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An Appraisal of Pharaonic Egyptian Boundary Studies

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Abstract: Exogenous and endogenous factors have encouraged increasing research on Pharaonic Egyptian territoriality, as well as the polity's ideological, social, cultural, economic, and political boundaries. Key themes include studies of Egyptian vocabulary related to boundaries, Pharaonic conceptions of space, frontier fortresses and other material correlates of boundaries, social identity and ethnicity, migration and mobility, cultural, religious, and economic networks, aesthetic divisions in Pharaonic imagery, and rites of passage or ritual practices demarcating social boundaries. Contemporary scholars employ a wide variety of theoretical approaches and have moved beyond the cultural-historical methods of early twentieth century scholars. Current scholarship foregrounds the importance of boundary maintenance and practice-based approaches. Collaborative, multi-scalar studies that compare cross-frontier policy within Egypt and with other polities offer a promising avenue for future research.

Keywords: boundary studies, borderscapes, Pharaonic Egypt, theories of practice, territoriality, border theory

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In recent decades, Pharaonic Egyptian boundaries and borderlands have emerged as promising research foci for both archaeologists and Egyptologists. In this piece, my aim is to trace the emergence and development of this sub-field over time, identify several current trends, and highlight promising avenues for future investigation. Pharaonic boundaries are complex subjects to study, not least because defining terminology even in the present can be challenging: boundary, border, frontier, and borderland are at times conflated. Bradley Parker[1]

[1] Parker 2006: 79–80.

identifies 'boundary' as an all-encompassing term that applies across a spectrum ranging from rigid borders to porous frontiers, but the ancient Egyptian lexemes *t3š* (a general word often translated as boundary, frontier, sphere of influence) and *ḏrw* (often translated as limit or end) distinguish between boundaries that can be changed by human action (*t3šw*) and those which cannot be altered (*ḏrww*).[2] Such distinctions reflect different concerns than modern approaches to boundaries, which often centre on permeability.[3] Beyond semantic challenges, boundary studies often require a degree of interdisciplinary engagement as perspectives on either side of a marked border or within a wider frontier must be considered – Egyptological biases and simplistic applications of core-periphery models have long warped interpretations of Pharaonic interactions with Kushite polities and other groups operating both in Nubia and Egypt itself.[4] Within Egyptology, Boundary studies have traditionally been anchored in discussions of political or administrative boundaries and territoriality, and these themes will inevitably occupy a prominent position in this review. However, recent studies of mobility[5] and nomadism,[6] constructions of ethnicity[7] or gender,[8] trade and economic networks,[9] cultural or religious identities,[10] and social practices[11] have made extremely impactful contributions to discussions of Pharaonic boundaries and should not be neglected. Indeed, much of this research highlights how political borders frequently do not map congruently onto social, cultural, economic, or environmental boundaries. The scope of this article means that Pharaonic perspectives will be privileged in the following pages, but many of these foundational works have emerged as scholars have conducted archaeological research in contact spaces or borderlands beyond the traditional ideological boundaries of Pharaonic Egypt.[12]

From an emic, Pharaonic, perspective, studies of ancient Egyptian political, administrative, sociocultural, economic, aesthetic, or demographic boundaries warrant study not just because the application of modern theoretical approaches can yield new insights, but because such boundaries mattered to the Egyptians themselves as they attempted to shape and navigate their world. Pharaonic Egyptian boundaries reward academic inquiry because they often reflect aspects of the values and priorities of the individuals or groups who established, imposed, and maintained them. Enclosure walls, frontier fortresses, or monumental gateways that circumscribe or striate space often betray a perception of insecurity on the part of those ordering their construction, otherwise the boundary itself would not

[2] Hornung 1981: 393; 1989: 81.
[3] Siegel 2022: 7.
[4] Näser 2021: 32–38; see also Smith 2003: 58–60.
[5] For example, the collected studies in Mynářová, Bertolini, Zangani (Eds) 2024; Priglinger 2019.
[6] Cooper 2022; Bourgeois, Crépy, Gatto 2024.
[7] Smith 2003; 2018; Moreno García 2018; Liszka 2025.
[8] Matić 2021.
[9] Moreno García 2017; 2023; 2024.
[10] Moers 2015; Bader 2021; Candelora 2023a.
[11] Jiménez Meroño 2024 details, for example, the use of social exclusion in Pharaonic Egypt.
[12] For example, Török 2008; 2009. See also Liverani 1990 and 2001 (especially 17–76) for foundational works discussing boundaries in the wider Near Eastern world.

need to be marked so ostentatiously.[13] In other instances, the assertion of particular styles or elements in various material cultural traditions reflects the agency and self-confidence of individuals as they express elements of their social identity.[14] Particularly in the case of clearly delineated physical boundaries or self-consciously conspicuous sociocultural choices, these border-making efforts are often intended to communicate a message – and archaeologists and Egyptologists are increasingly attentive to questions of context, authorship, and audience when thinking through the meaning of various kinds of Pharaonic boundaries.

