Friederike Fless – Stefan Esders

Plenary Agenda Report for Research Group B-I-2

Fuzzy Borders

Members:
- Stefan Esders (History of Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages, Freie Universität Berlin)
- Friederike Fless (Classical Archaeology, Freie Universität Berlin)
- Jörg Gerber (History of Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages, Freie Universität Berlin)
- Silke Müth (Classical Archaeology, Freie Universität Berlin; DFG Network »Fokus Fortifikation«)
- Katja Moede (Classical Archaeology, Freie Universität Berlin)
- Stephan Ridder (History of Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages, Freie Universität Berlin)
- Peter Schneider (German Archaeological Institute [DAI], Architecture Department; DFG Network »Fokus Fortifikation«)

Abstract: The Research Group »Fuzzy Borders« investigates the diverse qualities of borders and boundaries in antiquity as well as corpuses of knowledge which are effective in shaping the spatial design of borders. Its primary focus is on border zones and on the kind of indistinct, fuzzy borderlines which become visible and describable only against the background of concrete forms of delimitation. Our research activities are divided into two project groups, the first concerned with the formation and linear definition of borders, for example in the form of city walls, the second concerned with their dissolution and with border zones. The group is affiliated through Silke Müth and Peter Schneider with the DFG network of younger researchers entitled »Fokus Fortifikation,« which is preoccupied with city walls and fortifications in the eastern Mediterranean region. Incorporated into Research Area B (»Mechanisms of Control and Social Spaces«), the project is designed to provide a foundation for an improved understanding of the organization of social groups and of states through an examination of their external borders. We are also interested, finally, in instances where definitions of external borders are renounced altogether and states are organized from the center toward outer margins, for example, with the ›edge‹ of a given territory remaining undefined. Investigated on the basis of archaeological finds and textual sources are transboundary social relationships, whose significance for the transfer of knowledge currently forms the substance of discussions within our research group.

Projects:

Project Area: *Fuzzy Borders*
- »Border Zones and Ethnos in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages« (Stefan Esders)
- »The Borders of Late Roman Syria« (Jörg Gerber)
- »The Roman Presence Outside of the Imperium Romanum – Alma Kermen« (Friederike Fless; excavation project in cooperation with the Ukrainian Academy Of Sciences, Simferopol Branch, Dr. Jurij Zaytsev)
- »Border Organization in the Eastern Merovingian Kingdom and Its Late Antique Foundations« (Stephan Ridder; dissertation project)

Project Area: *Borders and Boundaries*
- »Forms of the Delimitation and Marking of Space« (Katja Moede)
- »The Symbolic and Representative Functions of Ancient Fortifications« (Silke Müth)
- »The City Walls of the Roman Border Town of Zeugma on the Euphrates« (Friederike Fless, Silke Müth; excavation project in cooperation with the University of Ankara, Dr. Kutalmis Görkay)
- Application for the DFG network »Fokus Fortifikation« (Silke Müth, Peter Schneider)

Contents

1 Results

1.1 The Formation and Transformation of Space and Knowledge (Foundations)

In the projects of the Research Group »Fuzzy Borders,« the question of the formation and transformation of space and knowledge will be related to the borders of various forms of political organization, namely the poleis, the league of towns, and the empire. Emerging along political borders in a striking and spatially perceptible manner are specific claims to control and authority: political, military, legal, economic, fiscal, and in some circumstances, religious as well. In recent years, in dependence on the work of George Simmel, it has become customary to regard borders as manifestations of the social necessity for delimitation, ones capable, moreover, of assuming forms designed to configure space in highly divergent ways (SIMMEL 1992, 697). Considered in this way, the drawing of boundaries serves to solidify group identity and a sense of belonging while facilitating the desired homogenization of the community; political decision-makers, of course, play a substantial role in such proceedings. Borders, then, are sociopolitical entities which have been transformed into natural spaces, and serve to regulate transboundary traffic, communication, and the transfer of knowledge – ideally, moreover, in the interests of the power centers of the participating political formations (WHITTAKER 1994).

But borders are not exclusively social phenomena; instead, they tend to become materialized in physical definitions of space. They may be defined in terms of naturally occurring features, including mountain ranges or rivers, but also by boundary stones, sanctuaries, grave markings, and ramparts or towers. Accordingly, boundary phenomena by definition go beyond linear types to encompass multiple forms of complex border zones as well.

