

Chinese Walls around the World: Conference Report

Place: Department of History of Art, University of Vienna

Organisers: University of Vienna & University of Innsbruck

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Report By: Univ. -Ass. Alexandra Nachescu M.A.

The conference "Chinese Walls around the World" aimed to address wall-building as a recurring feature in human history. It was conceived in the context of contemporary political rhetoric frequently offering the building of walls as a simple solution for current major problems. Such suggestions usually ignore the experiences gained during earlier wall building enterprises of which the Chinese Great Wall is the most famous one.

We aimed through this event to provide a platform for comparative research on fortified boundaries throughout history. In order to facilitate discussion, we requested our speakers to address a common set of questions: the basic characteristics of the structures serving as the subject of each talk, and the rhetoric and ideology surrounding their erection, to the extent that these are recorded or can be reconstructed. Speakers were also asked to consider the impact (economic, social, military, cultural) of the erection of the walls considered, as well as the perception and interpretation of the wall from the outside and posterity.

Thursday 18th October

Prof. LUKAS NICKEL (Vienna) opened the first welcome address with a discussion of the increased prominence of wall construction in current discourse. He contrasted the current momentum in wall building projects such as Donald Trump's proposed border wall between the United States and Mexico with the Zeitgeist of 89' that revelled in the demolition of the Berlin Wall and the dismantling of border defences separating the Eastern Block from Western Europe. He carried on by tracking the growing number of constructed and planned solid border defences over the past few decades, and identified the re-emergence of such structures as a global phenomenon. Prof. Nickel emphasised the apparent disconnect between the popularity of border walls and the lack of reference or insight of the initiators of these projects to historical precedents, and suggested this was strong motivation for the conference participants to consider what lessons "can be learned from history".

Prof. ROBERT ROLLINGER (Innsbruck), the co-organiser of this conference, gave the second opening talk. Prof Rollinger brought up the fact that as late as 2007, Astrid Nunn referred to walled boundaries in Europe as being "no longer in step with the times", structures that are no longer relevant. He introduced the idea of walls as icons of protection that signal sovereign potency even when they fail as physical structures. Echoing Prof. Nickel, he referenced the modern ignorance of wall-building projects by past societies, whose intent to use walls as a "simple reaction to a complex problem" bears an uncanny resemblance to current rhetoric. After introducing the research questions sent to all speakers, he suggested two quotes as stimulus for discussion, one from Wendy Brown's *Walled States, Waning Sovereignty* referring to walls as a "*pharmakon* for waning sovereignty, worsening the problem they respond to", and one from a recent article by Kai Ruffing reminding that "Security structures communicate security without actually providing it."

Prof. GEBHARD SELZ (Vienna) opened the first panel with his talk on **“The MAR.TU wall of the Ur III period”**. At the end of the 3rd millennium, despite many centuries of intensive contacts between central Mesopotamia and the Semitic speaking people in the west, the last rulers of the so-called Ur III dynasty engaged in a huge wall-building project in order to prevent the intrusion of the West Semitic “Amorites” into the Mesopotamian heartland, the so-called MAR.TU or Amorite wall. Prof. Selz discussed the Amorite wall as an attempt of “cultural stereotyping”, that is the interconnection between physical and mental walls. He discussed the physical impact of the wall on the movement of the nomadic Amorites, as well as how documents such as the “The Marriage of MAR.TU.” reflect ambiguous attitudes towards the allegedly culturally inferior but militarily efficient Amorites.

Prof. ROBERT ROLLINGER (Innsbruck) returned for the second talk in the panel, on **“The Median Wall and Xenophon”**. He started by offering an outsider’s view of the fortifications between the Tigris and Euphrates by referring to received references to Median wall in Xenophon, Strabo and the Roman historian Ammianus among other sources. He reviewed attempts in modern scholarship to identify this “Median Wall” by referring to a number of different archaeological monuments and cuneiform inscriptions of Babylonian kings. Prof. Rollinger contrasted the previously mentioned Greek and Roman sources with the view resulting from the Babylonian inscriptions that saw the walls as monumental statements of sovereignty aiming to frame Babylon as a cosmic centre. As represented in the inscriptions, the walls were aiming to defend against an abstracted “Other” rather than a specific enemy.

The third talk was given by Prof. LUKAS NICKEL (Vienna), who discussed **“The Qin and Han Great Wall”**. His lecture started with a survey of wall building in China, beginning with the earliest demarcations through to early modern wall building projects, showing that wall building enjoyed periods of revival but also whole dynasties with little to no construction activity. After a discussion of Warring States period (475–221 BC) fortifications as territorial demarcations between proto-Chinese states, rather than defences against nomads, Prof Nickel honed in on the wall-building efforts of the First Emperor of China (259-210 BC). The Qin wall was contextualised in the rhetoric of the First Emperor, as reconstructed from his stele inscriptions, which conspicuously omit the northern walls among the lauded state building efforts of the Emperor. Prof. Nickel also considered the walls in the context of the broader military strategy regarding the Northern Frontier of the First Emperor.