From the vantage point of royal or elite inscriptions and monumental architecture, ancient Egypt appears as an extraordinarily bounded world. Environmentally, the 'black land' of *kmt* was demarcated by the fertile alluvial silts of the Nile Valley and Nile Delta, circumscribed by the Eastern and Western Deserts, the Mediterranean Sea, and the Nile's First Cataract – environmental factors that ideologically defined the core of the Pharaonic state;[15] boundary stelae seemingly defined inter-polity boundaries and at times even individual plots of land;[16] monumental enclosure walls limned funerary monuments, temples, and at times even entire settlements to the extent that Barry Kemp once described the Pharaonic affinity for them as a kind of 'habit of mind';[17] as John Baines has observed, conventions of decorum constrained aesthetic and social choices in the realm of art, architecture, and personal behaviour.[18] Aesthetically, the division of paintings or reliefs into registers of action is one of the hallmarks of Pharaonic art,[19] and the theme of *m3ʿt* (order, cosmic justice) in contrast to *izfet* (chaos) is easily identifiable in many of these images.[20] Administrative documents categorise social classes, often flattening social, cultural, or ethnic distinctions.[21] However, re-evaluations of various elements of the textual corpus and especially archaeological evidence have done much to revise, problematise, or blur some of these more rigid boundaries, allow insight into less elite-centric perspectives, and at times illuminate alternative boundary-making practices or even resistance to royal or elite impositions. Just as in the present day, more nebulous boundaries inevitably emerge when scholars grapple with the complex realities of daily practice rather than idealised bureaucratic or ideological descriptions.[22] Antonio Loprieno and Stuart Tyson Smith foreground just such distinctions when contrasting *topos* and *mimesis* in relation to the representation of foreigners in ancient Egyptian narratives and imagery.[23]

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[13] Siegel 2024: 439–442.

[14] De Souza 2020: 14–17.

[15] Shaw 1993.

[16] Vogel 2011.

[17] Kemp *et al*. 2004: 284.

[18] Baines 2023: 74–76.

[19] Davis 1976: 404–405.

[20] Smith 1994. For a different interpretation of *m3ʿt*, see: Bestock 2018: 34–35, 39 n. 48; Brémont 2018; Allon 2021: 23; Mourad 2024: 248–249.

[21] More generally, see Kóthay 2013. For specific examples of Egyptian bureaucrats flattening sociocultural distinctions, see Liszka 2023.

[22] This is the subject of numerous studies discussed in Amstutz *et al*. 2015. For a Nubian context, see de Souza 2024: 117–122.

[23] Loprieno 1988; Smith 2003.

Just as there is no unified 'border theory' followed by political scientists, geographers, or anthropologists working on similar themes in other locations or time periods,[24] archaeologists and Egyptologists researching Pharaonic political, social, economic, cultural, spiritual, or environmental boundaries deploy a variety of theoretical approaches. Current themes animating research on ancient Egyptian boundaries include attempts to understand Egyptian vocabulary for frontiers and borders, investigations of Pharaonic conceptions of space and territoriality, architectural and archaeological correlates of ancient Egyptian boundaries, efforts to study migration in Pharaonic contexts, analyses of cultural, religious, or economic networks in the ancient Egyptian world, explorations of ethnicity and social identities in ancient Egypt and Nubia, and evaluations of social divisions or aesthetic boundary-making identifiable in textual evidence or Pharaonic imagery. Work in many of these arenas has been revitalised by deeper investigations into the mechanics, ideological underpinnings, and lived realities of Egyptian imperialism in the Middle and New Kingdom through archaeological excavations in Pharaonic borderlands. Inevitably, this discussion is not exhaustive, and not all of these scholars conceptualise their research as being related to the study of Pharaonic boundaries. Rather, the aim here is to illuminate some of the most prominent themes enlivening current debates related to Pharaonic boundaries, borderlands, and borderscapes.