Effective in the interplay of borders as sociopolitical entities on one hand and as physical markings and formations on the other are highly divergent corpuses of knowledge. Involved as well may be ›specialized forms of knowledge,‹ as in the case of the Roman surveyors who demarcated and articulated borders and border zones in antiquity. Our task is to shed light on the diverse forms taken by the founding, development, and significance of such boundaries found on both sides of the borders of ancient societies.

At the center of the joint endeavor of our research group are three factors:
1. *The diverse forms of knowledge about borders.* In this context, it has proven useful to distinguish between pragmatic knowledge (empirical knowledge) and theoretical or academic knowledge, and to differentiate the spatial dimensions through which these forms of knowledge circulated (local, supraregional, empire-wide, transboundary).
2. *The social groups which supported this knowledge*, and who were responsible for its transmission. To be examined here are various forms of professionalism and specialization for example (military officers, informants, engineers, artisans), as well as the horizon and action radius of such carrier groups.
3. *The media and practices of memorization, visualization, and public dissemination of such knowledge.* Since pragmatic knowledge is little documented on the whole, significant here are not just instructional texts, but also the »discursive practices« (to resort to a Foucauldian term; cf. FOUCAULT 1973) found preserved in texts, monuments, and other remains.
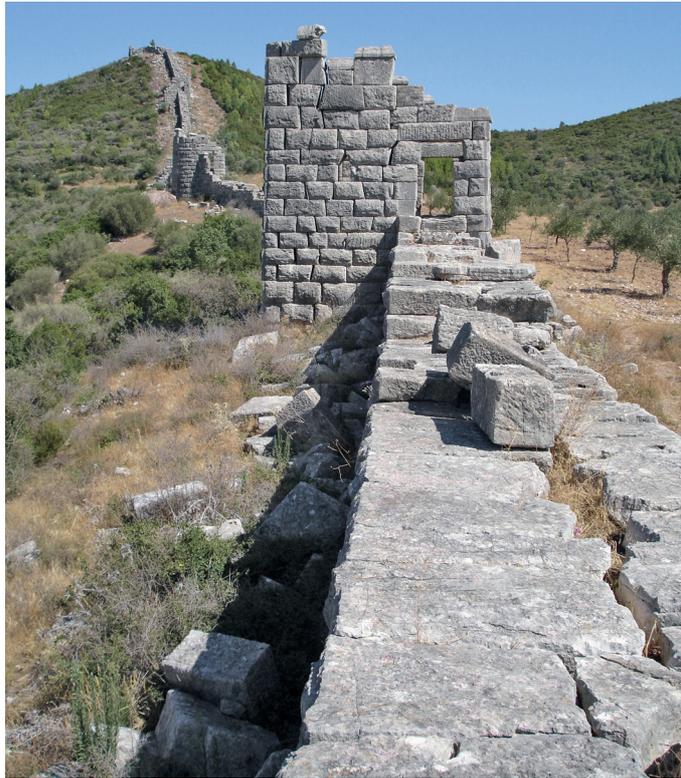
Fig. 1 | Messene city wall, north-western section (view from south).

1.2 Investigated Borders

If we take up the question: Which corpuses of knowledge are effective in demarcating, constructing, and commemorating borders? In the context of city walls, then emerging to begin with is the pragmatic level of artisanal knowledge that is related to the erection of fortifications. Manifested in the precise construction technique of walls and towers in the case of the town walls of Messene (Figs. 1 and 2), investigated by Silke Müth, is knowledge about the construction of assault machinery (or: offensive machinery), of the fortification technology used to resist sieges, as well as concerning the optimal topographical trace of fortifications (on the interplay between poliorcetic and fortification technology, see MARSDEN 1969–71; GARLAN 1974; OBER 1987, 569–604). It is also manifested,

Fig. 2 | Messene city wall, Arcadian Gate with a section running toward the east (view from west).

however, by the fact that this fortification doesn't show the dimensions of a wall only circumscribing the area of the settlement, but those of a ›Gelaendemauer‹ instead. This circumstance has consequences for the definition of space. So in Messene even graves were placed within the city walls(cf. MÜTH 2007, 227–234). This delimitation, consequently, is permeable, and – judged by the premises provided by archaeological handbooks, which specify that cemeteries are forbidden within town limits – constitutes a fuzzy border.

