

Medieval Frontiers: Concepts and Practices

Review Number:

310

Publish date:

Saturday, 1 February, 2003

Editor:

David Abulafia

Nora Berend

ISBN:

754605221X

Date of Publication:

2002

Price:

£47.50

Pages:

306pp.

Publisher:

Ashgate

Place of Publication:

Aldershot

Reviewer:

Naomi Standen

Students of medieval frontiers spend much of their time explaining how the ambiguous and multiple boundaries they study were very different in many important respects from the normative and singular national borders we live with in the present day. *Medieval Frontiers* is the third recent collection in English on this subject. Like Robert Bartlett and Angus MacKay, eds, *Medieval Frontier Societies* (Clarendon; Oxford, 1989), the focus is on the external frontiers of (chiefly Latin) Christendom in the later middle ages, but here the range is wider, considering encounters with Muslims, pagans, nomads, Orthodox and unreformed Christians in the Iberian peninsula, Byzantium, the Crusader lands, the Crimea, the Baltic, the German East, the British Isles and the Atlantic Ocean. Like Daniel Power and Naomi Standen, eds, *Frontiers in Question: Eurasian Borderlands 700-1700* (Macmillan; Basingstoke, 1999), the issue is definitions of the frontier, but here there is a conscious effort to address the question from the point of view of medieval people themselves. For instance, what did medieval people see as frontiers (and what not as a frontier), what did they think frontiers were for, and how did descriptions of frontier interaction compare with the realities? All three collections necessarily end up providing many case studies of 'frontier societies' in action, even if that is not their explicit intention, and they are almost all militarised frontiers, even if this circumstance is not emphasised. Taken together, we are developing a progressively more complex and sophisticated picture of medieval European frontiers.

David Abulafia's extensive and learned introduction to this volume explores several different ways of approaching – defining – the frontier, including economic contrasts, language, the question of alien human bodies, and underlying political concepts. The chief issue for him is to understand the very different conceptual framework of the medieval world, with its different assumptions about power relations, the

nature of territorial control, overlordship and sovereignty. The chapters themselves address the 'outer edges of Christian Europe'. This has geographical connotations, but the real issue here is not borderlines but encounters, conceived primarily as confrontations – always with the potential for violence – between those of different religious persuasions. Given the well rehearsed problems with finding linear or 'national' borders with any great significance to medieval people, Abulafia is right that it makes a lot more sense to consider frontiers as sets of relationships. Since this can get extremely confusing, giving primacy to religion here provides an alternative framework of division and a point of orientation derived from the thought-world of contemporaries. These, then, are frontiers based on differences that were felt at the time, and ideally Abulafia would like to see medieval frontiers not just as sets of relationships in space but also as states of mind, made visible by the focus on how medieval people themselves thought about and responded – or not – to challenges to the known. He reminds us that the concept of frontiers exists chiefly for our benefit and that the phenomena analysed under this rubric would often have been categorised very differently by contemporaries.

The chapters themselves are grouped by region but do not obviously follow any other arrangement. Each reader will notice her own set of themes and connections between the papers, and I follow my own preoccupations in the organisation of what follows.

Case studies of particular frontier societies and borderlands are essential for comparative purposes, especially when they extend the range of our knowledge beyond the 'usual suspects' that received so much attention in *Medieval Frontier Societies*; that is, the British Isles, the Iberian peninsula, and the German East. By my count this book provides four such cases, all displaying successful interaction. Jonathan Riley-Smith ('Government and the indigenous in the Latin Kingdom of Jerusalem', pp. 121-31) believes Christians and Muslims found highly effective ways to live in peace, while Peter Edbury ('Latins and Greeks on Crusader Cyprus', pp. 133-42), taking a bleaker view of human nature, suggests Latins and Greeks on Cyprus only mixed because they were so conscious of their frontier position facing the Islamic lands. Edbury does not pursue this issue, but it would shed useful light on how Latins and Greeks understood their own situation and the frontier they were on.