While the earliest scholars analysing Pharaonic boundaries adopted culture-historical methods that assumed neatly bounded cultural, social, and political groups, current research on Pharaonic boundaries foregrounds the practices or processes that create and maintain boundaries rather than viewing them as permanent, ahistorical features. Rather than static lines on the map, this scholarship characterises boundaries as dynamic, fluctuating, and socially mediated – a viewpoint that connects the work of scholars applying Pierre Bourdieu's[25] *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, the structuration theory of Anthony Giddens,[26] or Chiara Brambila's notion of the borderscape.[27] This article ends by suggesting several promising avenues for future research – namely, collaborative multi-scalar or cross-boundary approaches within Egypt – that build upon the detailed local or regional histories that have been the focus of previous studies. Furthermore, it is imperative for Egyptologists and archaeologists to bring the Pharaonic evidence into conversation with wider, comparative or interdisciplinary approaches to territoriality and border-making.

THE EMERGENCE OF PHARAONIC BOUNDARY STUDIES

Researchers have investigated Pharaonic interactions with neighbouring polities or the territorial administration of the ancient Egyptian state since the beginnings of the field, with publications focusing on frontier fortresses,[28] the Amarna boundary stelae,[29] and

[24] Paasi 2011: 18–19.

[25] Bourdieu 1977.

[26] Giddens 1984.

[27] Brambila 2015: 20–24. On notions of practice within Egyptology and Egyptian archaeology, see Bussmann, Baines 2022, and for practice-based approaches more generally, Kienlin, Bussmann 2022.

[28] Clarke 1916; Borchardt 1923.

[29] Davies 1908.

interconnections with Nubia, the Levant, and Mesopotamia.[30] The culture-history framework that dominated scholarly approaches to Egyptology and Egyptian archaeology during the nineteenth and the first half of the twentieth centuries assumed that archaeological or linguistic cultures were neatly bounded entities – boundaries were largely assumed, based on textual evidence or categorising material culture into particular groups, and not the object of separate studies.[31] When scholars discussed political boundaries, they assumed that ancient Egyptian borders resembled those of modern nation-states. In the mid-twentieth century, Wolfgang Helck[32] investigated boundaries more explicitly: his monograph on Egyptian nomes remains a valuable reference work on Pharaonic provincial administration, and his collection and analysis of numerous sources discussing the changing boundaries of ancient Egyptian provinces highlights the dynamic nature of Egyptian governance.[33] Boundaries (*Grenze*, *Grenzsicherung*) and boundary stones/stelae (*Grenzsteine*) were sufficiently significant to warrant separate entries within the *Lexikon der Ägyptologie*, though this might in part have been a result of their prominence within Helck's own research programme.[34]

Several structural factors have contributed to the increasing prominence of border studies within Egyptology and Nubiology in recent years. At the broadest level, these intellectual currents follow in the wake of fierce, ongoing debates about nationalism, globalisation, immigration, and border control that have animated public discourse in recent decades. This, in turn, has spurred anthropologists,[35] geographers,[36] sociologists,[37] historians,[38] and archaeologists[39] to investigate many of these themes both in the present and in the distant past. Within the confines of the academy, the so-called spatial turn in the humanities and social sciences reasserted the importance of place, space, and territoriality across numerous disciplines[40] including archaeology and Egyptology, and boundary studies form a small subset of this research.[41] Efforts to reckon with the colonial origins and pasts of archaeology,[42] Egyptology,[43] and Nubian studies,[44] as well as their ongoing effects in the present day, have pushed scholars to think more deeply about the deployment and effects of political, economic, and social power in these regions in antiquity; since marked boundaries are often

[30] For example, see W. Max Müller's contributions on 'Foreign Relations', in the early volumes of the *Egypt Exploration Fund's Archaeological Reports*: Müller 1899; Müller, Evans 1900.

[31] Trigger 2006: 311–313.

[32] Helck 1951.

[33] Helck 1974.

[34] *LÄ* II: 896–897. Other encyclopedias generally do not include distinct entries for boundaries or boundary stelae.

[35] Donnan, Wilson 1999; Wilson 2024.

[36] Agnew 1994; Newman 2006.

[37] Sassen 1996.

[38] Sahlins 1989.

[39] Lightfoot, Martinez 1995; Smith, M.L. 2005; Parker 2006; de León 2015.

[40] Warf, Arias 2009.

[41] For territoriality in archaeology, see VanValkenbergh, Osborne 2012.

[42] Dietler 2010; van Dommeln 2011.

[43] Gertzen 2020; Langer 2023.

[44] Lemos 2023.

among the more tangible results of such applications of social power, they have predictably emerged as a focus of research in conjunction with efforts to contextualise colonial legacies or decolonialise the fields of archaeology and Egyptology.