In Classical and Hellenistic times, it becomes evident – once we have moved beyond the nucleus of the town as defined by its surrounding walls in order to turn our attention toward the external boundaries of the polis – just how much energy was devoted to archiving knowledge concerning the boundaries of the polis, to rendering this knowledge publicly legible through inscriptions, and to securing it through institutions, thereby avoiding border conflicts. These efforts, however, do not necessarily correspond to the precise physical demarcation of an external border. As demonstrated by the investigations of Katja Moede, even in cases where the contours of a boundary line have been agreed upon firmly and in detail, the border nonetheless remains perceptually indistinct in the context of the concrete territory.

Found alongside these two forms of fuzziness affecting the borders of towns and the boundaries of poleis is the phenomenon of overlapping boundary demarcations. The most striking instance of this phenomenon is the city of Rome (Fig. 3).
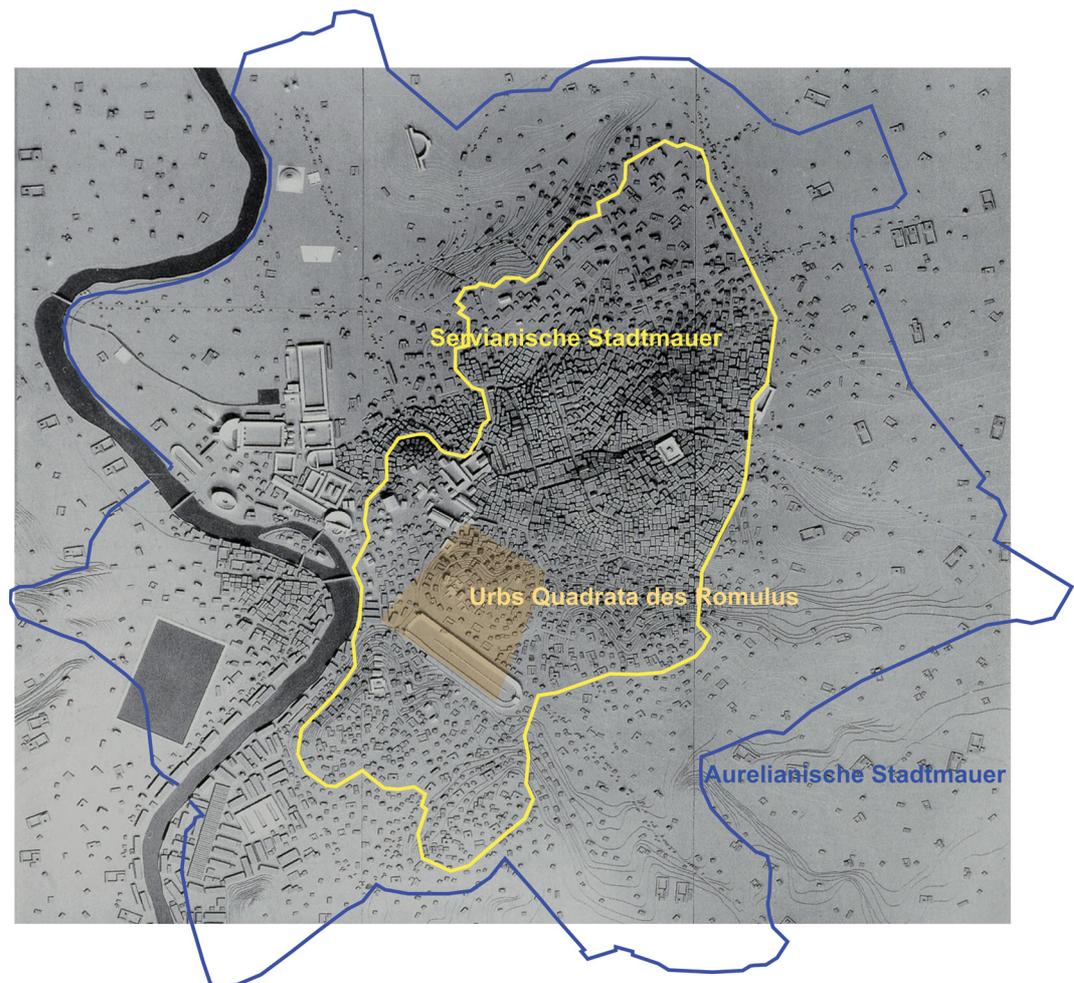

Fig. 3 | Model of Augustan Rome with city wall (cast collection of the Freie Universität Berlin).

