknowledged that national borders are of recent vintage, projecting peculiarly modern forms of governmental power and bureaucratic control onto delineated geographic areas.<sup>3</sup> The modern regime of national borders that so powerfully conditions how we experience and conceptualize the landscape of the ancient world maps poorly onto ancient practices and ideologies of boundaries and frontiers, both between and within imperial states. Despite the impressive, even monumental remains of Rome's border defenses, such as the iconic Hadrian's Wall, neither the frontiers of the Roman Empire nor its provincial boundaries regulated trade, mobility, and belonging in a manner remotely comparable to the functioning of modern

2. This general tendency to study mosaic finds within the confines of modern national borders is also evident in the series of brief articles written mainly by participants in advance of the conference and collected under the rubric "La mosaïque antique et son contexte" in the public-facing magazine *Dossiers d'archéologie*, whose publication was timed to coincide with the AIEMA conference; see *Dossiers d'archéologie* 412 (July/August 2022): 6–73.

3. For comparative analysis of borders in premodern and modern states, see, e.g., Saskia Sassen, *Territory, Authority, Rights: From Medieval to Global Assemblages* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006); Daniel Power and Naomi Standen, eds., *Frontiers in Question: Eurasian Borderlands, 700–1700* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999).

borders. We must remember that, like other premodern states, the great empires of Late Antiquity were flexible territorial structures, both encompassed and crisscrossed by fluid and indeterminate zones—fuzzy borderlands, not starkly drawn borderlines.<sup>4</sup>

Moreover, for at least a generation, historians have reflected on how various national and institutional traditions of scholarship on the ancient world are thoroughly bound up with the histories of modern nationalism, imperialism, and colonialism as well as by the reactions and counterreactions that these processes have engendered.<sup>5</sup> Archaeologists are likewise increasingly cognizant of the important role that their discipline has played in underwriting nationalist and colonialist projects.<sup>6</sup> But these insights regarding the profound differences between ancient and modern states as well as an ever greater appreciation of the entangled histories of ancient societies within and beyond the Mediterranean have not fully mitigated the effects that national identities and nationalist ideologies have had on how scholars conceptualize and organize their fields of knowledge.

These problems seem to be particularly acute and intractable in academic specializations that focus on materials uncovered during archaeological excavations. Such projects are wholly dependent upon the formal approval of state bureaucracies and often also on significant financial investment by governmental bodies or prominent civic organizations. The ideological and economic imperatives for ministries of tourism, museums, and other such institutions geared toward managing a country's cultural heritage likewise contribute to the erection of national boundaries around archaeological sites and the materials unearthed from them. To complicate matters further, the ongoing looting of antiquities in Syria, Iraq, and elsewhere has led to renewed demands that museums and private collectors in Europe and North America commit to equitable practices of cultural restitution and repatriation. Thus,

4. I take the final phrase in this paragraph from the title of Alexander C. Diener and Joshua Hagen's edited volume, *Borderlines and Borderlands: Political Oddities at the Edge of the Nation State* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2010).

5. See the astute observations about how the various European traditions of modern scholarship on the frontiers of the Roman Empire have been shaped by specific national and imperial interests in C. R. Whittaker, "Roman Frontiers and European Perceptions," *Journal of Historical Sociology* 13, no. 4 (2000): 462–82; Whittaker, *Frontiers of the Roman Empire: A Social and Economic Study* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994), 1–9.

6. See, e.g., Raphael Greenberg and Yannis Hamilakis, *Archaeology, Nation, and Race: Confronting the Past, Decolonizing the Future in Greece and Israel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2022); Bonnie Effros, *Incidental Archaeologists: French Officers and the Rediscovery of Roman North Africa* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2018).

whether excavated or looted, ancient artifacts are constituted as objects of study by the very dynamics of modern nationalism, colonialism, and imperialism through which these items are brought to light in the first place.<sup>7</sup>

It, therefore, bears endless repeating that the pasts that we produce as scholars inevitably replicate the contours of our own particular zones of comfort or discomfort, belonging or exclusion. As a journal whose founding mission-statement describes it as “an international forum for innovation and reflection on global Late Antiquity,” *Studies in Late Antiquity* is committed to challenging scholars of all kinds to bring to consciousness the borders and boundaries—physical, disciplinary, political, and psychological—that restrict their vision of this period. This goal does not mean running roughshod over local sensibilities, ignoring the wrongdoings of governments or their proxies, or disregarding the very real tensions that exist among populations and states across the regions we study. It certainly does not mean blithely benefitting from the access that some passports permit and from the resources some countries and institutions afford. There are even times when scholars must stand against injustice and oppression, imposing on ourselves limits to collaboration and cooperation in protest. Nevertheless, we should not let the constraints imposed on us from above by institutions and governments—or, for that matter, our own soft prejudices—narrow our horizons. I hope that the present issue of *SLA*, like its predecessors, provides models of scholarship that successfully traverses both the political and the mental boundaries that keep us from seeing the intersecting worlds of Late Antiquity. ■

7. My thinking on the issues discussed in this paragraph has been shaped in particular by Bénédicte Savoy, *Africa's Struggle for its Art: History of a Postcolonial Defeat*, trans. Susanne Meyer-Abich (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2021), and Dan Hicks, *The Brutish Museums: The Benin Bronzes, Colonial Violence, and Cultural Restitution* (London: Pluto Press, 2020).