Endogenous changes within Egyptology and Egyptian archaeology have also encouraged interest in Pharaonic borders and boundary studies in recent decades. Excavations both within Egypt and in neighbouring countries have produced a wealth of archaeological evidence that diverges, sometimes sharply, from the textual record. As a result of the UNESCO salvage campaign prior to the construction of the Aswan High Dam, the Lower Nubian Nile Valley remains one of the better documented regions in the world from an archaeological standpoint. More recent archaeological excavations and surveys in other Pharaonic Egyptian borderlands have furnished a wealth of new data, much of which challenges historical or cultural narratives proffered by royal inscriptions. New tools and technology have changed the way that academics approach spatial questions. Digital recording methods, free or cheaply available Geographic Information Systems (GIS) software,[45] and access to high resolution satellite imagery have revolutionised the way archaeologists conduct regional and local surveys.[46] In sum, increased interest in Pharaonic boundaries is unsurprising given the wider intellectual milieu as well as more field-specific developments.

CURRENT RESEARCH THEMES

Erik Hornung's seminal article on *t3š* and *ḏrw* has influenced all subsequent investigations of Pharaonic vocabulary for boundary-making and their material correlates.[47] José Galán has deftly elaborated upon these efforts, foregrounding the role of the king in establishing and maintaining a *t3š* and emphasising how the term often indicated the Pharaonic sphere of influence rather than a specific border-line.[48] Anja Kootz has subsequently argued that we should conceive of *ḏrww* as akin to modern state-borders,[49] though other scholars have highlighted how these boundaries have shifted over time.[50] Boundary (*t3š*) stelae mark internal boundaries at Amarna,[51] and a select few examples delineating fields are attested archaeologically[52] or represented in tomb paintings.[53] Establishing internal boundaries is a focus of Khnumhotep II's autobiographical inscription,[54] and this theme occurs in Ahanakht's inscription at Deir el-Bersha as well.[55] Ostensibly inter-polity boundary stelae are known

[45] Menéndez-Marsh *et al*. 2023.
[46] Parcak 2009.
[47] Hornung 1981.
[48] Galán 1995; 1999.
[49] Kootz 2013: 44–48.
[50] Candelora 2023b.
[51] Murnane, van Siclen 1993.
[52] For example, Pelizaeus-Museum 5952. On Pharaonic methods of surveying fields more generally, see Arpagaus 2015.
[53] Parkinson 2008: 112–115, Figs 118–120.
[54] Simpson 2003: 418–424.
[55] Brovarski 1981: 18.

from Semna,[56] Uronarti,[57] and Kurgus,[58] together with additional examples in the northern Levant attested only in textual evidence,[59] have been the subject of extensive publications and analysis.[60] More recent studies have suggested that many of the *t3šw* established by Middle and New Kingdom pharaohs are not analogous to modern linear borders: indeed, they reflect alternate conceptions of territoriality and power that prioritised royal action and control over networks of people, commodities, and natural resources.[61]

Ancient Egyptian conceptions of space and territoriality have been a focus of research in recent years.[62] Drawing on the wealth of representational evidence from tomb or temple paintings or reliefs, sarcophagi, papyri, and ostraca, Egyptologists have investigated Pharaonic cartography,[63] representations of natural and manufactured environments,[64] and conceptual geographies of the cosmos and the netherworld.[65] Notions of territoriality in Pharaonic Egypt have, relatively speaking, only recently become a focus of academic inquiry. Juan Carlos Moreno García,[66] Émilie Martinet,[67] François Ghiringhelli,[68] and Jessica Tomkins[69] have used various (primarily textual) sources to reconstruct nuances of the territorial administration of Pharaonic Egypt. The work of Chris Eyre has shed considerable light on wider Pharaonic patterns of land holding and land tenure.[70] Recent scholarship has also re-evaluated the Egyptian state's relationship with marginal areas and nomadic, semi-nomadic, and non-agrarian groups, suggesting that these groups were important actors within the wider Pharaonic economy.[71] Silvia Lupo's[72] research introduced anthropological approaches to territoriality, highlighting the pragmatism of Pharaonic terminology. Modern cartographic principles have at times been applied uncritically to the ancient Egyptian world: introductory readers or cultural atlases[73] by necessity tend to depict territorial control as homogenous and total, but there is ample reason to question this even in periods of relative unity, to say nothing of the petty kings of the First, Second, and Third Intermediate

[56] Loeben 2001; Obsomer 2017.
[57] Janssen 1953.
[58] Davies 2017.
[59] *Urk.* IV: 697, 3–5.
[60] Galán 1995: 136–153; Vogel 2011.
[61] Siegel 2022: 25.
[62] Chaintrain, Winand 2018.
[63] O'Connor 2012.
[64] See for example Evans 2020 on Pharaonic relationships with the natural world; see also Chantrain 2024 on the use of sign N23 to denote claimed or conquered space.
[65] Zago 2022; Lucarelli 2024.
[66] Moreno García 1999; 2013.
[67] Martinet 2019.
[68] Ghiringhelli 2024.
[69] Tomkins 2018.
[70] Eyre 2013.
[71] Moreno García 2013.
[72] Lupo 2007.
[73] See, for example, the First Intermediate Period as depicted in Manley 1996: 43 or the Third Intermediate Period in Baines, Malek 2000: 47.