In the second panel, Prof. NICOLA DI COSMO (Princeton) continued the focus on the Chinese walls with a talk on **“The Chinese Wall from a Nomadic Perspective.”** His paper questioned the interpretation of the Great Wall as an iconic element of Chinese civilization by exploring its meaning from the standpoint of the history of pastoral nomads. Prof. Di Cosmo focused on walls as focal points of the relationship between the Han Emperors and the Xiongnu confederacy whilst invoking further examples across Chinese history, including Mongolian and Manchu leaders using walls as negotiating points in dealing with their Chinese neighbours. Prof Di Cosmo considered the use of textual and archaeological sources, as well as climatic reconstruction to better understand the how the walls impacted pastoral economies and strengthened certain segments of the nomadic elites. He argues that the history of the steppes contributed to shaping and transforming the Wall from the Warring States period to the Ming dynasty in ways that have yet to be fully explored.

The last talk of the first day was given by Prof. KRZYSZTOF NAWOTKA (Wrocław) on **“The ‘Gates of Alexander’ and the Caucasian Wall of Derbent.”** His talk started with the notion of the Gate of Alexander as relating to two discreet realities: literary and archaeological. The paper first investigated the history of the surviving Derbent Defense Complex (DDC), identifying the three stages of its construction (pre-Sasanian, that of Yazdgird II and that of Khosrow Anushirvan, dated to 568 through a building inscription), and its broader role as a measure to control the movement of nomadic peoples between the Roman and Sasanian empire. Prof. Nawotka contrasted the possible

historical circumstances of the construction of the wall with the later literature on the walls, including the Hellenistic anecdotal tradition that ascribed the wall to Alexander the Great, and the Jewish eschatological story of Gog and Magog.

Prof. TIMOTHY TAYLOR (Vienna) provided the closing remarks of the first conference day, and chaired the ensuing discussion. He provided a summary of recurring approaches to walls that came up in the papers, including walls as structures that communicate safety, walls as instruments of economic control, walls as infrastructural projects that required the mobilisation of great masses of workers, and walls as responding to the need for internal control rather than external threat. He also introduced several theoretical approaches to walls as discussion points, including the relation of boundaries to common pool resource management theories, Gibsonian approaches to walls as physical frames for interactions that create habitus, as well as other materiality-based approaches to walls.

The notion of walls as a "defined edge implying the actuality of the centre" stirred particular interest in the final discussion. Another topic discussed was the place of walls in collective memory, in particular the apparently inexplicable absence of written records on certain monumental structures.

Friday 19th of October

Dr LAUREN MORRIS (Freiburg) opened the second day of the conference with a talk on "**The Iron Gate wall in Uzbekistan**". Dr Morris first surveyed the archaeological remains of the several layers of artificial fortifications found in the area of the Iron Gates, a naturally defensible portion of the road between Bactria and Sogdiana running through the Hissar Range. Once again, the role of the wall as a frontier mark between the sedentary and the nomadic world was discussed, with particular attention paid to the micro-ecologies of the region and their impact on nomadic people, the possible identities of these nomadic peoples, and the Kushan military hierarchy responsible for the construction and maintenance of this wall. The Iron Gate wall also served as a waypoint on the debate on the chronology of Hellenistic rule over northern Sogdiana, as well as discussion of economic and cultural links between northern Sogdiana and Bactria in the Hellenistic period, Kushan frontier management strategies, the alleged economic integration of northern Sogdiana into the Kushan Empire, and the cultural and political relationship between the Kushans and Kangju.

Prof. EBERHARD SAUER (Edinburgh) presented a paper written in collaboration with Jebrael Nokandeh & Hamid Omrani Rekavandi on "**The Wall of Gorgan**". Prof. Sauer's paper suggested the Gorgan Wall as a counterexample to the previously presented case studies, in that far from being a "signal of fading power", it effectively protected the empire's economic resources. The talk provided a thoroughgoing survey of archaeological remains of the wall and associated structures that suggested both the incredible scale and the great complexity of the Gorgan defence system. It included a 200km-wall and its c. 38 forts, including some of the largest fortresses of the ancient and medieval world, covering a combined area of c. 80ha and densely filled with military barracks. The construction and maintenance of the walls and forts involved digging long canals, channelling water to the construction sites via aqueducts, the erection of thousands of brick kilns etc. Architectural similarities between distant military structures within this defence system and the repeated presence of Sasanian kings on campaign in those areas suggest strongly that these structures were imperial initiatives. In lack of any existing textual sources mentioning these walls, Prof. Sauer's talk enabled the material remains to paint of a compelling picture of the Sasanian financial and military might that brought these structures into being.