Although Rome is today perceived as having a clear external boundary, one formed by the Aurelian Wall, this structure is in fact a later achievement, and was erected only in the 3rd century CE (MAYER 2005, 109–128; HASELBERGER 2007, 231–237). In particular during the later Republican period as well as during the early and mid Imperial eras, the limits of Rome were not clearly defined by walls; evident instead was a multiplicity of demarcations which were associated with specific functions that were called to mind by a variety of forms.

Information about the configuration of the Wall of Romulus was archived in the form of boundary stones, rituals, and the historiography of knowledge. During the Augustan period, on the other hand, knowledge about the configuration of the ruinous Servian Wall – which dates from the 4th century BCE – was revived by means of the erection of gates. A third border form, one present in the form of boundary stones, was the pomerium. The course of this continuously expanded sacred border was marked out by boundary stones. Evidently, the enlargement of the pomerium was rendered legible by the deliberate preservation of earlier boundary markings. This spectrum could be extended to include boundaries which designate the scope of official competencies or sacral spaces. Here, it is important to stress the simple fact that in Rome during the late Republican and early Imperial eras, the architecturally developed territory of the city did not coincide with any of these boundaries. This multiplicity of overlapping boundaries called for the services of lawyers, who were hard-pressed to bring about harmony between the contents and functions of these demarcated spaces, which transgressed clear boundaries, the built reality, and its sacred and administrative functions.

The fact that this multiplicity of boundaries cannot be reduced through an act of ›land reform,‹ so to speak, to a single, unambiguous border involves a number of different facets. The recollection of the *urbs quadrata* of Romulus and the reactivation of the Servian Wall during the Augustan period served to underscore the city's great age. The expansion of the pomerium as a demonstrative enlargement of the sphere of influence, the definition of the *urbs* as the territory circumscribed by the wall and of *Roma* as the territory demarcated by a closed area of settlement constituted parallels with the ideology of the *Imperium sine fine*.

At the margins of the Roman world, in Zeugma on the Euphrates, where a project on the city walls is currently being carried out, the results of this year's excavations have indicated that with the expansion of the Hellenistic town during the Roman period, the contours of the Hellenistic town walls were probably no longer actively recalled. Instead, the layout of the old city walls, and possibly the remains of their foundations, were used in order to conduct water conduits into the town from the cisterns on the Belkis Tepe.

Like the borders of towns, the external limits of the Imperium Romanum could also be endowed with highly divergent qualities. This was the case with Roman involvement in the Crimea, as shown by excavations in Alma Kermen. The digs rendered Roman military presence recognizable, although the Crimea – with the exception of three outposts on the coastline – never became part of the Imperium Romanum. Similar conclusions, nonetheless, can be drawn from textual sources. Around the turn of the millennium, the geographer Strabo defined the Euphrates as the linear boundary separating Rome from the Parthian Empire in the sense of a learned schematism. His text goes on to observe

that living in the region around the Euphrates are bands of nomadic Arabs – the »tent-dwellers,« as he refers to them – »some of whom are affiliated more closely with the Parthians, others more closely with the Romans« (Strabo, *Geographika* XVI 1.28; 2.1). Here, he has recourse to the level of pragmatic knowledge, which relativizes unambiguous legally recognized borders between states in favor of a model which renders these indistinct through the reciprocal interpenetration of imperial zones of influence. For Strabo, this perspective was bound up with cultural-geographical convictions. »The closer the nomads come to the Syrians,« he emphasizes in another passage, »the less wild and Arab they become, and the less they dwell in tents« (Strabo, *Geographika* XVI 2.11). Such ethnocentrism is reminiscent of the Caesar's characterizations of the Gauls and the Germans (ZEITLER 1986, 41–52), but at the same time alludes to the Roman strategy of domination which involved the use of buffer zones along borders through which attempts were made to exercise targeted influence on the ways of life of neighboring peoples (BRAUND 1984; HEATHER 2001, 15–68). Conceptions of borders, then, must be supplemented by an entire repertoire of deliberate (or established?) practices designed to account for and to secure border regions.

It has proven feasible in this context to distinguish in ideal-typical terms between two phases through which forms of knowledge pertaining to borders, their transmission and their realization diverged from one another during the Roman Imperial era.