Periods. Outside of propagandistic later sources like *The Teaching for Merikare*,[74] there is scant evidence that suggests the Herakleopolitan kings uniformly exercised dominion over the entire Nile Delta. The authority of smaller dynasts like that of Nehesi during the Second Intermediate Period[75] or the Libyan kinglets of the Third Intermediate Period[76] warrant similar skepticism. In recent years, Danielle Candelora,[77] Federico Zangani,[78] and Oren Siegel[79] have all argued for the importance of escaping what John Agnew[80] described as the 'territorial trap' and the need to consider Pharaonic territoriality in less rigid terms. Following the network/nodal based approaches of archaeologists like Monica Smith,[81] these authors forcefully argue against assuming that linear territorial boundaries akin to those of modern nation-states should be applied to Pharaonic Egyptian political boundaries.

Archaeological research has been instrumental in overturning many of these assumptions, since it often underlines contrasts between quotidian realities and the ideologically freighted, idealised depictions of interactions between the Egyptian king (or his highest officials) and foreign peoples. Drawing on insights by Loprieno,[82] Smith's[83] research has been of outstanding importance in this regard. In some instances, archaeology also provides the opportunity to construct bottom-up narratives related to boundary-making or the resistance to official policies that are not accessible via textual evidence or pictorial representations in temples or elite tombs.[84] Archaeological missions investigating Middle and Late Bronze Age cemeteries and settlements in Pharaonic borderlands have proliferated in recent decades. Beyond individual sites, regional projects and more targeted research have investigated Pharaonic frontiers, borderscapes, or contact spaces in the Western Delta,[85] Eastern Delta,[86] the Western Desert oases,[87] Red Sea coast,[88] Sudanese Nubia,[89] and the First Cataract region.[90] The architectural mechanics of Pharaonic borders and boundary-making have long been a focus of Egyptologists and archaeologists – Egyptian frontier fortresses and the roads and riverways they police have been a focus of research

[74] Simpson 2003: 152–165, for an English translation as well as bibliographic references.

[75] Bietak 2023.

[76] Many inscriptions from this period are analysed and translated in Ritner 2009.

[77] Candelora 2023b: 237–238.

[78] Zangani 2022: 295–305.

[79] Siegel 2022: 2.

[80] Agnew 1994.

[81] Smith, M.L. 2005.

[82] Loprieno 1988.

[83] Smith 2003: 24–29; on boundaries more generally, see also Smith, S.T. 2005.

[84] Lemos 2024.

[85] Boussac *et al*. (Eds) 2023 covers Egypt's long western frontier; for general approaches, see Somaglino 2023, and for the north-western Delta more specifically, see Boussac, Redon 2023.

[86] Bietak 2010; Mourad 2015; Bietak 2017; Ksiezak 2021; Mourad 2021.

[87] Jeuthe 2023; Veprauskienė 2024.

[88] Tallet, Marouard 2016; Bard, Fattovich 2018; Tallet 2018; Goncalves 2022.

[89] Budka, Hassan, Ward 2025.

[90] Maria Carmela Gatto's Borderscape Project; see webpage *Borderscapeproject*. Aswan-Kom Ombo Archaeological Project, co-directed by Gatto and Antonio Curci; see webpage *Akapegypt*. See also Eller 2025 in this volume.

for over a century. Monographs by Carola Vogel,[91] Franck Monnier,[92] and Ellen Morris[93] provide excellent overviews and may be supplemented with recent reports detailing excavations at sites like Tell el-Borg,[94] Tell Hebua,[95] Tell el-Retaba,[96] Kom Firin,[97] Zawiyet Umm el-Rakham,[98] Tombos,[99] Amara West,[100] Uronarti,[101] and Shalfak.[102] Reanalysis of textual evidence related to these military installations has elucidated elements of Egyptian frontier administration and surveillance.[103]