Intermixing in the Crimea took place against the similar background of a strongly felt need to defend against the 'Tatar onslaught', but here the boundary is crossed. Michel Balard ('*Genuensis civitas in extremo Europae: Caffa from the fourteenth to the fifteenth century*', pp. 143-51) shows that Turks and Tatars were clearly part of the scenery, but were also suspected of adherence to the khans. Unfortunately Balard leaves me wondering how intergroup relations worked in this situation, and what brought Turks and Tatars to reside in Caffa in the first place, as well as puzzling over the meaning of 'the inorganic world of the Mongol steppes' (p. 143). Balard's categories are often insufficiently refined to catch the crucial details of the borderland. In particular the twofold opposition of 'Latin' and 'Oriental' obscures our vision of what, if any, distinctions were made by the Latins between Greeks, Armenians and – the third largest group in the city – Turks and Tatars. By contrast, Rasa Mažeika ('Granting power to enemy gods in the chronicles of the Baltic crusades', pp. 153-71) does try to work out how relationships developed across a frontier of war by describing a frontier of religion that was not exclusive. Here pagans propitiate Christ and Teutonic Knights are accused of practising pagan-style divination, even as both sides continue their adherence to their own beliefs. Whereas some cross-border relationships, antagonistic or otherwise, develop into a single society, here are two separate groups that nevertheless borrowed from each other. This helps to flesh out the continuum in the nature of frontier relationships, ranging from the single society quite common in the Middle Ages to the near-universal, hardline, mutual antagonism which this book helps to suggest is a distinctively modern phenomenon.

Two chapters provide empirically-based surveys of the theoretical issue of centres and spheres of influence versus linear borders. Dealing with the Crusader lands, Ronnie Ellenblum ('Were there borders and borderlines in the Middle Ages? The example of the Latin Kingdom of Jerusalem', pp. 105-19) discusses this question from a topographical viewpoint in which there are 'isolated alien centres in a heterogeneous space', defined by points and lines of clear demarcation between Frankish and Muslim worlds that yet all lie within Muslim territory. Like many frontier medievalists, he feels that centres make much better points of

reference than borders, and that conventional maps cannot adequately represent the situations that we so often find. Although Ellenblum does not map relationships of power and authority onto his spatial analysis, this has been done for other cases, producing networks of interrelation between people that have spatial effects, in contrast to the modern conception of a set of bounded spaces within and between which relationships between people are constrained. From an Asian perspective, I am increasingly struck by the similarities between these medieval European networks of power and authority in space – set out very clearly here – and the idea of *mandalas* in premodern Southeast Asia.⁽¹⁾ We perhaps know enough about frontiers in medieval Europe now for us to hazard the possibility that the most fruitful avenues of future enquiry will be attempts to diagram (rather than map) European medieval frontiers and to compare European experiences with others around the globe.

Ellenblum's description has a rather timeless quality, but Grzegorz Myśliwski ('Boundaries and men in Poland from the twelfth to the sixteenth century: the case of Masovia', pp. 217-37) describes a shift at the local level from a conception of boundaries which defined specific points in an amorphous mass – similar to Ellenblum's description above – to more, and more precise, definitions of boundaries around pieces of land. In Masovia something quite like a network or *mandala* is becoming much more territorial. Myśliwski's contribution is to detail some of the connections between this localised transformation and a parallel trend towards clearer demarcation of space by those higher up the social and political scale in Poland (and indeed Europe) as a whole. The point here is that boundaries are made, not given, and we see several examples of the importance of boundary markers as places where agreements, disputes and the changing nature of the frontier are worked out publicly.

