

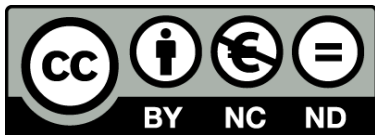
## State Borders, Other Orders

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## State Borders, Other Orders

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Jim Scott<sup>1</sup> returned time and again to the topic of how states produced land cadasters (and vice-versa). “[A] state cadastral map,” he wrote in *Seeing Like a State*, “created to designate taxable property-holders does not merely describe a system of land tenure; it creates such a system through its ability to give its categories the force of law” (1998: 3). This is lyrical and axiomatic. But best of all, not content to point out the artificiality of a system, Jim pressed on to pursue the *purpose* states had in simulating powers. The cadaster performs a kind of ontological alchemy: it not only helps to create state capacity, but it grounds it in ways of knowing (as law, as science) which are discursively fixed and unquestionable, with obvious political benefits. As he did with everything from moral economies to grain baskets, Jim always forged ahead to think through why forms of control worked – how they served state projects – and not just expose them.

Whether Jim’s legions of readers always follow along to the ends of his arguments is less clear. A man much cited and oft quoted has given us subtleties which do not always precipitate into post-Scottian investigations of ancient states. Nowhere is this so true as for misunderstandings of the sotto voce distinctions he made between landscape, territory, and sovereign land at various levels of analytic control. Jim was sensitive to the difference, for instance, between how ancient grain states conceived of land in terms of production, whereas early modern states rationalized it in areal terms. He was always on the lookout for practical outcomes: how cadastral information produced grain yields, and then how those rents were shaped to state satisfaction by baskets and strickles.

The political borders and boundaries of states are among their technologies of control, forms of “synoptic data [which] are the points of departure for reality as state officials apprehend and shape it” (Scott 1998: 83). Yet he was equally aware that the geography of ancient states could not be so easily bounded, “fragmented” as its productive zones were by “fiscally sterile” and unincorporated populations (Scott 2020: 230).

Notwithstanding, it is routine for historians of Mesopotamia to speak of state “borders.” The conundrum represented itself to me recently as I sat in a conference about migration and population movements in antiquity. Virtually every paper enjoined some concept of borders and boundaries in one way or another. The same papers all took trouble to put daylight between ancient and modern concepts of borders: they identified ancient boundaries as socio-political constructs; admitted that they were emically un- or under-defined; proclaimed their limited applicability to ethnic, linguistic, and economic identities and activities. Yet, having made these disclaimers, everyone still bounded ahead to treat geographic borders as an analytically valid concept.<sup>2</sup>

But what if they’re not? Can we give more serious attention to the conception of state territory in the pre-cadastral world? Is our interest in defining ancient states so “scientific” that we must impute to them a geographic integrity so misleading that it pins them to a board like so many butterflies? I will try here to give body to some of the ways in which concepts of borders are profoundly anachronistic to ancient Mesopotamian contexts and then consider a potential way to think about the geographic embeddedness of ancient states in relation to their “Others,” the great and little-documented world of non-state people, places, and production.

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1 Jim was the one person whom I and my sister Sophie Richardson (a scholar of and advocate for human rights in the very modern world) both knew professionally, which made for a nice point in common.

2 The online catalogue of the Research Archives of the Institute for the Study of Ancient Cultures (Chicago) returns more than 200 works published since 2010 on ancient Near Eastern topics with “border” (not “borderlands”), “boundary,” or “frontier” in their titles.

One is struck by the insufficiency of Mesopotamian technologies for the purpose of controlling territorial integrity in two related senses: neither for Latin *finis* or *limes* as boundaries of *extent* on the one hand, or the modern sense boundaries as *enclosing* a politically defined space on the other. This is to say nothing about the imaginative and mathematical capacities of Mesopotamian cultures, which developed many sophisticated methods for measuring and accounting. But these skills were little turned to the production of territoriality such that state (or even city-state) borders were operable attributes prior to the first millennium BCE. “Insufficiency” here does not mean incapability, only that the task of drawing borders to which the relevant technologies might have been put was irrelevant. This is demonstrable for Mesopotamia along many lines, some of which I list below. Many of these points will be long familiar to archaeologists in spirit, if not detail, but I think there is a purpose to bring them together in this way.<sup>3</sup>