The reconstruction of trading, religious, and cultural networks is another theme of recent studies of Pharaonic material that connect to wider discussions related to boundaries. Much of this research suggests greater contact, looser territorial administration, and more extensive trade than earlier scholarship had assumed.[104] Influencing, if not outright controlling, lucrative Eastern Mediterranean trade networks centered at city-states along the Levantine coast was a key aim of Pharaonic rulers during the New Kingdom,[105] and there is evidence suggesting that trade within ancient Egypt itself was a prominent economic driver fostering increased development of the Nile Delta over the *longue durée*.[106] A wider elite culture expressed through diplomatic correspondence like the Amarna letters and ritual gifts conveying themes of fertility, abundance, and hunting connected leaders across the Eastern Mediterranean.[107] Tracing these linkages and breaks further emphasises the need for alternate conceptions of territoriality in the Egyptian world.[108]

Boundary studies are often implicated in discussions of migration and mobility, and this has become a renewed focus of research as archaeologists and Egyptologists better understand archaeological evidence that might inform nomadic or sedentary lifeways,[109] reassess textual evidence related to forced deportations,[110] travel,[111] and trade.[112] Scientific

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[91] Vogel 2004.
[92] Monnier 2010.
[93] Morris 2005.
[94] Hoffmeier (Ed.) 2014.
[95] Abd el-Maksoud, el-Alim 2023.
[96] See Hudec *et al*. (Eds) 2023 for a preliminary report on recent seasons including defensive structures of the late New Kingdom.
[97] Spencer 2008; 2014.
[98] Snape 2023.
[99] Smith, Buzon 2018.
[100] Spencer 2017.
[101] Knoblauch, Bestock 2013; Bestock, Knoblauch 2020.
[102] Näser *et al*. 2017.
[103] Kraemer, Liszka 2016; Liszka, Kraemer 2016; de Magistris 2023; Somaglino 2024.
[104] Moreno García 2023: 59–61.
[105] Kilani 2020; Zangani 2022: 383–401; de Magistris 2024.
[106] Moreno García 2023: 59–61.
[107] Feldman 2006.
[108] Zangani 2022: 295–338.
[109] Bourgeois, Crépy, Gatto 2024.
[110] Langer 2021.
[111] Köpp-Junk 2015.
[112] Moreno García 2023.

techniques like isotope analyses promise even greater detail as archaeologists attempt to trace the movement of individuals.[113] This renewed interest in migration studies occurs as Egyptology attempts to move beyond its fraught early history in this field, as many early archaeologists and Egyptologists espoused approaches that emphasised exogenous cultural change and essentialised pernicious ideas about race and ethnicity based on nineteenth or early twentieth century assumptions.[114] Egypt's circumscribed environment created conditions that made it challenging for Pharaonic subjects to emigrate elsewhere and simplified efforts to monitor immigration to the Nile Valley or Nile Delta. Scholars like Robert Carneiro and Kathryn Bard,[115] Michael Mann,[116] and James C. Scott[117] have situated this capacity to control personnel and labour as an engine for the development of more complex polities in the lower Nile Valley. At times during the Pharaonic period, the movement of peoples was heavily policed (at least in theory), as documented in the Semna dispatches[118] or the active efforts of the state to track down fugitives from labour service.[119] In a literary setting, Sinuhe's harrowing experience evading sentries in the north-eastern Delta after the regicide of Amenemhat I speaks to the active efforts of the state to control the movement of people and goods – indeed, this seems to have been more of a priority than holding land, in many instances.[120] Scholars have drawn productive parallels with more recent border policies, as when Bruce Williams[121] describes the Lower Nubian fortresses of the Middle Kingdom as 'a mudbrick curtain' or Morris's[122] analysis of how the Egyptians weaponised the deserts around them to better control the boundaries of the Pharaonic state.

Social boundaries, particularly those related to ethnicity and identity have also been a key focus of recent research. Fredrik Barth's[123] influential observation that the maintenance of ethnic boundaries frequently entails processes of social exclusion or incorporation suggest that boundary-making is a core part of these processes. However, it is frequently challenging and at times impossible to identify material correlates for these dynamic processes – as Kate Liszka[124] notes, there is a danger that ethnicity as currently used by Egyptologists may serve to obscure more than it clarifies, and it may well be more productive to reorient these discussions to elements of social identity in cases where scholars lack crucial information related to religious beliefs or understandings of common ancestry.

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[113] For strontium isotope analyses, see Buzon, Schrader, Bowen 2019; Stantis *et al*. 2020; for an analysis of dental non-metric traits, see Maraanen, Zakrzewski, Schutkowski 2022.

[114] Priglinger 2018.

[115] Bard, Carneiro 1989.

[116] Mann 1986: 114.

[117] Scott 2017: 208.

[118] Smither 1945; Kraemer, Liszka 2016.