Heading away from a strictly material approach, David Abulafia's chapter ('Neolithic meets medieval: first encounters in the Canary Islands', pp. 255-78) reminds us that medieval frontiers are as much imaginings as material processes. Petrarch refuses to allow that the Canary Islanders might have chosen their 'solitary' lifestyle and instead emphasises their 'animal quality', while Boccaccio essentially sees them as 'noble savages' living in a state of nature. Although Abulafia wants us to understand that Boccaccio's picture of Canarian society fits best with archaeological findings, his real point is that accounts of 'Others' tend to tell us more about the writer than they do about the subject. We see what we want to see and the cultural frontier is chiefly in our heads.

A major cultural frontier in medieval Europe was religion, and one distinctive contribution of this volume is its sustained emphasis on the specific workings of religious boundaries. Ann Christys ('Crossing the frontier of ninth-century Hispania', pp. 35-53) provides one of several chapters that reinforce the point that many of the religious divides of the medieval world are historiographical constructions which oversimplify the complex realities on the ground. In this case, a ninth-century Muslim frontier crosser is claimed by both Andalusian and Asturian propagandists as the client or vassal of their respective rulers, whereas he really maintained an autonomous position that made him alternately the enemy of both. For him, religious affiliation did not determine political allegiances, but chronicles from the eleventh century and later add a new sense of a religious division that reflects the circumstances of their own times. In the same vein, Kurt Villads Jensen ('The Blue Baltic border of Denmark in the High Middle Ages: Danes, Wends and Saxo Grammaticus', pp. 173-93) argues that around 1200 Saxo Grammaticus portrayed a rigid, uncrossable frontier between Danes and Wends as having existed for centuries, whereas there is strong evidence for intermixed settlements of Wends and Danes. Saxo's writing was a justification of contemporary Danish kings' expansionism, rather than an accurate reflection of past times.

Meanwhile, Nora Berend ('Hungary, 'the gate of Christendom'', pp. 195-215) looks more closely at frontier rhetoric itself. Berend argues persuasively that, following the Mongol invasion of Hungary in 1241-2, King Béla deliberately exaggerated both the importance of Hungary as the 'gate' of Christendom and its vulnerability to renewed Mongol attack, thereby strengthening his case for increasing royal authority at the Church's expense. Berend points to the parallel with the actions of the Iberian kings, and I would add that similar situations (though without the religious angle) arose repeatedly on the northern frontier of medieval China. In all these cases those with direct experience of the borderlands knew that raiding was a routine part of frontier life rather than a major threat, whereas those at the 'centre' were often not aware of this and so

developed fears that could be manipulated for local advantage. Berend points out that linear frontiers existed in conception long before they became realities on the ground, and that kings could make ‘conscious use of frontier rhetoric in the service of building royal power’.

Christys, Jensen and Berend all reinforce the point that highly selective interpretations regarding the nature of particular boundaries have been a standard feature of rulers’ ideologies since long before nineteenth-century nationalism was invented, but Berend presents the issue most clearly when she suggests that it was those at political centres who played a crucial role in creating the idea of the frontier, rather than (as Turner claimed) the playing out of the frontier process that gave definition to the centre. That historians of the American West are now saying this suggests an important continuity in uses of the frontier idea, but we must also remain aware of the differences. If the medieval period in Europe was one in which powerful claims to universal authority were increasingly challenged by localised rulers, then students of medieval European frontiers must keep in mind the relationships not just between frontiers and local centres, but also between both of these and the universal claims of the leaders of Christendom as a whole. Although medieval monarchs could readily deploy linear or territorial notions of their own frontiers, the most important concept remained that set of relationships radiating out from suzerains to vassals, rather than anything that laid claim to all within some geographical limit.

