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Benjamin Isaac

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THE MEANING OF THE TERMS *LIMES* AND *LIMITANEI**

By BENJAMIN ISAAC

It is a commonplace of modern scholarship that the Roman Imperial Army in the frontier areas was organized in *limes*-systems: fortifications linked by roads along a fixed boundary, marked in many, but not all, parts of the empire by a river or an artificial obstacle: indeed, the term *limes* is often used as though it were self-explanatory.¹ The term is certainly used in ancient sources; thus while the literature may furnish only fragmentary information on the army and its activities along the border, it does at least apparently provide us with a name to which to link the material remains. Over the past four decades conferences on Roman frontier studies have regularly been held, often under the title '*Limes Congress*'.

It was when the study of army organization in the frontier areas developed in the nineteenth century that the term *limes* came to be accepted as referring to a system of defence in use along the border of the empire from the first century onward. Mommsen was, it seems, the first to attempt to define the meaning of the term,² or, if not the first, certainly the most influential. Although his theory was not universally accepted,³ it is generally taken for granted that the term indicates permanent defensive structures or a formal military and administrative organization. The relevant entry in P-W states without hesitation that under the Empire the term *limes* came to signify a hermetically closed border.⁴ Or one could cite an influential book on the Roman army: 'The conception of a system of forts and supply bases, with planned communications, belongs entirely to the Empire. The idea that there was a controllable limit to the extension of Roman authority was first enunciated by Augustus. The adequate protection of the frontier areas, in the face of the movements and pressure of barbarian peoples, became an increasing preoccupation of succeeding emperors'.⁵ Modern studies do not hesitate to describe as a *limes* any set of Roman forts encountered in a frontier-zone. Syme wrote in 1936: 'This was the term which soon came to be applied to each and all of the frontiers of the Empire ... The essential of a *limes*, then, is a road with watch-towers or forts along it'.⁶

Since the term is so widely used by historians and archaeologists it is obviously important to know what we mean by it ourselves, and more important still to have a clear idea of how the Romans used it. Theories invariably start from the presumed meaning of the term in antiquity. It is particularly important to consider whether the notion of 'defence against barbarians' is as closely associated with the word *limes* as is generally supposed. This paper therefore attempts to trace the use of *limes* in ancient texts following a roughly chronological order. It will be argued that the common translation of the term as 'defended border' is incorrect for every period. Moreover, since our common view of the nature of the units of *limitanei* in the late empire derives directly from the accepted meaning of the term *limes*, a discussion of the former term will also follow (pp. 139-46).

* I am grateful for advice and comments to Glen Bowersock, Averil Cameron, Tony Honoré, John Mann and Fergus Millar.

¹ Most of the literary and epigraphical sources cited here are listed by Forni, *Dizionario Epigrafico* IV, 2, s.v. *limes*, 1074 ff. (1959) and in *TLL* VII, 2, fasc. ix, p. 1415; see also Fabricius, *RE* XIII, s.v. It is possible that I have missed inscriptions published after 1959, after which perusal of *L'Année épigraphique* had to suffice; the term *limes* appears frequently there in the notes but only twice in the texts themselves: *AE* 1964, 197; 1967, 555, both boundary stones.

² Th. Mommsen, 'Der Begriff des Limes', *Gesammelte Schriften* v (1908), 456-64.

³ See below, p. 130.

⁴ Fabricius, *RE* XIII, 572-5.

⁵ G. Webster, *The Roman Imperial Army* (1979), 46; see further Forni's definition, op. cit. (n. 1), 1080: 'Nel

significato di "frontiera fortificata e stesa a difesa dell'impero romano", in senso molto lato e per niente affatto corrispondente all'idea moderna di confine come linea ideale contrassegnata da cippi o altro ...'. Usually, however, it is considered unnecessary to explain what the term means, either in ancient sources or as used in modern studies.

⁶ R. Syme, *CAH* XI (1936), 182 f. Hence M. P. Speidel writes in *Studien zu den Militärgrenzen Roms* III, 13. *Internationaler Limeskongress, Aalen 1983, Vorträge* (1986), 657, of the forts on the eastern shore of the Black Sea: 'While one is certainly justified to call this well defined sector of the Roman frontier the *limes Ponticus*, from a strategic point of view it may be better to speak of it as the Caucasus frontier'. In a note Speidel refers to V.A. Lefkinadze, *Pontijski Limes, Drevnei Historij* (1969), 75-93, though he points out that neither term is attested.

I. MEANINGS OF THE TERM *LIMES*

In the republican period and in the works of Cicero and Caesar the normal terms to denote 'the boundary of the empire' were *finēs* and *termini*. In the early imperial period, *limes* is used as follows:

A. *Military Road*

1. Velleius II, 120 (Tiberius in A.D. 10):

arma infert quae arcuisse pater et patria contenti erant; penetrat interius, aperit limites, vastat agros, urit domos, fundit obvios ...

He attacked the enemy whom his father and country would have been content to hold in check; he penetrated farther inland, opened up roads, destroyed fields, burned houses, routed those in his way ...

Tiberius constructed military roads in enemy territory during a campaign of conquest in difficult terrain. 'Aperit' is used frequently to indicate road-construction.⁷

2. Tacitus, *Ann.* I, 50 (Germanicus in A.D. 14):

at Romanus agmine propero silvam Caesiam limitemque a Tiberio coeptum scindit, castra in limite locat, frontem ac tergum vallo, latera concaedibus munitus.

But the Roman commander, in a forced march, passed through the Caesian forest, opening up a road which Tiberius first constructed [or: 'which Tiberius had begun to construct'] and placed his camp on the road, fortifying its front and rear with an earthen wall, the flanks with a palisade.

Here the term *limes* refers to one of the structures mentioned in (1). Germanicus, in A.D. 14, used a military road constructed by Tiberius in A.D. 10. He 'cut' a road through the forest. It has been objected that 'scindit' cannot be used in this sense or that the *zeugma* which results is too harsh.⁸ It is suggested that Germanicus crossed a fortified line constructed in enemy territory 'designed to mark off and defend territory to which Rome laid claim'. But it is not possible to mark off and defend what has not even been conquered.⁹ Suggestions like these ignore the realities of war in antiquity. 'Scindit' evokes the image of a road constructed through a heavily forested area where safe movement and communications are the primary concern of an attacking force.

3. *Ann.* II, 7 (Germanicus in A.D. 16):

et cuncta inter castellum Alisonem ac Rhenum novis limitibus aggeribusque permunita.

All the land between the fort of Aliso and the Rhine was now completely secured with new military roads and causeways.

The plural makes it clear that this was a system of military roads constructed throughout the region, to allow movement of army units in newly invaded land, not a single fortified line meant to prevent foreigners from entering a peaceful area. The term *aggeres* is explained in another passage of Tacitus: in A.D. 15 Germanicus sent Caecina ahead, 'ut occulta saltuum scrutaretur pontesque et aggeres umido paludum et fallacibus campis imponeret' ('to explore unknown forests and to construct bridges

⁷ Cf. Florus II, 27: Drusus (also in Germany) 'invisum atque inaccessum in id tempus Hercynium saltum patefecit'. 'Aperuit et stravit' is found on milestones; see below, p. 131.

⁸ Cf. F. R. D. Goodyear, *The Annals of Tacitus* I

(1972), pp. 315-17. Cf. Statius, *Silvae* IV, 3, 41: 'rescindere limites' (of the Via Domitiana); Lucretius II, 406: 'rescindere vias'.

⁹ See the remarks by A. Oxé, *Bjß* 114 (1906), 128.

and causeways over humid swamps and treacherous fields').¹⁰ These are military roads constructed in marsh-land on embankments, just as *limites* are military roads built through woodland. Dio LVI, 19, 1 relates that the troops of Quintilius Varus in A.D. 9 suffered even before the Germans attacked, because they had to fell trees, build roads and construct bridges where required. The essential difference between this campaign and the others was that Varus' troops had to prepare the roads as the army as a whole was advancing in enemy territory. Normally such engineering activities are undertaken by units preceding the main body of troops, which can then march quickly to their destination.

4. Frontinus, *Strat.* 1, 3, 10:

Imperator Caesar Domitianus Augustus, cum Germani more suo e saltibus et obscuris latebris subinde impugnarent nostros tutumque regressum in profunda silvarum haberent, limitibus per centum viginti milia passuum non mutavit tantum statum belli, sed et subiecit dicioni suae hostes, quorum refugia nudaverat limitibus ... actis.

When the Germans according to their custom continuously attacked our forces from their forests and unknown hiding places and would have a safe retreat into the depths of the woods, the emperor Caesar Domitian Augustus, with the aid of a hundred and twenty miles of military roads, not merely changed the course of the war, but subjected the enemies whose refuges he made accessible with the roads which he constructed.