In the early Imperial era, that is to say, when the ›classical‹ limes were formed, the transmission of empirical knowledge was dominated by the homogeneous functional elite of the Roman legion, which was operational throughout the empire: a soldier trained in Egypt could be unproblematically deployed in Gaul or Britannia. The centurions, who were transferred from one legion to the next as they advanced through their careers via promotion (and who were, unlike the commanders, not politicians, but exclusively military personnel), seem to have been the group ultimately responsible for the transmission of strategic, technical, and tactical knowledge. There existed, then, a corpus of supraregional empirical knowledge which could be applied anywhere *mutatis mutandis*, for the Roman army was organized uniformly throughout the empire, and assured its transmission. Technical knowledge, as applied in the construction of border infrastructures ensured a far-reaching uniformity of Roman border structures (i.e., in contrast to medieval castle construction, for example), can be traced back to the standardized and reliable transmissible of professional knowledge designed for the erection of functional military buildings and for the delimitation and establishment of colonies (we refer here only to the treatise *De munitionibus castrorum*, attributed to Hyginus, which was transmitted together with other texts concerning the conduction of land suveys, the so called *agrimensores* [GILLIVER 1993, 33–48]). The early imperial army, moreover, was a multifunctional cosmos which maintained its own painters, artisans, *gromatici* (surveyors), etc., which is to say that highly specialized forms of empirical knowledge were transmitted reliably within the legion (MACMULLEN 1984, 440–456).

During the late Imperial era, this situation changed. Consequential in particular was the division – affected by Diocletian and Constantine – of the army into the mobile legions of the *comitatenses* and the stationary, localized units of the *limitanei*. While in the case of the mobile units, the separation of military from civil administration led to the professionalization of the higher officer corps so that the higher military commanders now spent their entire careers in the army, local recruiting of soldiers in the case of the border units

and the process of their ›putting down roots‹ through the acquisition of land and the granting of permission to marry ushered in a process of sustained regionalization. This process was reinforced further by ›outsourcing‹ defensive and control tasks to ethnically defined federative units whose leaders received formal recognition and whose authority and command was strengthened by offices, titles, and access to weaponry and resources.

The decoupling of the border units from the control of the imperial army and the growing significance of federative entities created wholly different conditions for the transmission of border-related knowledge. Ammianus Marcellinus relates the story of a bookkeeper in the civil service of the *dux* of Mesopotamia whose high debts led him to defect to the Persians. Before leaving, he exploited his access to the accounts held in the office of the *dux* in order to gather information about the number, type, and stationing of the Roman troops, as well as concerning planned military operations, in addition to information about weaponry and the provisioning of the troops. Determined to remain inconspicuous, he purchased a piece of land in the border region and withdrew there with his family and friends. His advisor, an excellent swimmer, then established contacts with the satraps on the Persian side. This same advisor organized the transfer of loyalties which would eventually allow the defector to become one of the closest advisors to the Persian king Shapur (Ammianus Marcellinus, *Historia Romana* XVIII 5, 1–3).

Of course, there existed defectors during all periods of Roman history. Decisive here, nonetheless, are two factors: first of all, when a functionary of the border forces defected in late antiquity, he was able to take all of his knowledge about the troops stationed in the border region along with him (LEE 1993), and secondly, it was precisely the localized ›rootedness‹ of the border forces which facilitated such defections. The defector mentioned above was indigenous to the area where he was stationed, owned property and had a family there (which is to say, all of the things which were strictly forbidden to legionnaires of the early Imperial era), and it is revealing that he established contacts with the opposing side via local satraps before ultimately defecting to the Great King.

At the same time, the very factors which harbored enormous potential for danger in this instance were also – viewed in positive terms – preconditions for a highly successful transfer of knowledge. The greatest beneficiaries of such federative structures were profiteers in border regions who gained access to the material and conceptual resources of the Romans. Roman confederates such as the Arab Ghassanids established themselves in existing structures, for example fortifications, and converted them into fortified desert palaces (SHAHĪD 2002; FOWDEN 2004). The passage of Latin military terminology into the languages of confederates – for example the conversion of the Latin *castrum* into the Arabic *qasr* – illustrates this transfer of knowledge from another point of view. In the widest sense, »knowledge pertaining to border policies« also encompassed texts associated with the Christianization and church organizations of federative groups (ESDERS 2008a, 3–28). Both empirical and theoretical knowledge, then, came to be transmitted on very different levels – in the east to Arab confederates, in the west to Germanic ones, both of whom appropriated such knowledge in a variety of ways (ESDERS 2008b, 17–24). In both cases, this led in the medium term to the establishment and consolidation of new empires in Roman border territories whose vitality was to a considerable degree owed to their access to the knowledge resources of the Roman Imperium (POHL – WOOD – REIMITZ 2001). Thus, at the terminus of this process of knowledge transfer, finally, we find ourselves!

1.3 Questions and Perspectives

Instead of recapitulating our results, we would like to close by sketching a number of perspectives in the form of three salient points which have emerged through the activities of our research group, and which are suggestive of new thematic and methodological possibilities in the framework of this Excellence Cluster.

The first point concerns the nature of borders as such: it is not terribly helpful to regard borders primarily in terms of their linear determinations – not even in instances where they are clearly marked out by walls. Instead, it is a question of zones – border zones and zones of influence – within which we must investigate the relationships between a variety of social boundary demarcations and behavioral logics (ISAAC 1988, 125–147). From this perspective, the question arises: Which political, military, legal, social, economic, and religious boundary demarcations converge to constitute a single line in a given border zone, and which ones do not? Moreover, it is a question of exploring such phenomena of convergence and divergence in concrete instances.

Second, there is the question of empirical knowledge: here we find perhaps the greatest gain when it comes to framing an integrated problematic. How can empirical knowledge be reconstructed when – notwithstanding its significance – it only rarely attains the level of explicit textual fixation? Manifestly, on the basis of concrete archaeological and epigraphic remains, documentary papyri and ostraca, but also through operational schemes and instructions, often repetitive in structure, as transmitted by literary sources. For these reasons, it is our view that a history of empirical knowledge represents a very special challenge.

Arising thirdly are the following questions: How do theoretical and empirical forms of knowledge support one another in the shaping of borders and border zones? Through which larger territories does such knowledge circulate? As in the case of the gromatici, the Roman army itself during the Imperial era constitutes the object of a specific history of knowledge; here, it is a question of the circulation of knowledge within specific spaces, but also of the way in which such circulation is regulated. In cases involving border regions, we are dealing for the most part with local situations which do participate to some extent in the transmission of supraregional knowledge, but for which nonetheless local knowledge was always urgently necessary. In many respects, the question of the spatial dimensions of the circulation of knowledge appears to us more promising than the establishment of oppositional pairs like »center and periphery,« » state and local communities,« »Roman and barbarian,« et cetera. For slumbering in various areas of expertise are a variety of possibilities for reconstructing knowledge as a foundation of human action. A history of ancient forms of knowledge and their transmission has the potential to generate a heightened awareness of the logic of action in antique and post-antique societies, thereby dynamizing our examinations of such phenomena. The forms of established knowledge required in the broadest sense for military institutions and border policies, as well as by military personnel, politicians, technical specialists, scholars, etc., and encompassing the most diverse forms of theoretical and empirical knowledge constitute a sort of inventory of knowledge the history of whose operational reliability becomes explicable only through an understanding of the functionality of post-Roman political formations in both east and west.

2 Publications

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3 Additional Research and Third-party Funded Projects Associated with the Research Group

Third-party funded projects associated with this Research Group or based on its activities:

1. The Necropolis and Settlement of Alma Kernen, Crimea/Ukraine (Fritz Thyssen Stiftung). Direction: Prof. Dr. Friederike Fless.

2. Ak Kaya (Crimea) – Geoscientific Investigations of the Historic Landscape Reconstruction (research committee of the Freie Universität). Direction: Prof. Dr. Friederike Fless – Dr. Katja Moede – professorship of Prof. Dr. Britta Schütt – Ukrainian Academy of Sciences, Simferopol Branch.

3. Forms of a Roman Presence and Acculturation Processes on the Southwestern Crimea – Terra Sigillata from Alma Kernen (Fritz Thyssen Stiftung). Direction: Prof. Dr. Friederike Fless – originator: Ellen Kühnelt M.A.

4. The City Wall of Messene (Gerda Henkel Stiftung). Direction: Prof. Dr. Friederike Fless – Prof. Dr. Wolfram Hoepfner – Prof. Dr. Dorothée Sack (Technische Universität Berlin). Assistant: Dr. Silke Müth.

5. DFG Network »Fokus Fortifikation.« Direction: Dr. Silke Müth – Dr. Peter Schneider (Architectural Department of the German Archaeological Institute [DAI]).

Dissertation project of Stephan Ridder: »The Border Organization of the Eastern Frankish Empire and its Basis in Late Antiquity,« sponsored by an Elsa Neumann Stipend of the Federal State of Berlin (beginning 2010).

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5 Figure Source

Figs. 1 and 2: Photography Silke Müth • Fig. 3: Friederike Fless (caption), Photography Abguss-Sammlung Antiker Plastik of the Freie Universität Berlin.

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