The final talk of the second day was presented by Prof. DIRK RUPNOW (Innsbruck), who brought the conference back to one the first walls mentioned on the first day, "**The Berlin Wall**". The paper provided an overview of the structure of the Berlin Wall, delving into the different stages of its

construction and the different layers of defence it was composed of, as well as dwelling on the aesthetic effect of different parts of the wall, from both the East and the West side. It also presented both the discursive "prehistory" of the wall, as well as its reception in the later decades of its existence. Particular reference was made to the reception of the Berlin Wall in the artistic circles of the Federal Republic of Germany, with some artists treating the wall as a canvas, while others, such as Joseph Beuys and the noted architect Rem Koolhaas, regarded the wall as "heartbreakingly beautiful minimal art". Finally, the destruction of the wall was discussed, as well as the problem posed by the conspicuous absence of such a defining boundary for the cultural memory of the city of Berlin.

The closing discussion was chaired by Prof. SITTA VON REDEN (Freiburg). Prof. Von Reden brought up the implicit narratives present in diagrammatic representations of walls in popular and academic literature. The discussion honed in on the symbolic effect of walls such as the Berlin wall, as well as the historicity of walls and their interpretation.

After the conclusion of the talks, the speakers were invited on a tour of the historical city centre of Vienna with Prof. ANDREAS SCHWARCZ (Vienna). Prof. Schwarcz led the group around the areas of the centre matching the location of the Roman fortifications of Vindobona, illuminating how the features of the Roman garrison town left their mark on medieval and modern Vienna.

Saturday 20th October

Prof. KAI RUFFING (Kassel) opened the final day of the conference with a paper on "**Hadrian's Wall**". Prof. Ruffing argued that while the Wall in particular, as well as the Roman *limites* in general, were seen first and foremost in the elder research as a testimony of Roman defensive strategy, current scholarship present a much more complicated picture of the potential reasons for the construction of such physical barriers in the frontier zones of the Roman Empire. Prof. Ruffing's paper gave a brief overview of current debates on these structures, and posited Hadrian's Wall as a monument. The talk further contextualised the Wall among the efforts of self-staging of Roman emperors, in particular of the expression of the military virtue of Roman emperors through architectural means.

The last talk was given by Prof CHRISTOPH SCHÄFER (Trier) on "**the Rhine and Danube Limes**". The „wet Limes“ at the rivers Rhine and Danube gained in importance after the collapse of the Roman border defence in the Northern provinces of the Roman Empire, turning rivers into lines of defence. Prof. Schäfer's paper discussed the new types of vessels developed for riverine defence, and how the fixed and mobile elements of defence interacted. An important focus of the paper was the use of experimental archaeology as a methodology to be used in conjunction with archaeological source material to better understand the nautical technology of the Romans. Efforts led by Prof. Schäfer and his team to reconstruct Roman vessels were presented in the paper.

The concluding summary of the conference was given by Prof. BERT FRAGNER (Vienna). Prof. Fragner began by reminding of the theme of walls as instrument of both inclusion and exclusion, which had featured heavily throughout the conference. He also laid out other apparent contradictions, such as walls having the potential to be expensive projects actively leading to the decline of society, as well as potentially supporting regional economic structures, and creating societal structures through its presence. The notion of the "agency" of walls, as expanding beyond the will of their constructors and planners, was brought up and expanded upon in discussion. Prof. Fragner concluded with the urge to see walls not as isolated symbols, but to understand the system into which they are embedded.

Conference Overview

Thursday, October 18

10:00-10:15 **Welcome and Opening address** Lukas Nickel and Robert Rollinger

Panel 1, Panel Chair: Eberhard Sauer, Edinburgh

10:15-11:00 Gebhard Selz, Wien, **The Martu-Wall of the UR-III period**

11:15-12:00 Robert Rollinger, Innsbruck, **The Median Wall and Xenophon**

12:00-12:45 Lukas Nickel, Wien, **The Qin and Han Great Wall**

Panel 2 Chair: Christoph Schäfer, Trier

14:30-15:15 Nicola DiCosmo, Princeton, **The Chinese Wall from a Nomadic Perspective**

15:15-16:00 Krzysztof Nawotka, Wrocław, **The “Gates of Alexander” and the Caucasian Wall of Derbent**

16:15-17:15 **Discussion** - Timothy Taylor, Vienna

Friday, October 19

Panel 3 Chair: Lukas Nickel

9:00-9:45 Lauren Morris, Freiburg **The Iron Gate wall in Uzbekistan**

9:45-10:30 Eberhard Sauer et al., Edinburgh **The Wall of Gorgan**

11:00-11:45 Dirk Rupnow, Innsbruck **The Berlin Wall**

11:45-12:30 **Discussion** - Sitta von Reden, Freiburg

afternoon:

Excursion: **Roman Vienna** with Andreas Schwarcz, Vienna

Saturday, October 20

Panel 4 Chair: Robert Rollinger

9:30-10:15 Kai Ruffing, Kassel **The Hadrian's Wall**

10:15-11:00 Christoph Schäfer, Trier **The Rhine and Danube Limes**

11:15-12:15 **Concluding Remarks and Final discussion** - Bert Fragner, Vienna