The situation is similar to that in (1). The construction of military roads penetrating enemy territory enables the Roman troops to move safely.¹¹

5. Tacitus, *Germ.* 29, 4, on the Agri Decumates:

levissimus quisque Gallorum et inopia audax dubiae possessionis solum occupavere; mox limite acto promotisque praesidiis sinus imperii et pars provinciae habentur.

The most useless Gauls, made audacious by poverty, occupied these lands of precarious ownership; subsequently a road was constructed, garrisons were moved forward and they are now reckoned an outlying recess of the empire and part of the province.

The reference is to the same campaign as in (4) and may be taken to indicate the same strategy. Garrisons linked by a system of military roads consolidated the conquest of the region. The term *limes* here has no connection with border or frontier defence.¹²

Passages (1)–(5) derive from first- and early second-century sources and refer to four first-century campaigns in Germany. All describe the same strategy of making difficult terrain accessible for the Roman army by constructing roads. The word *limes* here does not mean 'boundary' or 'fortified line' and the context is one of conquest, not defence.¹³ The Romans, when campaigning across the Rhine, will have been

¹⁰ *Ann.* 1, 61, 2. See also the 'aggeres et pontes' constructed during the campaign against the Frisians, IV, 73, 2.

¹¹ For the interpretation of this passage see below, n. 14, with Syme, *CAH* XI, 162 f. H. Schönberger, *JRS* 59 (1969), 159, strangely reverted to the assumption that Frontinus meant to say that lateral barriers were constructed. See further F. Millar, *Britannia* 13 (1982), 14.

¹² Cf. J. D. C. Anderson, *Tacitus, Germania* (1938), ad loc., p. 149: '*Limitem agere* is one of the technical expressions for driving such a road ...'. See also Virgil, *Aen.* x, 513: 'proxima quaeque metit gladio latumque per agmen ardens limitem agit ferro' ('he made his way through the enemy ranks').

¹³ See further Oxé, art. cit. (n. 9), 99–133, a study more often cited than read. See in particular the

conclusions at 121 f.: 'Nur zuweilen ... übernimmt der Limes die Funktion der Grenze ... der Limes selbst ist nie ein gefestigter Weg, geschweige denn eine Befestigung mit Palisaden oder Wall mit Graben ... Zum schluss mag nur noch betont werden, dass dem reinen Begriff des Limes die man ihm oft angedichtet hat, völlig fremd sind: Grenze, Befestigung, Querweg'. These passages are similarly interpreted by Fabricius, op. cit. (n. 4), 572–5. However, in the discussion which follows, Fabricius ignores the conclusions to be drawn from his own interpretation of the sources. Similarly Forni, op. cit. (n. 1), 1079; A. Piganiol, *Quintus Congregus Internationalis Limitis Romani Studiosorum* (1963), 119–22. Mommsen, op. cit. (n. 2), 459, misinterpreted all these passages in an effort to define the term on the basis of surveyors' vocabulary.

careful not to repeat the mistakes which had led to the 'clades Variana'; indeed, Dio makes it clear that insufficient preparatory care for communications in forests and marsh-land was one of the causes of the disaster.¹⁴ It must be noted that these were not paved Roman roads marked with milestones, but tracks cut through forests. Strangely, perhaps, there are no instances of *limes* used in this sense in later sources; no obvious explanation presents itself, apart from the relative scarcity of descriptions of offensive warfare in well-wooded country.

6. At least one (fragmentary) inscription seems to use the term *limes* in the sense of military road, *CIL* III, 3157 (cf. 8663; 14239/4) of A.D. 179:

Val(erius) Val(ens) v[et(eranus)] ex (centurione) limite[m] pub(licum) praeclus(um) ... aperuit.

Valerius Valens, veteran and ex-centurion opened up the public way which was inaccessible.

B. Boundary

1. Tacitus, *Agr.* 41, 2:

nec iam de limite imperii et ripa, sed de hiberniis legionum et possessione dubitatum.

It was no longer the land- and river-boundaries of the empire, but the winter quarters of the legions and the ownership of territories which were in danger.

Here Tacitus uses the word in a wholly different sense: 'the land boundary of the empire', as opposed to *ripa*, 'river boundary'. This is not a military technical term,¹⁵ but derives from surveyors' vocabulary.¹⁶

2. SHA, *vita Hadr.* 12:

in plurimis locis, in quibus barbari non fluminibus sed limitibus dividuntur, stipitibus magnis in modum muralis saepis funditus iactis atque conexis barbaros separavit.

In many areas where the barbarians are separated [from the empire] not by rivers but by land-boundaries he [sc. Hadrian] shut them off with high stakes planted deep in the earth and fastened together so as to form a palisade.

Although we cannot be certain that the SHA reflects second-century terminology,¹⁷ it is clear that the word *limites* is used here in the same sense as in the previous example. It has indeed been claimed that this is an instance of the meaning 'fortified boundary', but the reference is rather to a land-boundary which was subsequently reinforced with a palisade. From the wording it is clear that it was called *limes* before Hadrian built a permanent structure to mark it as such. Further, a clear distinction is made between river- and land-boundaries: only the latter are called *limites*. Nor, one may add, is any mention made of forts or other military installations. (Cf. below, C. 6.)

¹⁴ See n. 4 above. Note also Vegetius' observations on the dangers of marching on a narrow road: 'melius est praecedere cum securibus ac dolabris milites et cum labore aperire vias' ('it is preferable that soldiers lead the way with hatches and pickaxes and laboriously open up roads') (III, 6).

¹⁵ Cf. Siculus Flaccus, *Grom.* 163, 24: 'Territoria inter civitates, id est municipia et colonias et praefecturas, alia fluminibus finiuntur, alia summis montium

iugis ac devergiis aquarum alia etiam lapidibus positae praesignibus, qui a privatorum terminorum forma differunt; alia etiam inter binas colonias limitibus perpetuis derigentur'. Here a continuously demarcated boundary is meant as opposed to boundary stones set at intervals.

¹⁶ It is curious that Mommsen does not cite this passage (see n. 13).

¹⁷ Forni, op. cit. (n. 1).

3. *Itinerarium Antonini* (O. Cuntz, *Itineraria Romana* I, (1929))

(a) p. 71, 464:

Iter Britanniarum ... A limite, id est a vallo, Praetorio.¹⁸

The itinerary in Britain ... From the boundary, that is from the wall, to the Praetorium.

(b) p. 16, 111:

Item a Capua Equo Tutico ubi Campania limitem habet.

Also, from Capua to E.T. where the boundary of Campania is.

(c) p. 10, 73:

Item iter quod limitem Tripolitanum per Turrem Tamalleni a Tacapes Lepti Magna ducit.

The boundary (*limes*) of the province of Britain serves as *caput viae*; by way of explanation ('id est') it is added that the border was marked by the wall. In other words, the boundary is described as 'the wall'; that does not mean, however, that *limes* means anything but provincial boundary. It may be noted that the Wall is never referred to as *limes* in inscriptions, but always as *vallum*—e.g. *RIB* 2034; 2200; 2205. It is of interest to note that the same source uses the word for a boundary within Italy (that of Campania), where, of course, no defence system existed in this period. This usage then reflects third-century terminology.¹⁹

4. *ILS* 451, *Acta Arv.*, 11 August A.D. 213:

[The Emperor] per limitem Raetiae ad hostes extirpandos barbarorum [sc. terram vel sim.] introiturus est ...

The Emperor is about to cross the border of Raetia into barbarian [lands] in order to destroy the enemy.²⁰

5. R. G. Goodchild and J. B. Ward Perkins, *JRS* 39 (1949), 91 (*AE* 1950, 128), A.D. 244–6:

[The Emperor Philip and his son] regionem limi[tis Ten]theitani partitam et [eius] viam incursib[us] barba[ro]rum constituto novo centenatio [—] prae[cl]useru[nt] ...²¹

The inscription is badly mutilated, but it seems sufficiently clear that it refers to 'the border region of Tentheos and the road through it(?) which were closed(?) to barbarian raids'. While the reference is obviously to military activity, there is nothing to suggest that the term *limes* means more than simply 'boundary' (or, possibly, 'borderland').

6. *CIL* VIII, 22765 (*ILS* 8923), A.D. 262/3:

[The Emperor Gallienus] castra coh(ortis) viii Fidae opportuno loco a solo instituit operantibus fortissimis militibus suis ex limite Tripolitano.

(The Emperor Gallienus) established a new fort of the cohort VIII Fida on a suitable site through the toil of his bravest soldiers from the *limes* of Tripolitania.

¹⁸ For discussion see A. L. F. Rivet and Colin Smith, *The Place-Names of Roman Britain* (1979), 154–6.

¹⁹ See *TLL*, s.v., for a few additional cases where *limes* is clearly used to mean the boundary of the empire.