The changing relationships between those holding particular powers and those claiming universal authority in the medieval period raises the question of whether imperial frontiers were different from any other kind. Two chapters on Byzantium here suggest that while the practical workings of the empire’s frontiers bore many similarities to those of any other contemporary polity, conceptions of the frontier were able to be much more sophisticated and flexible because they rested upon an ideological apparatus that had persisted and evolved over many centuries. Catherine Holmes (‘Byzantium’s eastern frontier in the tenth and eleventh centuries’, pp. 83-104) reconsiders the conventional picture of Byzantine expansion in the light of new evidence, and finds that the eastern frontier was nothing like so rigid, linear or militarised as usually thought, but was instead another ‘patchwork of constantly shifting relationships’, with fiscal issues paramount. However, Holmes further suggests that Byzantine administrators always believed it would be possible to remilitarise the eastern frontier quickly, should the need have arisen, in accordance with theoretical statements like the *Escorial Taktikon* – already a venerable document – or treaty clauses normally honoured in the breach.

This notion that rhetoric might be transformed into reality is given greater force by Jonathan Shepherd’s chapter (‘Emperors and expansionism: from Rome to middle Byzantium’, pp. 55-82), which describes a mid-tenth century shift from a rhetoric of expansion towards actual expansion. In the dark days of the seventh to ninth centuries, imperial rhetoric emphasised claims to universal hegemony that connected Byzantium with the heyday of the Roman Empire. But as circumstances improved during the ninth and tenth centuries the empire ‘dusted off’ its rhetorical claims and began to put them into action, reasserting authority and building its military power. From the mid-tenth century expansionist rhetoric became increasingly territorial, perhaps because a large standing army sought activity for the troops and the rewards of campaigning. Possession of a pre-existing rhetoric, focused on the absence of frontiers, provided both the goal of expansion and its justification when the time was ripe. By contrast, those seeking to escape subordination to universalistic claims, like King Béla of Hungary, had both to invent justification for the authority they sought and define the limits they were willing to place upon it, with little direct precedent to guide them.

In Latin Europe the strongest claim to universal authority generally came from the papacy, which accordingly had to face its share of national challenges. Brendan Smith (‘The frontiers of church reform in the British Isles, 1170-1230’, pp. 239-53) argues that the papacy, in seeking to use reform to assert its universalist claim to control over the Church in the British Isles, was working against the ideas of national boundaries that rulers were busily developing in their quest for greater local authority. Smith tries to illustrate how this basic conflict was expressed at the frontiers between secular powers, secular and religious authorities, between and within ecclesiastical institutions, and between different peoples, and takes a rash of bishop murders to have been one striking result. Smith thus strays beyond relationships between power and spatial arrangements into the more abstract realm of cultural space and its divisions. This adds a whole new

level of complexity – perhaps more than one – to an already complex subject, and Smith raises many questions to which he cannot do justice in the space of a single chapter.

Overall this book consolidates and extends our understanding of medieval European frontiers, so where do we go from here? The authors naturally talk much about change, but it is striking that the shifts seem to be all in the same direction, towards clearer definition and greater rigidity. This of course fits the longterm pattern of increasing central authority at ‘national’ level, but it also suggests the need to complicate the big picture by considering cases where European frontiers became more fluid or less well defined. As the authors note more than once, differences are chosen not given, and frontiers only exist because of the workings of human agency. More studies of the dissipation of difference – and outside the one-sided analytical framework of acculturation – would be a welcome and much-needed reminder that humans can overcome their differences as well as dwelling upon them.

The decision here to focus on discussion of frontiers without lines and with military issues de-emphasised has opened up the subject most effectively. It has allowed the authors to focus on the idea of frontiers as sets of relationships or states of mind and in so doing to greatly enrich our understanding of how medieval frontiers worked and what they were. There is much food for thought here. Nevertheless it is striking how much the spatial and military issues still impinge. Ultimately all these relationships had to be conducted in some place or other, and the possibility of violence was ever-present. Accordingly, to me one way forward is indicated by those discussions that address directly the relationship between the ‘hard’ frontiers of defence and war, politics and spatial organisation on the one hand and the boundaries defined by religion, historiography, and everyday life on the other; those trying to trace the relationships between military circumstances and cultural interaction, between political and religious allegiances, and of course between spatial arrangements and everyday negotiations of perceived difference.