1. There is an absence of cartographic representations of space in Mesopotamia much beyond depictions of fields or individual buildings – plans rather than maps, spatial illustrations largely divorced from relative and absolute spaces. A few well-known city plans (and the late, so-called ‘Babylonian Map of the World’<sup>4</sup>) notwithstanding, this culture never created any larger relational system to represent geographical space. In this respect, no borders could ever be fixed in relation to other places or spaces contained within them.
2. Nor do we have actual cadasters beyond lists of fields in local districts. Even the 21<sup>st</sup> century BCE “Ur-Namma Cadaster” only defines specific tracts of land which were parts of various temple estates, not anything like the “lands of the state”.<sup>5</sup> The highly detailed documentation of fields in Ur III Umma (Molina and Steinkeller 2017, with literature) and Old Babylonian Larsa (Richardson 2008, 2015: 279–292) were limited to describing tracts under production. We should take seriously the implications of sustained and long-lived projects to document specific productive fields and districts but never *all* land of the state.
3. Nor again do we have any catalogs of toponyms from any period with pretensions to give a textual picture of individual states or the known world. In fact, most place-names are very poorly integrated into the world of textuality generally. Textualized representations of topographical space, such as itineraries or sections in word lists such as Ur<sub>5</sub>-ra,<sup>6</sup> were written for purposes of trade or scribal education, not for the sake of transforming toponymy into geography. And the way toponyms were used generally presents an even more bewildering picture: for instance, we know of about 2,000 toponyms for the Old Babylonian period, derived from about 19,000 texts. These large numbers might lead one to believe that both ancient scribes and modern scholars had/have a lot of knowledge about ancient geography. But about 62% of those 2,000 toponyms are attested only one, two, or three times; 41% are attested only once. Despite this ubiquity of poorly attested place, there are virtually no indications that scribes had any trouble knowing *where* these places were, how to get there, or knowing how to spell their names. In no way do we get the sense that the location of unusual places was unknown or problematic. We thus face the confusing situation that there was a high degree of fidelity in documenting place names at the same time there was a very low concern about documenting *where* those places were. The conception of the toponymized world, sophisticated and specific as it was, did not translate into any interest in its spatial composition. To this problem I will return briefly below.
4. Few ancient *linear* boundary markers are known from ancient descriptions or modern archaeological surveys. The levees, meadows, and wadis, which made up most portrayals of boundaries, occupied discrete areas and were non-contiguous, only partial boundaries. Man-made border markers were single-point features – shrines, wells, and monuments – visible only at their *in situ* locations, unrelated to areal space, and perishable (indeed, one of the very first things we ever learn about these early and impermanent boundary markers is that they

3 I make no pretension here to a full study; for more comprehensive attention to theory and detail, see, for example, the collections of essays edited by Osborne and VanValkenburgh 2013 and d’Alfonso and Rubinson 2021.

4 For an original take on this unique object, see Delnero 2017.

5 The fragmentary text (RIME 3/2 1.1.21) describes the borders of the fields of various gods. Excluding some long, broken sections, this includes the fields of the gods Numušda of Kiritab (Ex 1 i 13), Numušda of Apiak (Ex 1 ii 21), Šin of an unknown city (Ex 1 iv 21), and Lugal-marda of Marad (Ex 2 iv 30). The first two fields shared one contiguous boundary, but adjacency cannot be established for any other tracts.

6 For OB itineraries, see Goetze 1953 and Hallo 1964; on toponyms in various scholarly lists, Veldhuis 1997: 125 writes that “geographical names hardly function as a set...”

got ripped out all the time<sup>7</sup>). Even if we understand that “boundary stones” would have identified important points in the landscape, we have to admit that those with secure provenances were all found *within* cities and not standing out in their hinterlands at the supposed boundaries. The Early Dynastic Lagaš inscriptions imply that monuments like these measured off linear borders, but their text does not actually make reference to their location in relation to any other geographic point(s); they more or less float in undefined space, boundaries only in loose conceptual terms.<sup>8</sup>

5. There was little that was systematic about the points chosen to mark and describe the borders of early Mesopotamian states. In addition to the kinds of features already mentioned, boundaries were marked by towers, villages, fields, swamps, rivers, canals, and purely conventional and self-referential limits just called “the boundary of god/place {X}.” Especially given the protean character of shifting waterways in the lower alluvium, a reliance on such features points strongly towards boundaries as both improvised and constantly shifting.<sup>9</sup>
6. Despite much attention the thematic importance of state frontiers in the Lagaš-Umma “border war” story – which I have pointed out is the exception to early city-state competition, not the model<sup>10</sup> – *Grenzterminologien* are weakly and inconsistently attested prior to the MA/MB periods, when they gradually began to take on more extensive meanings. In the Old Babylonian period, for example, we have many words for “border” or “boundary,” but most of these refer to the edges of individual fields, streets, or buildings,<sup>11</sup> occasionally the outskirts of cities.<sup>12</sup> Two terms do indicate the edges of state control but mostly designate borderlands regions (*aḥītu*) or towns (*āl pāṭi*) rather than lines marking off territories between two political powers. This accords with the sense we get in Mari letters that various powers tried to fix their mutual borders at single points (e.g., Ḥaradum between Mari and Ešnunna, or Ḥit between Mari and Babylon), not with enclosing and linear borderlines. Only a few uses of *pāṭu* by itself in the OB refer to a geopolitical border, attested only at Mari. The term shows up only twice in the inscription of any OB king, and only to suggest vague extents of the kingdom, not a hard border.<sup>13</sup> Thus, even for a period best known for its interstate warfare, there was little expressed concern for boundaries as lines to defend, police, or use for any purpose of administration, taxation, or trade control (Richardson 2012). The uses of *pāṭu* to mean a state border show that the idea was conceptually available, but of limited use.
7. Relatedly (and combining two points made above), virtually all mensuration technologies related to land were focused on areas and edges of houses and fields. An enormous amount of administrative, legal, and even ritual<sup>14</sup> attention was paid to the specific measurement of the properties that belonged to households, not to political units. To my knowledge, no boundary of any Bronze Age field was ever identified as belonging to another polity.
8. There was little administrative or intelligence apparatus to police interstate borders and territories. This may

7 See E-anatum RIME 1 9.3.2: ii 5–6 (i<sub>3</sub>-bu<sub>x</sub> [PAD], “ripped”).

8 Described chiefly with the Sumerian verb *ki sur*, “to demarcate,” lit. to “divide off” (*sur*) a “place” (*ki*); also *im-dub*, “to divide off.” The sense that an identifiable border existed is given by the inscriptions’ repeated accusations that leaders of Umma had “crossed” or “transgressed” it (with *bal*). Enmetena in one inscription claims that Mesilim had “stretched out the measuring rope (eš<sub>2</sub>) on the field” (RIME 1 9.5.1 i 9–12) but uses the measurement to erect a single-point monument rather than a *borderline*. Jerry Cooper (1983: 33) – acknowledging that “only a small number [of these place names] can be identified with precision” – made an educated guess as to the location of the Lagaš-Umma border, tentatively identifying a “ca. 50–60 km” line between the Tigris and the Nun-canal.

9 Note the many concerns that boundary canals could be actively “shifted” (RIME 1 9.3.1 rev. v 2–3) or dried up (RIME 1 9.5.1. iv 30–33); cf. NB *suḥḥū* v., “to disarrange” a boundary.

10 Richardson 2012: 10–14. Note further that the meaning “boundary stone” for *narū* A is only attested from the Middle Babylonian period on and is only indicated by usage; strictly speaking, the Akkadian word just means “stone.” Cf. MA/MB *kudurru* A, from the verb *kadāru*.

11 Including (from CAD) *idu* A, *itū* A, *limītu*, *mišru* A (in OB), *nēru* B, *pilku* A (pl. only; cf. *palāku* A, only with fields), and *pūtu*. The term *mišru* A came to designate a state border beginning in the MA/MB and increasingly into the NA/NB; in the OB, however, the word only described the edges of fields. Similarly, the verb *nabalkutu*, “to cross (over),” only came to mean crossing territorial borders in SB/MB dialects; in OB times, at most it meant to scale the wall of someone’s house. OB *pulukku* only designated a kind of tool.

12 I.e., *aḥītu* (“outside” [a city]).

13 RIME 4 3.6.6: 9’ (Ḥammurabi, the *pāṭu* of Gutium) and 3.7.8: 5’–6’ (Samsuiluna, *ištu pāṭ* Gutium *adi pāṭ* Elam).

14 Richardson 2021a: esp. 45–47 and 50–51 (quoting Scott).

have begun to change by the time of first-millennium empires, when spies, lookouts, and watchposts were more systematically employed (see Dubovský 2006). But even if Bronze Age states had intimate knowledge of hinterlands and boundaries (already doubtful), they had little ability to surveil it. We know of a few terms for scouts (e.g., *āmīru*) and safe-conduct letters; at OB Mari, we know of mobile corps of *bazaḥātū*, “border guards,” who spied on enemies and seized fugitives. Omens were used to scry unseen movements in the landscape (Richardson 2022). But no set of documents, checkpoints, or other technologies existed to make border crossing a certifiably legal (or, therefore, illegal) act. Nor was there any way to establish the identities of anyone crossing a border, should they even have been enforceable to begin with. Various accusations in early inscriptions of boundary “crossing” or “transgression” were really political accusations.

9. What references we do have to frontiers in state letters or royal inscriptions suggest that they were often one-sided projections of the city-state doing the talking. This is certainly the case when Enmetena, Ur-Namma, or Ḫammurabi talk about borders. There is almost no evidence outside of the Mari letters for the mutual recognition of state boundaries prior to MA/MB times.
10. The documentation of interstate economic activity was focused on end-point transactions rather than transit points – on what happened where people bought and sold things, not where goods passed through borderlines. We do have some evidence about such things as caravan tolls, pass-through treaties, and smuggling (especially for the Old Assyrian trade), but the focus of most commercial texts is on sites of procurement and sale – at marketplaces, not frontiers with import/export controls.
11. There was virtually no legal attention paid to borders as such; laws like Ḫammurabi’s rarely ventured to imagine let alone attempt to adjudicate anything that happened beyond the urban environment (Richardson 2021b: esp. 46–52). A few laws were concerned with foreign jurisdictions for property sales, but nothing related to borders per se.
12. Our knowledge of provincial systems *inside* of major Mesopotamian states – i.e. of their internal territorialization – is very spotty. It would be easy to assemble the positive evidence we do have for a subset of departments and officers representing them. A rather long list of men called *šagina*, *ensi*<sub>2</sub>, *šāpiru*, *bēl pīḫāti*, etc. could be assembled for a variety of places in historical states, with an equally heterogeneous set of attested functions. But if we were to invert the exercise for the Sargonic, Ur III, Old Babylonian states, etc., and make a list of the places for which there are *no* attested governors – for powers *not* demonstrably exercised from evidence – we would arrive at a much longer list. A true inventory would show that the regulable units we sometimes imagine to make up the working insides of states are much more unattested than attested. This suggests forms of organization which were not really provincialized but made up of elite networks governing through household clientage rather than territorial authority.
13. Given the intersection of low rates of literacy and the largely textual fund of information about where places and borders were, there was an overall communicative barrier to making borders known to anyone who might cross them. Most places and borders begin by being known from only a very small number of sources, often texts beyond the access of the very people most likely to cross the lines. How were most Mesopotamians to *know* where those borders were?

This is all quite enough to make the main point, so I will stop beating a *sīsû mīti*. The arguments against the salience of frontiers are generalizing and all subject to qualification or exception; they will surprise least of all archaeologists familiar with the long and longstanding theoretical literature about territory and borders. The kinds of state boundary lines we find in our texts at most marked specific points or zones of extent, not the *shapes* of whole states; nor did they order any spaces theoretically enclosed within or between those points and zones; nor again did those boundaries express the relation of the states laying them down to the homologous shapes and territorial claims of neighboring states. Such borderlines conveyed no “calculative grasp of the material world” (to quote Stuart Elden’s elegant wording: Elden 2013: 325–327), constructing neither relations between states nor administrative legibility within them.

But what Scott would have done with these kinds of observations would not have been to stop and simply say, “See? Borders are not a useful concept,” but instead go on to ask: “What *does* the sense of all these caveats tell us about how states *were* thinking about and using geography?” If not in the ways we might expect of a state, how did territoriality work as a component of sovereign power?

There are some familiar points one could make. Yes, our evidence points to an intense focus on nodality rather than territory, networks of people and resources rather than oil-stains of controlled land. There is a real case to be made that territoriality did gradually emerge as a real infrastructural power, while notably also appearing as a concept from a very early point, long before it could be made efficacious. And there is much yet to mine on how local concerns for the borders of fields and houses *do* fall within the ambit of the political: something yet to be written about neighbors, factions, and squabbles about owned and occupied land as the actually important political questions for ancient cities.

But there is also a newer takeaway: if we take seriously the implications from nodality, clientage, and locality, what must be modeled more strenuously in future are the competing and collaborating relationships of state networks with *non*-state populations, resources, and places, quite possibly forming the majority footprint within the Mesopotamian alluvium. Early states did not merely compete and come into conflict with *each other* for finite assets but with a whole non-state sector which receded into the landscape, interacting with states on only occasional and conditional terms.

I will zoom in on point 3, about toponyms, to illustrate what I mean. Let me posit that the paradigm of few attestations for most toponyms suggests low levels of interaction between most places and the central states which give evidence for them (the vast majority of texts having been written, after all, in those cities). This hypothesis about low interactivity is a way of explaining the distribution of evidence that some Assyriologists disagree with. The sense of their objection, if I may characterize it, is that the attestation-frequency pattern mostly implies low *knowledge* on the part of modern scholars rather than low interaction in antiquity. If only we had more texts, they opine, or the right texts, we would know where these places were, what happened there, why they were important! On the contrary, I am impressed by the apparent paradox between few mentions of most places and the texts’ overall unconcern for the where-what-why. People writing cuneiform texts in virtually every case where a unique toponym is mentioned simply say “Go to X and collect my silver” (or what have you), without any expressed worries about how to pronounce the name of the town, how to get there, whether it “belonged” to the state, or whether it was dangerous to go there. We are looking at a world in which economic and administrative systems routinely interacted with places at *all* points of the sovereignty spectrum: a few places under direct control, followed by an ever-larger number of places with which they had regular, occasional, sparse, and rare interactions.<sup>15</sup> Despite this, the atmosphere of unconcern about geographic location suggests an immense amount of casual and everyday knowledge, *grosso modo*, about where places were.

These little-mentioned places were the clients yet to be recruited, the harvests yet to be taxed, the workers yet to be levied.<sup>16</sup> This is the “dark matter” of socio-economic life for early states, glowing like little lanterns of textualized order in a dimly lit landscape.<sup>17</sup> The paradigm needs structured documentation and theoretical attention on the textual side, both of which are achievable goals. Yes, we should abandon romantic ideas about great and powerful ancient states, jealously guarding and ever-expanding their frontiers and control of land. But we can swap that out for admiring a managerial mindset which was endlessly sophisticated and flexible when it came to recruiting sometime-clients, calving-off rents where they could, and knowing where the places of their world were – whether they controlled them or not – Jim’s “barbarians,” with their history yet to be written.

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15 One is tempted to follow the regression pattern and argue that one type of toponym would even outstrip the number of places attested only once: places never mentioned at all!

16 One hears a cynical version of the Yeats aphorism: “There are no strangers here, only friends you haven’t yet met.”

17 Richardson 2007: 21–23 with Fig. 2.1, a map inverting the traditional model of state control over productive areas, showing states to be have been discontinuous and (geographically) archipelagic entities.

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