

**At the Edges of Empires: Territories and Processes nearby and between Emerging Great Powers in Antiquity**

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What happened at the fringes of ancient empires? Which exchanges, mutual influences and entanglements took place at these contact zones? Are fringes, contact zones, frontiers and edges useful heuristic categories and concepts at all?

These were few of the underlying discourses during the two-day Melammu-workshop held at the Institute for the History of Ancient Civilizations (IHAC) of Northeast Normal University, Changchun. In bringing together international and Chinese experts in the fields of Ancient Near Eastern, Ancient Egyptian and Classical Studies, QIANG ZHANG (Changchun), director of IHAC, stressed the parallels between the idea of IHAC from its foundation in 1984 and the aim of the Melammu-project, thus to see the ancient world as connected spheres where traditions, transgressions, mutual influences and interdependencies but also processes of differentiation and discrimination happened di- and synchronically. SVEN GÜNTHER (vice-director of IHAC, Changchun) pointed out that recent discussions about global, entangled or comparative history in ancient studies should be seen as a reflection of ongoing contemporary discourses that shape our approach to sources, and eventually may influence our understanding. Thus, he called for a careful examination of the extant material and contextualization before modeling or even theorization.

In his key-note lecture, JOSEF WIESEHÖFER (University of Kiel) shifted the view, from the 'common' powers like Persia, Parthia, the Romans etc. influencing Bactria to the own identity emerging in this region

due to these many and continuous contacts that created an own form of interweavement.

In the first panel on „Borders and Communication in the Ancient Near East“, GINA KONSTANTOPOULOS (University of Helsinki) concentrated on the 'sea' as a discourse concept which reflected ideas of imperial control and served as marker of distant space in the worldview of the ancient Near East. SEBASTIAN FINK (University of Helsinki) applied the model of Arnold Gehlen who stressed the *Mängelwesen Mensch* ('deficient human being') as being driven by the necessity to develop skills and economic surplus, to the changes and fall of Ur III. He explained that the dependency on foreign resources eventually forced the exploited neighbors developed forces to get rid of the repressing system that they created thus its own end from the beginning. The Eastern borders of Assyria and Babylonia were the focus of the paper given by SIMONETTA PONCHIA (University of Verona). She showed how elite networks, ties across cities in the border region and a system of alliances created an 'international elite' what is reflected in mutual influences, for instance in glyptic or other forms of art.

The second panel „Conflicts and Exchange in Entangled Areas“ was concerned with case-studies from classical times. HENDRIKUS VAN WIJLICK (Peking University) explained the ill-famed Parthian campaign of Marcus Antonius as a deliberate and accurate expedition of the triumvir to remove one of the main important allies of the Parthian king, Artavasdes of Media Atropatene. To the usual interpretation of the campaign as an act of representation, he added the perspective of Antony attempting to break traditional forms of alliance-building of the Parthian counterpart by copying for example marriage alliances and so forth. In three case-studies (Juba I of Numidia, Cleopatra and Marcus Antonius in Syria, Ma'nu VIII Philorhomaïos and Abgar VIII of Edessa), SVEN GÜNTHER (IHAC, Changchun) investigated how the issuing of coins by smaller polities and realms in contact zones between bigger powers reflected conscious decisions of minting authorities, and are reflected in the denomination, the metal, the iconography, and targeted

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specific audiences. KEE-HYUN BAN (Korea University, Seoul) showed how Armenia was gradually Christianized in the 4th century which was very much connected with the geopolitical situation of the realm between Rome and Persia, and their different political as well as religious policies at that time.

„Political and Economic Contacts“ formed the framework of the third panel. KAI RUFFING (University of Kassel) emphasized the role of military camps in creating economic stimulation on both sides of the ‘limes’ of the Roman Empire that should not be understood as clear and strictly defined borders but permeable fringes where economic interactions formed a win-win-situation for both sides. XIANG WAN (Xi’an Jiaotong University) separated the so-called Silk Road(s) into different contact zones where different forms and dynamics of exchange, trade and cultural interaction happened, whereby the specific route networks were deliberately used by the empires for their respective interests and thus never formed a consistent and consecutive system contrary to what the term ‘Silk Road(s)’ suggests.

The fourth panel „Ancient Egypt as Entangled Area“ touched on the transformation period from the Byzantine to Muslime Empires. STEFANIE SCHMIDT (University of Basel) examined the extant and multi-lingual source material and asked to what extent administration, economic trade relations and public as well as private life continued or changed after the change of ruling authorities. It turned out that tried and tested structures were continued at first and were only gradually changed and replaced by Muslim-shaped bureaucracy and forms of economy.

In the last panel on „Ancient and Modern Conceptions of Borders, Civilizations and Empires“, first TONG WU (IHAC, Changchun) deconstructed Diodorus’ description of the Red Sea Barbarians in Book 3 of his *Bibliotheca Historica*. He demonstrated how Diodorus deliberately modified his source, the work of Agatharchides that has partly survived in Photius and created a framework for his contemporaries where they could compare the Red Sea Barbarians’ passive and cyclic world with their own ‘modernity’ in which development, connectivity and

chances formed the spirit of the age. DAVID WARBURTON (IHAC, Changchun) stressed the importance of interdisciplinary work, particularly among archaeologists and historians from different fields of ancient studies, to understand that traditional definitions of fields and isolated views should be replaced by looking at synchronic developments in different regions and cultures, to understand where spatial, temporal and evolutionary frontiers really were located.

In the closing discussion on the chances and restrictions of comparative, entangled and global history studies, the participants pointed out the fixedness of all historians’ perspective and the necessity to understand ancient cultures not from a uniform viewpoint but to recognize the different levels of identities innate of specific ancient societies, groups or individuals. They strongly advocated the heuristic concepts of ‘fringes’, ‘contact zones’, ‘frontiers’ and ‘edges’, among others, due to the intense processes happening at these focal points. In the following days, the participants had the chance to discover such an entangled area in Jilin Province, in Ji’an with the ancient sites of the UNESCO World Heritage „Capital Cities and Tombs of the Ancient Koguryo Kingdom“.

#### **Conference Overview:**

##### *Key-Note*

Josef Wiesehöfer (University of Kiel): Bactria between Iran and Turan: A Region at the Edges and in the Centre of Great Powers in Antiquity

Gina Konstantopoulos (University of Helsinki): The Use of the Sea as a Conceptual Border in Mesopotamia

Sebastian Fink (University of Helsinki): Changes in Ur III. Border Regions – A Homemade Disaster?

Simonetta Ponchia (University of Verona): The Eastern Border of Assyria and Babylonia

Dr. Hendrikus van Wijlick (Peking University, Beijing): At the Edges of the Roman Empire: Antony and Parthia

Sven Günther (IHAC, NENU, Changchun): Theoretical Remarks / Coin Circulation at the

### Edges of Empires

Kee-Hyun Ban (Korea University, Seoul): Armenia between Rome and Persia: The Christianization of the Kingdom of Armenia in a Geopolitical View

Kai Ruffing (University of Kassel): Economic Life on the Fringes of the Roman Empire

Xiang Wan (Xi'an Jiaotong University): The Silk Road: Routes between Empires, or between Edges of Empires?

Stefanie Schmidt (University of Basel): The End of Antiquity? Egypt between Byzantine and Muslim Empires

Tong Wu (IHAC, NENU, Changchun): A Passive World: Red Sea Barbarians in Diodorus' *Bibliotheca Historica*

David A. Warburton (IHAC, NENU, Changchun): Frontier Studies Revived!

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