[119] Hayes 1955.

[120] Simpson 2003: 55–56.

[121] Williams 1999: 449.

[122] Morris 2017.

[123] Barth 1969: 10.

[124] Liszka 2025: 21–24.

Smith[125] explores social identity and in Nubia using Bourdieu's concept of *habitus*,[126] drawing on understandings of communities of practice that situate individuals within a wider social field that influences the actions they might choose.[127] Especially in the colonial setting of Lower Nubia, recent scholarship has emphasised how Nubian elites asserted particular styles and deployed considerable agency when adopting, disregarding, or shunning elements of Pharaonic cultural practice, but these opportunities were not equally available to non-elites.[128] Stimulating efforts to understand communities of practice in Predynastic Egypt have been undertaken by Jade Bajeot when evaluating ceramic traditions at Tell el-Iswid[129] and Aswan.[130] In the realm of social and aesthetic boundaries, Baines[131] has applied the concept of decorum to describe a dynamic system of rules and conventions that not only constrained artistic and architectural options of Egyptian craftsmen and governed social behaviour – an approach that considers different categories of evidence but is in many ways comparable to other practice-oriented methods. Though social class remains a somewhat understudied topic within Egyptology, researchers have sought to better understand pharaonic administrative and literary categorisations of both Egyptians and foreign peoples in textual evidence.[132] Rites of passage in Egyptian lifeways are another subject of current research,[133] with scholars investigating boundaries between the living and the dead[134] as well as other methods to commemorate the passage from childhood to adolescence to adulthood.

Interrogations of Egyptian imperialism and the Pharaonic state's changing territorial ambitions have been a key driver of boundary studies in Egyptology. Wider studies of imperialism are also some of the only examples of scholarship that attempt to analyse Pharaonic boundary-making in a more comprehensive, or at least holistic sense, often comparing evidence from across various regions of the Egyptian empire.[135] The territorial and colonial strategies pursued by the Egyptians were tailored towards their immediate economic and strategic goals, and impacted considerably by the agency of Levantine and Nubian groups inhabiting the borderlands.[136] In seeking organising principles for New Kingdom Egypt's imperial ambitions beyond economic objectives,[137] Edward Bleiberg[138] suggests that broadening the boundaries (*swsḫ t3šw*) is the best analogue in the Egyptian

[125] Smith 2003: 17–19.
[126] Bourdieu 1977: 17–20, 72–95.
[127] For an example of this approach among Pan-Grave communities, see de Souza 2025.
[128] Lemos 2024: 85–86.
[129] Bajeot, Buchez 2022.
[130] Bajeot, Ownby, Gatto 2024.
[131] Baines 1990; 2023.
[132] Kóthay 2013; Driaux 2019.
[133] Marshall 2022: 159–169.
[134] Englund 1999.
[135] Morris 2005; 2018. For a rare, more general example, see Hornung 1989: 81–94. For comparison with boundaries beyond Egypt, see Langer 2018: 53–67.
[136] Morris 2018: 8–9.
[137] Smith 1991: Fig. 5 focuses on these economic motivations.
[138] Bleiberg 1984: 3.

language for imperialism. Other scholars have contrasted the Egyptian Nile Valley and Delta as a locus of *mꜣꜥt*, often translated as (cosmic) order, justice, or truth, and physical space, with exterior chaos (*izft*).[139] *mꜣꜥt* was not frequently represented beyond the Nile Delta and Nile Valley, suggesting that the Egyptians made a conceptual distinction between their homeland and some of their imperial holdings.[140] Some scholars have suggested that this approach can be related to notions of civilisation and barbarism and frontier spaces from other historical moments,[141] though others prefer to view *mꜣꜥt* through the lens of natural order and harmony.[142]

PRACTICE AND PROCESS RATHER THAN LINES ON A MAP

Despite the disparate research agendas related to Pharaonic boundary studies highlighted above, archaeologists and Egyptologists have increasingly embraced approaches to boundaries that emphasise the processual, dynamic, and negotiated nature of borders and frontiers. This theoretical orientation shifts the emphasis from defining where precisely borders should be situated in absolute space to the suite of practices, institutions, and mechanics that maintain them. John Baines's application of the concept of decorum and Smith's use of *habitus* as a tool to understand Nubian agency in colonial contexts are among the earliest and most successful examples of such theoretical applications to Egyptology or Egyptian/Nubian archaeology. More explicit engagement with relational approaches to borders advocated by geographers like Anssi Paasi,[143] notions of borderwork and maintenance highlighted by Chris Rumford,[144] and Brambila's[145] concept of the 'borderscape' have all found purchase within discussions of Pharaonic boundaries in recent years. As Brambila notes, borderscape is a multivalent term that indicates the connection of a boundary to wider sociospatial landscapes, but also highlights the concept of landscaping – that is to say, the processes that shape and influence the nature of the boundary itself.[146]