²⁰ G. W. Bowersock doubts whether in Latin *crossing* the border would be expressed by *per* and wonders whether *limes* could mean 'borderland' in the present

passage. This is possible, but perhaps support for my rendering may be found in Caes., *BG* III, 26: 'Hostes undique circumventi desperatis omnibus rebus se per munitiones deicere et fuga salutem petere intenderunt'.

²¹ For discussion see J. F. Matthews in R. Goodburn and P. Bartholomew (eds), *Aspects of the Notitia Dignitatum* (1976), 157–86, esp. 170 f. For the meaning of *centenarium* see R. P. Duncan-Jones, *Chiron* 8 (1978), 548, 552–6.

We have here two third-century inscriptions which use the term *limes* to indicate the imperial boundary. Again, (6) cannot support the claim the *limes* refers to military works or organization. In inscriptions *limes* is always geographically defined, and even when using the term to mean 'boundary', none of the sources discussed speaks of it as something constructed or laid out. Where it is stated that the *limes* was 'made', the term is used in the sense of military road.

The term *limes*, then, is not used in this period to indicate permanent defensive structures or formal military and administrative organization, as is assumed in the modern literature.²² To speak of a *limes* in this sense is therefore incorrect; by the same token '*Limes congresses*' should rather be called congresses of Roman Frontier Studies.²³

It may be added that Mommsen, on the basis of an etymological discussion of the term, proposed the wild hypothesis that the *limes* always had a dual structure, consisting of a strip of land marked on both sides, with both an 'inner' and an 'outer' border.²⁴ Despite some criticism,²⁵ this notion was widely accepted, for instance by Brünnow and Domaszewski, who proceeded to search for the inner and outer *limes* in Arabia, under a misconception which has long bedevilled the study of the eastern provinces.²⁶ However, misconceptions about the *limites* go further back than Mommsen.²⁷

For the terminology actually used in the second century to indicate military structures see, for instance, *CIL* III, 3385, discussed by A. Alföldi, *Archaeologiai Értesítő* 3/2 (1941), 40–8.²⁸

Imp(erator) Caes(ar) M(arcus) Aur(elius) [Commodus] Antoninus Aug(ustus) Pius Sarm(aticus) Ger(manicus) Brit(annicus), pont(ifex) max(imus), trib(unicia) pot(estate) VI., imp(erator) IIII., co(n)s(ul) IIII., p(ater) p(atriciae), ripam omnem burgis a solo exstructis, item praesidi(i)s per loca opportuna ad clandestinos latrunculorum transitus oppositis munivit per [L. Cornelium Felicem Plotianum] leg(atum) pr(o) pr(aetore).

²² Pelham, below, n. 25. See also references above, p. 125 and n. 3.

²³ As indeed they usually are in Britain.

²⁴ Mommsen, op. cit. (n. 2), 456–64: 'Es scheint den Limes-forschern wenig zum Bewusstsein gekommen zu sein, dass der Limes seinem Wesen nach bei allen sonst möglichen Verschiedenheiten, eine irgendwie markierte zweifache Grenze, eine äussere und eine innere fordert'.

²⁵ *Essays by H. F. Pelham*, ed. F. Haverfield (1911), in the paper 'The Roman Frontier System', 164–78, esp. 168–9. Pelham, however, went on to say that 'there is no doubt that "limes", like "march", was frequently used to include not only the frontier line with its defences, but also the territory stretching along both sides of it'.

²⁶ Forni, op. cit. (n. 1), *passim*; R. MacMullen, *Soldier and Civilian in the Later Roman Empire* (1963), 39 n. 53. A. Poidebard, *La trace de Rome dans le désert de Syrie: Le limes de Trajan à la conquête arabe* (1934), thought he could recognize in the Strata Diocletiana an inner line of defence and farther eastward an outer line. Later R. Mouterde and A. Poidebard, *Le Limes de Chalcis, organisation de la steppe en haute Syrie romaine* (1945), claimed to have discovered two lines farther north, an inner *limes* east of Chalcis and an outer one on the Euphrates. In the Negev M. Gichon traced two lines: *Studien zu den Militärgrenzen Roms, Vorträge des 6. Limes-Kongresses* (1967), 175 ff.; id., *Roman Frontier Studies* 1979 (1980), 852–5; see also, K. C. Gutwein, *Third Palestine* (1981), 309–11. In Africa: J. Baradez, *Fossatum Africae* (1949), 358–60; in Mesopotamia: R. E. M. Wheeler, *Roman Frontier Studies* 1949 (1952), 112–29; esp. 127. For criticism see W. Liebeschuetz, *Studien zu den Militärgrenzen Roms II* (1977), 487–99, esp. 488 f.; G. W. Bowersock, *HSCP* 80 (1976),

219–29; B. Isaac, *HSCP* 88 (1984), 191 with nn. 103 and 104. Most recently S. Thomas Parker, *Romans and Saracens* (1986), 6, argued for the existence of 'a broad, fortified zone, not a single fortified line' in Arabia. Elsewhere, however, he speaks of a 'main *limes*' and a 'secondary line of defence' (p. 142).

²⁷ See P. Bartholomew, *Britannia* 15 (1984), 179 n. 45: 'The text of Ammianus xxviii. 5. 1 provides an illustration of the dubious authenticity of '*limes*'. According to Clark and the other modern editors, the object of the Saxon attack on north-east Gaul in 370 was '*Romanum limitem*'. But the reading of M (which survives at this point) is '*Romanum militem*'; and M is followed by V. '*Limitem*' appears only as a correction in an inferior fifteenth-century manuscript, and in Gheilen. This indicates the readiness with which Renaissance scholars thought of '*limites*' in the context of late Roman military operations. ... The decision of modern editors to accept '*limitem*' instead of the better attested '*militem*' must appear distinctly questionable.' For a similar case see Seeck, *Not. Dig. Oc.* v, 126: 'Comites limitum infrascriptorum', where all the MS read: '*militum*'; cf. Bartholomew, *Britannia* 10 (1979), 370. The search for fortresses sometimes leads to even more peculiar conclusions. Gutwein, op. cit. (n. 26), translates 'ex divisione praesidium Palaestinae' (Jerome, *Quaestiones in Genesim* 21:30, *PL* xxiii, 969) as 'a recent division of fortifications'. Jerome, *Vita Hilarionis* 18 (*PL* xxiii, 35), tells the edifying story of 'Orion vir primarius et ditissimus urbis Aelae, quae mari Rubro imminet, a legione possessus demonum'; this then is taken as a reference to the Legion X Fretensis based at Aela.

²⁸ For further references see also A. Mócsy, *Pannonia and Upper Moesia* (1974), 196 f.

The Emperor Commodus 'fortified the whole riverbank with new towers and forts placed on suitable sites to prevent covert crossings of raiders', etc.

Military terms encountered in this inscription are *burgi*, *praesidia*, *munivit* and *latrunculi*. The word *limes* is missing. For *burgi* see Alföldi, 47 f.;²⁹ for the term *latrunculi* (hit-and-run raiders), *ibid.*, 42–6. The term *ripa* is frequently attested in literature and epigraphy.³⁰ It occurs in the title of various commanders: the *praefecti ripae fluminis Euphratensis* (*ILS* 2709), *Danuvii* (*ILS* 2737 in Pannonia, *AE* 1926, 80 in Moesia), *Rheni* (Tacitus, *Hist.* iv, 55, cf. 26; 64).³¹ They were probably military officers with a local, territorial command rather than one over a specific unit; moreover, the examples given all seem to entail combined activity on land and at sea or on the river. The same would have been true of the *dux ripae* attested at Dura-Europos before the middle of the third century.³² Relevant for the present discussion is the absence of any comparable reference to an officer in charge of a *limes*.

Milestones on the Trajanic road in Arabia read:

redacta in formam provinciae Arabia viam novam a finibus Syriae usque ad mare rubrum aperuit et stravit ...

(Trajan) having organized Arabia as a province opened up and paved a new road from the boundary of Syria to the Red Sea.

The reference is, however, to the organization of the *provincia* and the construction of a paved road, not to any *limes*.³³ Finally, as noted above, Hadrian's wall in Britain is never referred to as a *limes*.

It is true that there existed during the principate a vague notion that the empire was made secure by troops stationed at the frontier. Aristides, *Roman Oration*, 80–4, spoke of a defensive system based on an outer ring of permanent camps; and a century later, Herodian II, 11, 5 made the anachronistic statement that 'Augustus ... fortified the empire by hedging it around with major obstacles, rivers and trenches and mountains and deserted areas which were difficult to traverse' (Loeb trans.). But these are indeed vague pronouncements which merely convey the sense that good government secured the empire against foreign enemies.