It may be that broader comparison is what is needed now. As a medieval Europeanist-turned-Asianist, I am struck by how much this is frontiers from the inside out; the same thing happens with China. Europe here is implicitly a cultural whole in contact with something – or several somethings – that are considered ultimately and fundamentally distinct from (Latin) Christendom, but the focus is almost entirely on the Christian side. This is understandable in many ways. The idea that Europe had Turnerian frontiers of expansion in the middle ages is a powerful organising principle of immense utility, and any volume that concentrates on contemporary views is bound to run into the problem that the two sides of the frontier are often the province of different academic disciplines requiring different sets of language skills. Nevertheless, it remains a problem that, for the most part, non-Latin ‘Others’ still largely lack definition. What we need to balance this book is a volume that collects the views of the immense variety of people on the other side of Christendom’s frontiers. Did Muslims, pagans, nomads and Orthodox Christians regard the frontiers they shared with western Christendom in the same way(s) that Latins did? There are hints of such concerns here, for instance in the pagans who propitiated Christ, but we need to flesh out our picture of what the people on the other side of these frontiers thought about them, and we need to do so at the same level of detail achieved in chapters like My?liwski’s on one region of Poland. Neighbouring groups of pagans presumably differed from each other as much as neighbouring Latins did, and certainly nomadic groups were not all the same. The Islamic world, like Christendom, experienced tensions between universalistic claims and bids for regional autonomy. The obstacle to exploring such issues in a sustained and systematic manner is, of course, those same disciplinary boundaries that have helped to frame one set of questions rather than another, and which frontier historians frequently complain about. So perhaps the only answer is a major rethink of the way historical study is organised in Britain!

The richness of the book’s contents unfortunately does not protect it from some technical gripes. While recognising that frontiers are not just about maps, nevertheless they are often helpful – and it is not compulsory to draw borderlines on them! I would have liked at least one map per chapter. Unfortunately very few publishers – as here – seem willing to redraw, so while the maps themselves are generally good, the reproductions are only just acceptable. In the same vein, the absence of analytical entries in the index reduces the utility of a very good book for the serious reader, and a bibliography would have helped. It is also a pity that the editors did not insist that English translations be provided for all quoted texts. This is a

serious book on the world of medieval Europe, but that need not mean that non-specialists – and particularly the comparative audience – should be excluded. Another irritation is the use of the generic ‘men’. It is easy enough to write ‘people’, and surely no-one now is insensitive to issues of gender? Finally, I am not quite sure what prompted the outburst on p. 6 (n. 12) regarding the romanisation of the name of China’s modern capital. While some writers in English may prefer to remain with ‘Peking’ because it is familiar (at least to older readers), there is nothing bizarre about replacing a colonial imposition with a more acceptable romanisation. As this book is at pains to show, it is important to take account of how people think about themselves, and since those who do not use Latin script to write their languages continue to romanise them entirely for our benefit (in airports, for instance), it is, if nothing else, simple courtesy to use the spellings that they suggest.

Of course, these points should not detract from the overall value of the book: it is timely, full of ideas, and in moving us beyond a predominantly national framework for the study of frontiers it reveals a wealth of relationships between different kinds of boundary that will keep us busy for some time to come.

Notes

1. The literature on this topic includes O.W. Wolters, *History, Culture, and Region in Southeast Asian Perspectives* (revised edn, Southeast Asia Program, Cornell University; Ithaca, 1999), esp. pp. 27-40, and two comparative volumes: Henri Claessen and Peter Skalnik, eds, *The Study of the State* (Mouton; The Hague, 1981) and Henri Claessen and Pieter van der Velde, eds, *Early State Dynamics* (Brill; Leiden, 1987).[Back to \(1\)](#)

Other reviews:

[2]

Source URL: <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/review/310#comment-0>

Links

[1] <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/item/1544>

[2] <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews>