

Melammu  
Workshops and  
Monographs

8



## Shaping Boundaries

Ethnicity  
and Geography  
in the Eastern  
Mediterranean Area  
(First Millennium BC)

Proceedings of the 15<sup>th</sup> Melammu Workshop,  
Verona, 19–21 January 2022

Edited by Simonetta Ponchia  
and Luisa Prandi

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# Melammu Workshops and Monographs

Volume 8

Edited by

Sebastian Fink and Robert Rollinger

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Illustration on the cover: *An idea of border*. Monastery of Saint Simeon Stylites the  
Younger (Samandağ – Turkey) (photo S. Ponchia).

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To the Memory of Kurt Raaflaub  
(1941–2023)

## A Premise

This volume hosts the papers presented at the Conference *Shaping Boundaries. Ethnicity and geography in the Eastern Mediterranean area (First Millennium BC)*, held in Verona in January 2022. We initially planned the Conference as an in-presence event and then we turned it into a dual mode one on account of the travel restrictions imposed by Covid-19. Two-thirds of the speakers came to Verona and many friends and colleagues attended the sessions throughout *zoom*.

The theme of the Conference is the same of the *ShaBo* Project, which the University of Verona funded and we started developing in September 2019. *ShaBo* aimed to analyse a crucial period: the formation of Greek identity, the first one documented in the West, at the time of the contacts with the Near East during the First millennium BCE. More in detail, we examined the interactions between the Syro-Mesopotamian, Levantine and Aegean worlds that took place along the coastal region extending from Bosphorus to Syria and Lebanon.

We paid special attention to methodological issues and diverse approaches in the investigation of boundaries and borderlands. These can be interpreted as different kinds of geo-political, or socio-cultural lines of separation, but should also be interpreted by taking into account their fundamental functions of communication spaces, where new, mixed, or hybrid identities took shape over time. As such, we should investigate them by bearing in mind their specificities. This appears particularly important in consideration of the role that boundaries have in the perception of the past and the construction of memory.

The flow of data, which derive from recent and on-going researches, and the renewed methodological discussion, with special attention to comparative analysis, stimulate a reconsideration of these issues.

We also wanted to respond to an exhortation that scholars – especially Near Eastern scholars – have been expressing for a long time (albeit only intermittently due to the long-lasting separation between different disciplines and difficulties in mastering knowledge and skills belonging to different fields). That is to abandon one-sided perspectives, that are either Greek or Oriental, and undertake a truly comprehensive analysis and comparison of the documentation, focusing on the aspects connected to human presence and circulation, transmission of goods and ideas.

The members of the Project in Verona, Luisa Prandi and Simonetta Ponchia, together with the post-doc fellows Silvia Gabrieli and Fabrizio Gaetano, mainly focused on Anatolia. The first results of their research appeared as a *ShaBo* dossier on *Kaskal* 18 (2021), 297–391, dedicated to the memory of our external partner Federicomaria Muccioli (University of Bologna), who regrettably died in May 2020. Other external partners, Raija Mattila and Robert Rollinger, offered precious help in organising the Conference. Considering that topics such as contacts, interrelations, and cultural transmission are among the themes variously investigated by the Melammu Project, we are glad that our meeting could be included within that framework. We warmly thank Robert Rollinger and Sebastian Fink for hosting our Proceedings within the Melammu series.

The sequence of the papers in this volume mirrors the programme of the Conference. We suggested the friends and colleagues whom we invited as speakers to deal with the general topic by choosing one of the following perspectives:

- 1 Impact of empires on the definition and perception of boundaries
- 2 Construction of identity/ies (foundation myths, Literary and Artistic expressions *etc.*)
- 3 Archaeological sources in the Levant and southern Anatolia, and related methodological issues concerning the definition of identities.

We are glad that their proposals allowed us to shape a coherent programme, where an Achaemenid panel and a “Levantine” panel stand out. The first emphasises the crucial role played by the Persian Empire. The second partially fulfills the *ShaBo* project, by exploring an area that the members of its team had no time or energies to investigate in the first phase of the research. As many speakers share a focus on identity markers, we suggest the reader to assuming this perspective as the reading key of these Proceedings.