Earlier studies have laid the groundwork for interregional, diachronic, and interdisciplinary comparisons related to various Pharaonic boundaries. There is much room for comparison of borderlands and boundary-making within Egypt itself: given the different characteristics of their physical environments, the imperatives of managing Egypt's long western frontier present real contrasts with the comparatively narrow paths into the northeastern Delta from the Sinai Peninsula or the desert tracks and portage roads circumventing the Nile's First and Second cataracts. Such comparisons of boundary-making approaches can offer diachronic and synchronic insight into state capacity and coordination (or the lack

[139] Smith 1994; Xekalaki 2021: 3940.
[140] Tomkins, Thompson 2022: 400.
[141] Langer 2018: 64–67.
[142] Brémont 2018: 12–13, suggests that the chaotic nature vs orderly culture binary is unnecessarily reductive.
[143] Paasi 2011: 19–22.
[144] Rumford 2014: 22–38.
[145] Brambila 2015.
[146] Brambila 2015: 20–24.

thereof) across Pharaonic territory. The wealth of textual and archaeological data already analysed by scholars demonstrates that Pharaonic Egypt supplies numerous case studies that would enrich comparative historical discussions of boundaries. Although Egypt is regularly cited as one of the earliest and most durable territorial polities, it is rarely included in comparative analyses of territoriality or border studies.[147] Pharaonic evidence can also provide a corrective to contemporary narratives of territoriality that suggest ancient peoples simply did not conceive of linear boundaries, as if linear boundaries were an invention that emerged following the Treaty of Westphalia.[148] Just as scholars must be wary of transmuting modern assumptions about territoriality, ethnicity, and the state onto evidence from the ancient Egyptian world, we must also be careful to acknowledge Pharaonic ingenuity: plainly, the ancient Egyptians were capable of conceiving of linear boundaries, since these sometimes defined fields and potentially on occasion delimited parts of the Pharaonic polity from the surrounding world. Rather, the more fascinating point is that boundary-makers in Pharaonic Egypt frequently and deliberately chose not to conceptualise space, power, and territoriality in such rigidly linear terms.

CONCLUSIONS

Decades of excavations in Pharaonic borderlands near the margins of the Nile Delta, the Western Desert Oases, the Eastern and Western Deserts, Upper and Lower Nubia, the Marmarican coast, and the Levant has furnished data that can be productively compared with at various scales, across regions and even beyond Egypt itself. Studies of ancient Egyptian boundaries have increased dramatically as border studies have become a focus in other humanities and social science disciplines and increasingly prominent. Tracing the material correlates, visual representation, and textual descriptions of Pharaonic social and political boundaries yields insight into the priorities, values, and insecurities of those who elect to establish, maintain, or subvert such features. Boundaries are complex objects of study, and Egyptologists and archaeologists working on Pharaonic borderlands have increasingly sought to approach them holistically, integrating textual, visual, and material culture into their research programs. There are diverse approaches to boundary studies in Egyptology, but much current scholarship emphasises the fluctuating and dynamic nature of Pharaonic boundaries by studying the practices, processes, and institutions that shape them. Recent studies of political boundaries have emphasised the need to escape viewing Egyptian boundaries as rigid lines analogous to those of contemporary nation-states. Beyond the wealth of data contributed by ongoing archaeological missions and archival research, the nuanced application of ancient DNA, isotope analysis, and quantitative modelling offer real possibilities to learn more about the lives and bodily practices

[147] Elden 2013: 10–11, 21–52, begins the historical discussion of territoriality with ancient Greece.

[148] For example, Diener, Hagen 2024: 34–35. Even in the present, perfect enforcement of linear territorial boundaries is impossible and territorial control varies considerably across landscapes despite the efficiency of modern surveillance technology.

of individuals in borderlands – though this evidence in isolation proves little about wider questions related to socio-cultural or political identity. Though there are notable exceptions, there has been limited work comparing cross-boundary policy in Pharaonic Egypt, and this seems like an important way forward in future years. Historical discussions of boundary studies and territoriality would also profit from comparative studies highlighting Pharaonic approaches to border-making. Too often, discussions of territoriality, borders, and boundary-making in the ancient world are limited to classical Greece and Rome, ignoring the wealth of textual, archaeological, and pictorial evidence furnished by Egypt, Nubia, and the wider Near Eastern world.

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Table of contents