Without any ambition to draw definitive conclusions, but rather hoping to direct the reader’s attention and provide some useful suggestions for the future research, we would like to offer a few thoughts originated from attending the Conference and reading the articles submitted for the Proceedings.

- Regarding the formation of boundaries, we must start considering the existence of a basic difference between Near Eastern and Greek sources, as often experienced when adopting a comparative view. The first kind of sources mostly offer a more technical and/or concrete information, whereas the second one provides a more ideological and political interpretation of the events. Our sources are never specialistic treatises on boundaries formation (geographical or juridical), and quite often reveal a biased attitude. Moreover, Near Eastern sources show a variety of perspectives on different types of institutional and social systems, including statal and nomadic/gentilic polities, in which the definition and description of borders involve varying juridical and narrative points of view.

Yet this typological plurality and these differences should not limit a wide-ranging evaluation of the data, but rather stimulate a true methodological integration. Given the character of our sources, we did not privilege the terminological research, but rather more comprehensive interpretive schemes, taking into consideration more concrete elements such as toponyms, types of objects, or distance perceptions, which suggest a roughly illustrative idea of the world we want to better understand.

- Natural separators, like rivers, canyons and channels, lakes or mountains should not be taken as significant boundaries too easily. Likewise, the presence of different ethnic groups settled in the same territory should not always be considered a significant marker: applying ethnonyms to a country is a long-standing practice.
- Borderlands, *i.e.* dependent or semi-dependent polities at the borders of other states, subordinate regions, or buffer states are areas that developed their own characters, zones where communicating was easier or where identities merged. These situations make it difficult to define a clear-cut border line and alter the perception of a boundary. Furthermore, an uncertain separation line between different people may change because they have conflictual ambitions in the same area. For example, both the Persians and some Greek cities aimed to control the Straits and the North Aegean Sea. Before the age of the Persian wars, we can notice a long period of gradual and political/diplomatic appropriation.
- There were real boundaries and boundaries declared or claimed by a king or a city in their official propaganda. Greek sources recount many stories concerning migrations or displacements of people who have goals and duties, always according to an *interpretatio Graeca*. There is a strong connection between Greek identity and the formation of boundaries between Greek and non-Greek people in myths that were revised and reshaped over the centuries.
- Borderlands were the regions where Greek myths illustrating origins and connections englobe, combine and transform motifs of indigenous and oriental origin. Disentangling these threads can make us appreciate how they contributed to the transformation of cultures.
- The mythical cycle regarding Troy as well as almost all the other Greek epic cycles were instruments to reduce distances and to increase proximity between far-off communities. They represent cultural languages, working between Greek groups as well as between Greek and non-Greek populations.
- The role of the archaeological evidence appears pivotal in many case studies. However, what type of finds can be the best marker and improve our understanding of phenomena related to the shaping of boundaries?

In accordance with our goals, we have included different types of reflections and adopted various methodological approaches, also leaving space to some specula-

tions which may encourage further research. We hope that this volume can help to achieve a better understanding of the characteristics of the political/official or cultural/unofficial borders in the eastern Mediterranean regions, and also to identify the existence of other borders between Greeks and non-Greeks.

We also hope that the *ShaBo* project can highlight some of the (theoretical, practical, consequential) implications, typical of situations of conflict or balance between states/peoples. What is more, a better understanding of the past in such a complex area favours better interpretation of contemporary situations. These are the result of events similar to the ancient ones and are expected to give rise to similar circumstances. In this perspective, the correct comprehension of the historical “international” dynamics characterising the eastern Mediterranean basin, is also essential for correctly interpreting the current images and messages of cultural identity.

We thank again all the speakers as well as all the connected people in January 2022, also for their useful discussion after the presentations. The compliance with the deadlines by the contributors allowed us to have a suitable time for peer-reviewing and to succeed in publishing these Proceedings only a year and a half after the Conference.

Simonetta Ponchia  
Luisa Prandi