Aristides, *ibid.*, 67, emphasized that the Roman army was not based in cities in the interior, unlike that of the Athenians. Aristides wrote as a citizen of a city of Asia Minor, where this was true in the second century. He could not have said so in the fourth century. Even for his own day Aristides is clearly incorrect if we think of cities in Syria and Palestine. Moreover, he wrote in the reign of Antoninus Pius when the security of the empire rather than achievements in war would be stressed by those who supported the emperor's policy. Herodian's statement occurs in a rhetorical excursus that explains why the Italians were terrified at the approach of Septimius Severus with his Pannonian troops. Augustus, he says, excluded Italians from the army and stationed mercenaries at the frontier to act as a barricade for the Roman Empire.

²⁹ Cf. *DE* I, s.v. *burgus*, 1053 f.; IV (1962), s.v. *limes*, 1089 f.; MacMullen, *op. cit.* (n. 26), 38 f., 57. See also the article on *burgarii* and the *cursus publicus* by M. Labrousse, *Mélanges d'archéologie et d'histoire* 55 (1938), 151–67.

³⁰ E.g. Pliny, *Pan.* 82, 4. It is used in the Antonine Itinerary in a list of stations along the Euphrates between Satala and Melitene, see J. Crow in *The Defence of the Roman and Byzantine East, Proceedings of a Colloquium held at the University of Sheffield in April 1986*, ed. P. Freeman and D. Kennedy (1986), 81 f.

³¹ Tacitus, *Hist.* iv, 26: 'dispositae per omnem ripam stationes quae Germanos vado arcerent'. The *praefecti* are discussed by J. F. Gilliam, *TAPhA* 72 (1941), 157–75. He compares them with other *praefecti*, those in command of the *ora maritima* in Mauretania (*CIL* xi, 5744); the *ora Pontica* (Pliny, *Ep.* x, 21; 86a) and the

Baliorum insulae (*ILS* 9196). To the evidence in Gilliam's paper add *AE* 1968, 321: a *praefectus ad ripam* (sc. *Rheni*) under Claudius and Nero.

³² Gilliam points out that, unlike the later *duces*, this officer was subordinate to the governor of Syria. Of interest for the later meaning of the word *limes* is that the term *ripa* can also be used for a fiscal district, e.g. on an inscription from the *agora* of Palmyra, which mentions a *curator ripae superioris et inferioris*, see Gilliam, *op. cit.*, 165 n. 35; 174 f. It is not clear what was the difference between this *dux ripae* and the *praefecti* attested elsewhere.

³³ See the catalogue of milestones by P. Thomsen, *Zeitschr. D. Pal. Ver.* 40 (1917), 1 ff. *Aperuit* is only partly applicable, for most of the road followed the alignment of an ancient caravan-route marked by Nabataean road-stations.

On the other hand, the uselessness of such obstacles as a means of defence against foreign enemies is emphasized in a number of late-third and early fourth-century texts. These texts are of interest in that they reveal a change in the meaning of *limes*, which, even though its exact form is not always easy to discern, coincides roughly with the major reorganization of the Roman army in the reigns of Diocletian and Constantine.

Panegyrici Latini x (II) 7, 3 (A.D. 298, addressed to Maximianus):

Atqui Rhenum antea videbatur ipsa sic Natura duxisse, ut eo limite Romanae provinciae ab immanitate barbariae vindicarentur.

In the past Nature itself seemed to have traced the course of the Rhine so that it might mark the boundary and protect the Roman provinces against the ferocity of the barbarians.

It is clear that the term here means 'boundary'.³⁴ The passage suggests that in the past only the river, a natural obstacle, kept out the barbarians, because the army was too feeble to do so. Now, thanks to the military power exercised by Maximianus, the river has become irrelevant, for Roman power extends across the river.³⁵ This was a panegyric *topos*: whereas in the past only natural obstacles protected the empire against barbarian attack, now it is the mere presence of the emperor, who extended military power far beyond the boundary of the old provinces.

It is important to note that the text nowhere states that the empire was defended, either in the miserable past or in the blessed present, by a system of fortifications. In contrast to the earlier texts the river-boundary is now also referred to as *limes*. It must be kept in mind, however, that these are literary, not formal administrative texts.

It will be clear now that the term *limes* was used rarely during the principate; it does not appear on inscriptions before the third century. This stands in striking contrast to the later period, when it was extremely common. In the second and third century it means 'demarcated boundary' rather than 'defended border'. However, the major conclusion to be drawn from perusal of the available texts is that no term for a 'defended border' existed. It remains to be seen how *limes* was used during the late empire, after the army reorganization of Diocletian and Constantine.

C. Border District (fourth century and later)

In the following passages from the *Panegyrics* the term *limes* already seems to be used in the later sense of frontier district.

1. *Pan. Lat.* VIII (V) 3, 3 (A.D. 297, addressed to Constantius):

Partho quippe ultra Tigrim redacto, Dacia restituta, porrectis usque ad Danubii caput Germaniae Raetiaeque limitibus ...

The Parthian has been sent back beyond the Tigris, Dacia restored, the *limites* of Germany and Raetia have been extended as far as the source of the Danube ...

The *limites* of Germany and Raetia that extended as far as the sources of the Danube could be the imperial boundary or frontier districts. The verb *porrigo*, used in the passive for 'to stretch out, to extend', may suggest that an area, not a line is meant.³⁶

³⁴ For a similar use of the term see XI (III), 5, 4 (addressed to Maximianus in A.D. 291): 'transeo limitem Raetiae repentina hostium clade promotum'.

³⁵ The passage goes on to state that the same happened in the East, where Syria had only the Euphrates

for protection until the Persian kingdoms spontaneously surrendered themselves to Diocletian.

³⁶ Cf. Pliny, *NH* IV, 12, 58: 'Creta inter ortum occasumque porrigitur', and other examples.

2. Ibid. VI (VII), 11 (addressed to Constantine in A.D. 310 and discussing the safety of the border area against attacks by Franks across the Rhine)

Contra hinc per intervalla disposita magis ornant limitem castella quam protegent.

The forts established at fixed intervals adorn rather than protect the *limes*.

The meaning of the term here is not immediately clear.³⁷ It could refer to the boundary of the empire, but 'frontier district' is more appropriate since the forts, seen as distinct from the *limes*, are more likely to protect a district than the boundary itself.³⁸

3. Ibid. XII (IX):

21, 5 (addressed to Constantine in A.D. 313): perrexisti ad inferiorem Germaniae limitem; 22, 5: in superiore limite.

When mention is made of 'the lower *limes* of Germany' and the 'upper *limes*', the terms are obviously used as substitute for the old *provincia*.

4. Ausonius, *Gratiarum Actio* II, 7 (A.D. 379):

... Imperatori fortissimo: testis est uno pacatus in anno et Danuvii limes et Rheni.

... a most powerful emperor: witness the *limes* of the Danube and of the Rhine, pacified in one year.

Since the *limites* of the Danube and of the Rhine are said to be pacified, this is better rendered 'frontier district' than 'boundary'.³⁹

From the fourth century onwards, *limes* is used so frequently that a selection has to be made:

5. *CIL* III, 12483; *ILS* 724:

[Constantine's three sons] locum in parte limitis positum, gentilium Gotho[ru]m temeritati semper aptissimum, ad confirmandam provincialium [s]uorum aeternam securitatem erecta istius fabri[c]ae munitione clausurunt latru[nc]ulorumque impetum perennis mun[imi]nis dispositione tenuerunt adcurante Sappone v.p. duce limitis Scythiae.

[They] blocked a site lying in a part of the *limes* always exposed to the temerity of the Gothic foreigners, in order to guarantee the eternal security of their provincials, by the construction of a fortified building and they have stopped the onslaught of raiders by the arrangement of an enduring fortification through the care of Sappo, *dux* of the Scythian *limes*.

The term *limes* is now attested as a formal administrative concept denoting a frontier district administered by a military commander (*dux*). The inscription records the erection of a military structure in a part of the *limes*, but this term, taken by itself,

³⁷ Cf. *TLL*, s.v. under the heading *finis extremi imperii Romani*.

³⁸ Similarly, *ibid.*, 13, 3: 'omnemque illum limitem non equestribus neque pedestribus copiis sed praesentiae tuae terrore tutatus es: quantoslibet valebat exercitus Maximianus in ripa' ('you have protected that whole *limes* not with cavalry nor with infantry but with the terror inspired by your presence: Maximianus on

the riverbank is worth an army ever so great'). The *limes*, then, is seen as distinct from the riverbank; cf. the similar argument in the case of the 'limitis ... custus', below, p. 137.

³⁹ Cf. *ibid.* XVIII, 82: 'tu Gratiane, tot imperii limites, tot flumina et lacus, veterum intersaepta regnorum ... celeriore transcursu evoluis'.

does not indicate any specific form of military organization or complex of fortifications. It has an exclusively administrative content.⁴⁰

6. Ammianus, xxiii, 5, 2 (Circusium):

Quod Diocletianus exiguum antehoc et suspectum, muris turribusque circumcedit celsis, cum in ipsis barbarorum confiniis interiores limites ordinaret, documento* ... per Syriam Persae, ita ut paucis ante annis cum magnis provinciarum damnis.

The text is incomplete but the meaning of *limes* is clear: Diocletian organized the remote border districts.⁴¹ We may note again the distinction made between *limes* and frontier. Two translations which I consulted clearly reflect the development of ideas about the Roman frontier. The Loeb translation by J. C. Rolfe, first published in 1940, writes: '... at the time when he was arranging the inner lines of defence on the very frontiers of the barbarians ...' The new translation by Walter Hamilton, published in 1986, shows the influence of Luttwak's ideas: '... when he was organizing defences in depth on our actual frontier with the barbarians.' But even if it is accepted that the term 'defence in depth' correctly describes Roman strategy, there is no evidence whatever that the Romans themselves expressed it in this manner.

7. Ammianus, xxxi, 3, 5:

Munderichem ducem postea limitis per Arabiam.

Munderich, later *dux* of the Arabian *limes*.

It may be noted that this is the first of two references to a *limes* in Arabia, the other being that by Rufinus (below); *per* strengthens the impression that the *limes* is something spread over part of the province rather than a line or zone at the edge of it.

8. Festus, *Breviarium* xiv, ed. Eadie, p. 57:

et per Traianum Armenia, Mesopotamia, Assyria et Arabia provinciae factae sunt ac limes Orientalis supra ripas Tigridis est institutus.

and Trajan made Armenia, Mesopotamia, Assyria and Arabia provinces and established the eastern *limes* beyond the banks of the Tigris.

Festus discusses Trajan's activities in the terminology of his own times.⁴² He describes the organization of new provinces and concludes that the eastern border district was now east of the Tigris. He was thinking of frontier districts under a *dux* such as existed in his own time. Such districts, mentioned in *Not. Dig. Oc.* v (and cf. *Or.* xxviii), can co-exist without problem with subject peoples beyond the frontier. This is particularly clear in the following passage.

9. Ibid.:

[Under Diocletian] Mesopotamia est restituta et supra ripas Tigridis limes est reformatus, ita ut quinque gentium trans Tigridem constituarum dicionem adsequeremur.

⁴⁰ Contrast Forni, op. cit. (n. 1), 1081: 'Nel basso impero, in seguito allo sdoppiamento delle competenze militari e civili, e ancora in età Giustiniana il concetto di limes venne allargato fino a comprendere, in aggiunta alle strade alle fortificazioni e alle truppe vaste territori affidati all'amministrazione militare'. P. Mayerson, *BASOR* 262 (1986), 35-47, esp. 39, denies that the term has a formal, administrative content and refers to the U.S. concept of a 'frontier': 'that part of a country which forms the border of its settled or inhabited regions' (as defined in the Oxford English Diction-

ary). This suggests that it is an informal geographical notion. In later sources, such as Malalas, the term is indeed used informally, but there is no doubt that the term *limes* has a formal meaning in the fourth century and afterward.

⁴¹ See also Ammianus xv, 8, 6: 'rupta limitum pace' and other passages cited in the *Thesaurus*. For the city of Circusium see Oppenheimer et al., *Babylonia Judaica* (1983), 377-82.

⁴² Equally anachronistic is the *dux limitis* mentioned in SHA, *Tyr. Trig.* 3, 9; 29, 1; *Aurelian* 13, 1.

Mesopotamia was restored and beyond the banks of the Tigris a *limes* was re-established, so that we gained sovereignty over five peoples beyond the Tigris.

The submission of the five peoples was a consequence of the reconstitution of the frontier district across the Tigris. Cf. xxv: '(Persae) Mesopotamiam cum Transtigritanis regionibus reddiderunt.'⁴³ '(The Persians) returned Mesopotamia with the regions beyond the Tigris.'

10. SHA, *Tyr. Trig.* 26 (on the Isauri):

in medio Romani nominis solo regio eorum novo genere custodiarum quasi limes includitur, locis defensa, non hominibus.

This, although in the middle of the empire, is enclosed by a novel kind of guard post, as though it were a frontier district, being defended not by men, but by the nature of the country.

This is mistranslated in the Loeb edition: 'for indeed their district, though in the midst of lands belonging to the Romans, is guarded by a novel kind of defence, comparable to a frontier-wall, for it is protected not by men, but by the nature of the country.'⁴⁴ It is not the 'kind of defence' which is compared with a *limes*, but their region. The passage does not refer to any boundary wall and emphasizes that the area is defended by nature, not by men.⁴⁵ Fortifications are not mentioned.⁴⁶

11. It should be noted that Byzantine Greek sources often use the Latin term, although there was also a Greek equivalent: *eschatia*, 'the remote regions'. Three examples will suffice:

(a) Zosimus xxxiv, 1-2:

τῆς γὰρ Ῥωμαίων ἐπικρατείας ἀπανταχοῦ τῶν ἐσχατιῶν τῇ Διοκλητιανοῦ προνοίᾳ κατὰ τὸν εἰρημένον ἤδη μοι τρόπον πόλεσι καὶ φρουρίοις καὶ πύργοις διειλημμένης ...

Thanks to the foresight of Diocletian ... the *eschatia* of the empire were everywhere occupied by cities, forts and towers.⁴⁷

(b) Suidas, *Lexicon*, s.v. (ed. Adler, 1, 2, p. 432):

Ἐσχατιά· τὰ πρὸς τοῖς τέρμασι τῶν χωρίων ἐσχατιάς ἔλεγον, οἷς γειννιᾷ εἴτε ὄρος εἴτε θάλασσα.

The zones near the frontier of the land are called *eschatia*, which are bounded by a mountain or the sea. ... Again, Diocletian, when considering the state of the empire thought it necessary to strengthen all *eschatia* with sufficient forces and to build forts.

To my knowledge this is the only extant definition of what the word *limes* might mean. It is significant that the military aspect is not mentioned in the definition itself, but only as a historical footnote. It has been suggested that this may possibly derive from Zosimus.⁴⁸

⁴³ Cf. Eadie's comments on p. 148 with references to Petrus Patricius, fr. 14 (*FHG* IV, 188 f.) and Ammianus, xxv, 7, 9, where the same region with five peoples is mentioned. Needless to say, nowhere are military structures referred to. The river Indus mentioned in this source is the Tigris, cf. Aurelius Victor, *de Caesaribus* 13, 3; also, Eutropius VIII, 3, 2. It may be added that Malalas, *Chron.* XII (Dindorf, 397) refers to the 'Indolimiton', where Theophanes speaks of 'Inner Persis' (*Chron.* ad ann. 5793 (A.D. 293)) and Eutropius, *Brev.* 9, 25, of 'ultimas regni solitudines'.

⁴⁴ Similarly: J. Rougé, *REA* 68 (1966), 284 f.

⁴⁵ Cf. the passages from *Pan. Lat.*, cited above, pp. 132-3.

⁴⁶ In two other passages in the SHA *limes* apparently has the same meaning: *Vita Probi* 14, 5: 'nisi si limes Romanus extenderetur et fieret Germania tota provincia'; *Aurelianus* 10, 2: 'limites restitueret'. In both cases, however, it is possible that 'boundary' is meant.

⁴⁷ For further discussion of this passage, see my forthcoming book, *The Limits of Empire: The Roman Army in the East*.

⁴⁸ See Eunapius, *FHG* IV, p. 14. D. van Berchem, *L'Armée de Dioclétien et la réforme constantiniennne* (1952), 115.

(c) Procopius, *Anecdota* XXIV, 12–13:

In the past the Roman emperors stationed numerous soldiers everywhere in the frontier districts of the state (τῶν τῆς πολιτείας ἐσχατιῶν) in order to guard the frontiers of the empire (τῶν ὁρίων τῆς Ῥωμαίων ἀρχῆς), etc.

Here a distinction is made between the *eschatia*, i.e. the *limites*, where soldiers were stationed, and the *horia*, the boundaries of the empire, which the soldiers guarded.

A similar distinction is already made in third-century Palmyrene inscriptions which mention persons who came to 'the frontier zone' or to 'the limits of the frontier zone'.⁴⁹

12. Malalas, *Chronographia*, ed. Dindorf, 308 (also discussed below, p. 141):

Ἐκτίσε δὲ καὶ εἰς τὰ λίμιτα κάστρα ὁ αὐτὸς Διοκλητιανὸς ἀπὸ τῆς Αἰγύπτου ἕως τῶν Περσικῶν ὄρων.

Diocletian built forts in the *limita* from Egypt to the border with Persia (i.e. in the outer districts).

A clear distinction is made between *limites* and the frontier. The phrase indicates that the term *limes* refers to specific districts where forts are built rather than to the system of forts itself.

13. Malalas, 295 f., describes the raid into Syria by Shapur I. He reached Antioch through 'the *limes* of Chalcis'. This term is found nowhere else and yet was chosen as the title of a well-known study by Mouterde and Poidebard.⁵⁰

However, van Berchem has already argued, rightly, that what is described there is not a defence system on the frontier, as the authors claimed, but a road system in the interior.⁵¹ If we further admit that Malalas meant no more than 'the hinterland' or 'steppe' of Chalcis, all difficulties are resolved. Diodorus Siculus speaks of Chalcis as a town 'in the frontier area of Arabia'.⁵² Jerome and others refer to monasticism in the 'desert of Chalcis'.⁵³ Jerome cites Malchus, born in Nisibis, who left his home town: 'et quia ad Orientem ire non poteram, propter vicinam Persidem, et Romanorum militum custodiam, ad Occidentem verti pedes ... Pervenit tandem et eremum Chalcidos ...' ('and because I could not go east because of the vicinity of Persia and the Roman military garrison I went westward ... finally I reached the desert of Chalcis ...'). Malchus, a native of northern Mesopotamia, naturally wanted to travel in those parts, but could not do so because a closed border ran through the country. Jerome clearly distinguishes between the military zone in Mesopotamia and 'the desert of Chalcis' far to the west. Malalas used another geographical term for the same region. It may be noted that there is not a single military inscription in the area, whereas there are numerous civilian Byzantine inscriptions.⁵⁴ Finally, Procopius attributes to al-Mundhir the statement that in this region 'there is neither a fortified city, nor an army worth mentioning'.⁵⁵

⁴⁹ J. Teixidor, *Syria* 40 (1963), p. 33, no. 1 (an inscription from Qasr Helqum on the road from Palmyra to Hit which commemorates those who were with Abgar the son of Hairan in the frontier-zone (BQŠT)). J. Starcky, *Syria* 40 (1963), 47–55 (an inscription from a road-station on the same route which commemorates 'Abgar son of Shalman son of Zabdibol, who came to the limits of the frontier-zone (BRŠ QŠT)'). See also Matthews, *op. cit.* (n. 21), 168 f.

⁵⁰ See n. 26.

⁵¹ Van Berchem, *L'Armée*, 5 f.

⁵² Fr. 21, *FHG* II, p. xvii. Tryphon concentrated his troops and encamped near the city of Chalcis (cited by Mouterde and Poidebard, *op. cit.* (n. 26), 4–5).

⁵³ Jerome, *Vita Malchi* 3 (*PL* xxiii, col. 56 f.); Theodoret, *HE* IV, 28, ed. Parmentier, 268, 8; for further references see Mouterde and Poidebard.

⁵⁴ See the collection in Mouterde and Poidebard. Note in particular the inscription recording work carried out by private individuals at the fort of el Bab, 71–3, 187 f., *MUSJ* 22 (1939), 65 n. 1; and the fortified *horreum* at et Touba where a similar inscription has been found, 197–201. There is one inscription in honour of Justinian, no. 39 on p. 209.

⁵⁵ Procopius, *BP* 1, 17, 34.

To my knowledge there is no passage anywhere in Byzantine sources which states that a *limes* was built or constructed. Reference is made to structures in the *limes* as distinct from the *limes* itself. It should be noted that the so-called 'strata Diocletiana' is known by this name because the term appears on milestones, but that no mention is made of any *limes*.⁵⁶

14. *Ibid.*, 434: used as in (2).

15. *CTh* VII, 13, 15 and *CJ* I, 27, 13: administrative term denoting frontier district.

16. *Not. Dig. Or.* XXVIII:

comes limitis Aegypti. sub dispositione viri spectabilis comitis rei militaris per Aegyptum [of units stationed in Memfis, Babilon, Pelusium, etc.].

This is the only *limes* mentioned in the *Not. Dig. Or.*; its meaning is similar to that in (15). In the *Not. Dig. Oc.* many are listed in North Africa. J. C. Mann points out to me that there is no reference here to forts along a frontier line. There was rather a system of roads (with fortifications), as there had been since the time of Augustus.

17. Rufinus, *HE*, II, 6:

Mavia Sarracenorum gentis regina, vehementi bello Palaestini et Arabici limitis oppida atque urbes quater, vicinasque simul vastare provincias coepit.

Mavia, queen of the Saracen people, battered in a fierce war the towns and cities of the *limes* of Palaestina and Arabia and began at the same time to ravage the neighbouring provinces.

In referring to the *limites* and the towns and cities of Palaestina and of Arabia, Rufinus indicates the elements which constituted these provinces: the urbanized area, that is, the cities and their territories on the one hand, and the frontier district on the other.

18. *IGLS* v, 2704 (Khān el-Abyad):

limitis ur[biu]mq̃ue fortissimae custus (*sic*) [i.e. the *dux Foenicis*].

The *dux Foenicis* is commander and administrator of the cities and their territories and of the frontier district. This is virtually the same formulation as in the previous passage. If the term *limes* itself had denoted a system of fortifications meant to protect the province it would make no sense to speak of 'the protector of the *limes*'.

19. F. M. Abel, *RB* 29 (1920), 120–2; A. Alt, *Zeitschr. D.Pal. Ver.* 46 (1923), 64 (*SEG* VIII, 296; sixth century):

Οὐδὲ λιπῶν λιμίτοιο Παλεστ(ίνης) χθόνα διὰν Δωρόθεος γεράων πέλεν ἄμμορος ἐκ βασι[λ]ῆος

Even after leaving the holy land of the *limes* of Palaestina Dorotheus still has a share in the distinctions from the King.

The inscription marked the funerary monument of a dignitary. The context is not military, but refers to the region where the dead man had been active. The use of the term here is close to meaning simply 'the land of Palestine'.⁵⁷

⁵⁶ Cf. M. Dunand, *Revue Biblique* 40 (1931), 227–48.

⁵⁷ Abel: 'Bien qu'il a quitté la divine terre de la frontière de Palestine D. a pourtant sa part au distinctions du Basileus.' Alt: 'D. wird schwerlich ein einfacher limitaneus gewesen sein. ... Türstutz eines Grabgebäudes ... dessen Errichtung auf Staatskosten [...] war vielleicht die letzte königlichen Ehrung für den

im Dienst an der palästinensischen Limes gebliebenen Mann. Der Lobpreis des "göttlichen Landes" ist öffentlich mehr als eine poetische Floskel.' Could the king of the inscription be God rather than the emperor? The phrase would then allude to the man's name, Dorotheus.

20. Ammianus, XIV, 8, 5:

Orientis vero limes in longum protentus et rectum ab Euphratis fluminis ripis ad usque supercilia porrigitur Nili, laeva Saracenis conterminans gentibus, dextra pelagi fragoribus patens ...

The *limes* of Oriens stretching from the banks of the Euphrates to the Nile, bordering on the left on the Saracens and to the right exposed to the waves of the sea ...

The term here is used as roughly the equivalent of the Diocese of Oriens. This diocese was indeed composed of the provinces along the eastern frontier, but it is obvious that *limes* as a technical term never included an area of such size. It is used here in a non-technical sense to describe the eastern frontier zone.⁵⁸

21. Ammianus, XXIII, 55:

Proximos his limites possident Bactriani ...

The neighbouring lands belong to the Bactrians.

Ammianus here speaks of lands far from the Roman empire, and *limes* is obviously not associated with anything Roman.

22. Malalas, 30 and *Chron. Pasch.* 77, in telling the story of Europa and the bull, state that Agenor and his sons waged war 'in the *limes*'.

23. Malalas, 143; 426:

King Solomon founded Palmyra 'in the *limes*'.

This may be compared with another passage in Malalas: Justinian gave the *comes* of the Orient in Antioch orders to reconstruct Palmyra, 'a city of Phoenike in the *limes*'.⁵⁹ He financed the restoration of churches and public buildings and 'ordered a number of soldiers to be stationed there with the *limitanei* and the duke of Emesa to guard the empire and Jerusalem'. Then follows a rambling discussion of Palmyra in the time of David. A similar statement is found in Theophanes: 'a city of Phoenike Libanensis in the inner *limes*, named Palmyra'.⁶⁰ Here it is specifically stated that the duke at Emesa was transferred to Palmyra for the protection of the Holy Places. These authors are vague on geographical and military matters and their statements should not be pressed in detail.

24. Malalas, 206:

Antiochus Epiphanes, beaten by Ptolemy, fled 'to the *limes*'.

25. Malalas, 230 f.:

The Magi, having visited Jesus and his mother in Bethlehem, eluded Herod's wrath by choosing 'another road through the *limes* and escaped to Persian lands'.

There is more, but these examples should suffice to prove that, in the early Byzantine period, the term came to mean simply 'the eastern desert', i.e. a geographical concept without administrative or military associations. Even the Roman origins of the term had been forgotten.

⁵⁸ It may be noted that it occurs in a chapter full of poetic and rhetorical expressions. The term *limiton* is also taken over into Syriac: see Michael the Syrian, *Chron.* IX, 16 and 26 on the region of the Balikh and the Khabūr (pillaged by al-Mundhīr).

⁵⁹ Malalas, p. 425, clearly derived from Josephus, *Ant.* VIII, 6, 1 (154).

⁶⁰ Theophanes, *Chron.* ad ann. 6020 (A.D. 520), p. 267.

II. THE TERM *LIMITANEI*

In the late empire part at least of the troops serving on the frontier were called *limitanei*. A reconsideration of the meaning of *limes* will therefore also be relevant for that of *limitanei*; since the nature and organization of these forces have been a subject of controversy, it may be useful to review the available information.

Mommsen was of the opinion that the Roman troops serving on the frontier were, from the third century onwards, a peasant militia, farmers who cultivated lands allotted to them by the government and performed guard duties in addition.⁶¹ This view was generally accepted,⁶² although W. Seston and A. H. M. Jones argued against it,⁶³ and their arguments were accepted by a number of scholars.⁶⁴ Usually, however, they are ignored or disbelieved.⁶⁵ Luttwak, for instance, admits that there is much controversy, yet continues: 'One thing, however, is certain: in the course of the fourth century, the full-time troops that had guarded the borders using mobile and offensive tactics gave way to part-time peasant soldiers (*limitanei*) who farmed their own assigned lands and provided a purely local and static defense'. As in the case of *limes*, it will be useful to review, in roughly chronological order, the sources which refer to, or are taken to refer to, *limitanei*.

For the army in the period we have three categories of evidence: (i) the *Notitia Dignitatum*, which gives us information of a formal nature on the command structure and distribution of army units; (ii) literary sources containing scattered pronouncements on military affairs, and (iii) the material remains of forts and roads, sometimes datable epigraphically. However, the information provided by these sources is combined in modern scholarship to build hypotheses about strategy and tactics from Diocletian to the Arab conquest, a legitimate method only if the deficiencies of each source are fully taken into account. The *Notitia* is full of information, but is a bureaucratic list, while anyone who uses such literary sources as Malalas or Zosimus without further understanding of their limitations is likely to be seriously misled. On the other hand, although the remains of military installations may be of great interest, it is a fallacy to assume that one can always easily understand why a particular site was chosen for a fort.

There are two main problems, frequently discussed in combination: first, the nature of the reforms instituted by Diocletian and Constantine respectively; second, the organization of the fourth-century army following these reforms. This paper is concerned with these matters only in so far as they touch on the position of the *limitanei* and on the measures which led to the creation of such forces.

Some of the scattered references in literary sources are discussed below. But first, Ammianus, in an incompletely preserved passage (XXIII, 5, 1–2), says that Diocletian fortified Ceresium when he organized the 'inner *limites*' near the borders with the barbarians as a response to the Persian raids into Syria.⁶⁶ But the nature of the reform is not clear, apart from fortifying at least one city. Zosimus II, 34, 1, says that

⁶¹ Th. Mommsen, 'Das römische Militärwesen seit Diocletian'. *Gesammelte Schriften* VI, 209–11.

⁶² See for instance R. Grosse, *Römische Militärgeschichte von Gallienus bis zum Beginn der byzantinischen Themenverfassung* (1920), 63–70; H. Delbrück, *Geschichte der Kriegskunst im Rahmen der politischen Geschichte* (1921), 231; E. Stein, *Geschichte des spätromischen Reiches* I (1928), 90 believes the process started under Septimius Severus; M. Rostovtzeff, *The Social and Economic History of the Roman Empire*, second ed. by P. M. Fraser (1952), 426 with n. 50; L. Dillemann, *Haute Mésopotamie orientale et pays adjacents* (1962), 104. Van Berchem, *L'Armée*, 19–24, did not accept the pre-Diocletianic reference.

⁶³ W. Seston, *Historia* 4 (1955), 286–91 = *Scripta Varia* (1980), 483–90; A. H. M. Jones, *The Later Roman Empire* (1964), 649–53; see also S. Mazzarino, *Aspetti sociali del quarto secolo* (1951), 330–40, who argued that there is no evidence for the existence of farmer-soldiers in the fourth century.

⁶⁴ G. Clemente, *La 'Notitia Dignitatum'* (1968), 319 with n. 1; E. W. Gray, *Proceedings of the African Classical Associations* 12 (1973), 24; T. Cornell and J. Matthews, *Atlas of the Roman World* (1982), 172.

⁶⁵ The entry on *limitanei* in *RE*, Suppl. XI (1968) contains no reference to Jones. D. Oates, *Studies in the Ancient History of Northern Iraq* (1968), 94; MacMullen, *op. cit.* (n. 26), 13 n. 34 and, in general, chapter 1; id., *Constantine* (1969), 43 f.; A. Piganiol, *L'Empire chrétien* (second ed., 1972), 365; A. Chastagnol, *L'Évolution politique, sociale et économique du monde romain, 284–363* (1982); J. S. Johnson in M. W. C. Hassall and R. I. Ireland (eds), *De Rebus Bellicis* (1979), 68; S. Williams, *Diocletian and the Roman Recovery* (1985), 97, 207, 213; E. N. Luttwak, *The Grand Strategy of the Roman Empire* (1976), 170–3; see also A. Ferrill, *The Fall of the Roman Empire* (1986), 49; Parker, *op. cit.* (above, n. 26), 149–52.

⁶⁶ See above, p. 134.

Diocletian made the empire impenetrable to barbarians by stationing troops in cities, *castella* and towers in the frontier zones. He goes on to say that Constantine demolished this system by withdrawing the troops from the frontier to cities in the interior which did not need them.

It must be admitted that these are vague and unspecific statements which tell us no more than that Diocletian was responsible for the construction and manning of military installations in the frontier areas. Zosimus clearly exaggerates the merits of Diocletian's work—the frontier was never impenetrable—and is notoriously hostile toward Constantine. As regards the East his statement is simply untrue. There had always been garrisons in cities, and there were troops in border towns before Diocletian and after Constantine. Further, there were border troops beyond the settled area after Constantine.

The sources taken to refer to *limitanei* are as follows:

1. SHA, *Severus Alexander*, XVIII, 58, 4:

sola, quae de hostibus capta sunt limitaneis ducibus et militibus donavit, ita ut eorum essent si heredes eorum militarent.

Lands taken from the enemy he gave to the *duces* and soldiers in the frontier districts stipulating that they would remain theirs if their heirs served in the army.

Though Mommsen, followed by others, accepted the statement at face value,⁶⁷ this is one of the less reliable *Lives* in the SHA, and the reference to *duces* shows that we have here at best a reflection of later practice.⁶⁸ It will be clear from what has been said above that *limes* was not a formal administrative term before the end of the third century; in the fourth century and later it was used for a frontier district, and in the course of time, applied informally to the whole frontier region. It must be assumed that the same is true of the adjective *limitaneus*, which need mean no more than 'of, or pertaining to, the *limes*'. In principle, therefore, *limitaneus* can be used in three distinct ways: (a) as an adjective used in a non-technical or informal context; (b) *limitaneus* (*miles*), (wider sense) a soldier stationed in the *limes*, i.e. one who served under the command of a *dux limitis*;⁶⁹ (c) (special sense) a farmer who serves in a territorial militia. In the present passage, it is clear that while reference is first made to 'the commanders and soldiers stationed in the *limes*' in general, Severus Alexander is indeed represented as being the emperor responsible for the measures which led to the creation of farmer-soldiers, *limitanei* in the special sense.

At issue here is not the question whether soldiers owned land in fact, but the credibility of the formal institution by the imperial authorities of a frontier militia which expected soldiers to work their own land as farmers. One can admit the probability of the former without accepting alleged evidence for the existence of the latter.⁷⁰

2. Eumenius, *Panegyrici Latini* IX, 18, 4 (A.D. 298):

Nam quid ego alarum et cohortium castra percenseam toto Rheni et Histri et Eufratae limite restituta.

⁶⁷ Mommsen, *Militärwesen*, 200; Rostovtzeff, op. cit. (n. 62), 377; Stein, op. cit. (n. 62), 90. Rejected by A. Alföldi, *Archaeologiai Értesítő* 1 (1940), 234. Van Berchem, *L'Armée*, 21, 41 considered it prudent not to rely on the statement. A. R. Neumann, *RE*, Suppl. XI, s.v. *limitanei*, 876, admits that the reference to *duces* is anachronistic, but relies on the statement as partial support for his theory that the *limitanei* existed in some form since the second century. Grosse, op. cit. (n. 62), 63 assumed that the reference reflects the situation in the fourth century. Seston, op. cit. (n. 63), argued that

the *limitanei* did not exist as farmer-soldiers in the time of Diocletian.

⁶⁸ J. C. Mann, *Legionary Recruitment and Veteran Settlement during the Principate* (1983), 67 suggests that the passage refers in fact to veterans, not to serving troops.

⁶⁹ Pointed out by van Berchem, op. cit. (n. 48), 34, 101.

⁷⁰ For soldiers as farmers see MacMullen, op. cit. (n. 26), chapter 1.

Why should I enumerate the forts of *alae* and cohorts restored throughout the *limes* of the Rhine, of Histrus and the Euphrates?

A very vague reference to the restoration of the military infrastructure in various sections of the imperial border following earlier catastrophes. It does not suggest that any drastic reorganization took place (note the term *restituta*), but rather supports J. C. Mann's conclusion that Diocletian's army reforms represented consolidation rather than innovation. Mann observed that, by the time of Diocletian's abdication, the frontier system of the principate could still be recognized—strengthened and intensified but not essentially altered.⁷¹ In fact Eumenius refers to the troops on the frontier as *alae* and *cohortes* and does not tell us anything about *limitanei*.

3. Malalas, ed. Dindorf, 308 (above, p. 136):

[Diocletian also founded *castra* in the *limites* from Egypt to the Persian border] τάσας ἐν αὐτοῖς στρατιώτας λιμιτανέους, προχειρισάμενος καὶ δοῦκας κατὰ ἐπαρχίαν ἐνδοτέρῳ τῶν κάστρων καθέζεσθαι μετὰ πολλῆς βοηθείας πρὸς παραφυλακὴν. καὶ ἀνήνεγκαν τῷ βασιλεῖ καὶ τῷ Καίσαρι στήλας ἐν τῷ λιμίτῳ τῆς Συρίας.

He stationed there *limitanei* and appointed *duces* in each province for service in the forts to stand guard with a strong force. For the emperor and Caesar they erected stelae in the *limes* of Syria.

Van Berchem observes, no doubt correctly, that the stelae are the milestones set up in these years.⁷² However, he misinterprets ἐνδοτέρῳ by translating it 'en deça des forts,' or 'en retrait du limes'. In fact it means quite simply 'in the forts'.⁷³ Van Berchem then concludes that under Diocletian the *dux* did not command the border troops. Yet it is highly dubious whether Malalas could be expected to provide such technical information on army organization under Diocletian, even if the text had contained a straightforward statement. Further, there is hardly any evidence otherwise of the existence of *duces* as the regular commanders of border troops before Constantine,⁷⁴ and John Lydus suggests in fact that it was his innovation.⁷⁵

Malalas refers to the well-known fact that in these years numerous forts and roads were built and others restored in the remote semi-desert in the East. When he says that they were manned by troops under the command of provincial *duces*, this may be partly true or it may be an anachronism. Most important for the present discussion is that the term *limitanei* is used in the wider sense. Malalas does not suggest that they were part-time soldiers who cultivated the land.

4. *CTh* VII, 20, 4 (17 June, A.D. 325): arrangements for exemption from taxation of various categories of troops:⁷⁶

(a) *comitatenses, ripenses, protectores*

(b) *alares et cohortales*

The status of (a) was more favoured than that of (b). Reference is made to an earlier enactment where the *ripenses* had an intermediate status:

⁷¹ J. C. Mann in *CBA Research Report No. 18: The Saxon Shore*, ed. D.E. Johnson (1977), 11.

⁷² Van Berchem, *L'Armée*, 17–18.

⁷³ See, for instance, Josephus, *Ant.* xv, 11, 3 (401): 'within this wall (ἐνδοτέρῳ δὲ τοῦτου [sc. τοῦ τείχους]) and on the very summit (of the Temple Mount) ran another wall of stone'. Cf. LSJ, s.v.; H. Stephanus, *Thesaurus Linguae Graecae* III, 1041 f.

⁷⁴ For criticism of van Berchem's interpretation see also Mann, op. cit. (n. 71), 12 with n. 8, observing that permanent ducates are attested under Diocletian only in Valeria, Scythica, and Augusta Euphratensis.

⁷⁵ John Lydus, *De Mag.* II, 11. Cf. Aurelius Victor, *liber de Caesaribus* 41, 12: 'Quo excruciato, ut fas erat, servili aut latronum more, condenda urbe formandisque religionibus ingentem animum avocavit (sc. Constantinus), simul novando militiae ordine'.

⁷⁶ I am grateful to Professor Tony Honoré for clarification. J. C. Mann has discussed the term *ripenses* and the development of the various categories of troops in two articles: *CBA Research Report No. 18* (above, n. 71), 11–15 and in R. Goodburn and P. Bartholomew (eds), *Aspects of the Notitia Dignitatum* (1976), 2.

- (a) *comitatenses*
- (b) *ripenses*
- (c) *alares et cohortales*

Distinctions are made between (i) death in service, (ii) death after retirement as a *veteranus* honourably discharged, (iii) death after discharge before completion of the full term of service. *Comitatenses*, *ripenses* and *protectores* are to be on a level so far as (i) is concerned; *alares* and *cohortales* are on a lower level of exemption. It is not clear what the position was before this enactment. As regards (ii), *ripenses veterani* are assimilated to *comitatenses veterani*. Apparently *alares* and *cohortales veterani* are on the same level of exemption. Regarding (iii), *ripenses* are put on a level with *comitatenses* only if discharged because of wounds.

This is the earliest text to mention *ripenses*.⁷⁷ It is frequently asserted, without argument, that the *ripenses* were later called *limitanei*.⁷⁸ Not only is there no evidence for this; there is no reason to assume that the *ripenses* were indeed soldier-farmers. The confusion is caused by the assumption, as a matter of course, that *limes* denotes every kind of fortified frontier, for although *ripa*, as noted above, is attested as a formal term from the second century onward, the terms *ripa* and *limes* are not mutually interchangeable.

The *Notitia Dignitatum*, Or. xxxix and xl, mentions *legiones riparienses* on the Danube. In the West several provinces are described as *ripariensis* or *ripensis*: Pannonia Secunda (xxxii), Valeria (xxxiii), Noricum (xxxiv, 13), [Gallia] Riparensis (xlii, 13). It is quite possible that the troops in these districts also had the status of *ripenses*.

5. *Riparienses milites* are mentioned in *CTh* VII, 4, 14 (1 December, A.D. 365).

6. *CTh* VII, 22, 8 (15 February, A.D. 372) stipulates that soldiers whose physical condition is inadequate for service with the field army (*comitatenses*) can be eligible for *militia ripensis*.

7. *CTh* VII, 13, 7, 3 (2 June, A.D. 375) discusses exemption from capitation taxes of:

- (a) ... qui comitatensibus numeris fuerit sociatus
- (b) ii qui in ripa per cuneos auxiliaque fuerint constituti.

The phrase cited under (b) is probably a circumlocution for *ripenses*. This will be a reference to the *cunei equitum* and auxiliary infantry forces serving in the provinces described by the *Notitia* as *ripariensis* or *ripensis*—the legionary troops are not mentioned.

8. *CTh* VII, 1, 18 (*CJ* XII, 35, 14) (19 March, A.D. 400):

non solum de comitatensibus ac palatinis numeris ad alios numeros milites transferri non licere, sed ne ipsis quidem seu de comitatensibus legionibus seu de ripariensibus castricianis ceterisque, etc.

Soldiers may not be transferred from any branch of service to another. It may perhaps be argued that transfer of farmer-soldiers to another type of unit—had they been included in this list—would not merely have been forbidden, it would be impossible. More important, nothing in these texts suggests that we are faced with anything but regular troops.

⁷⁷ For discussion see van Berchem, *L'Armée*, 83–7. SHA, *Aurelian* xxvi, 38, 4: 'hi compressi sunt septem milibus Lemberiorum et ripariensium et castrianorum

et Daciscorum interemptis', is merely another of the SHA's anachronisms.

⁷⁸ For instance in *RE*, *ibid*.

9. Various fourth-century enactments are concerned with the supplies of subsistence allowances to troops in the *limes* by civilians in the hinterland, and regulate the responsibility for transport of the supplies: *CTh* XI, 1, 11 (A.D. 365); VII, 4, 15 (A.D. 369); XI, 1, 21 (A.D. 385); *CJ* XI, 60, 1 (A.D. 385); XI, 62, 8 (A.D. 386). It should be obvious that troops which received such allowances were not expected to produce their own supplies.

10. *CTh* VII 4, 30 (23 March, A.D. 409) = *CJ* XII, 37, 13:

Limitanei militis et possessorum utilitate conspecta per primam, secundam ac tertiam Palaestinam huiuscemodi norma processit, ut pretiorum certa taxatione depensa speciorum inte[r]mittatur exactio. Sed ducianum officium Versamini et Moenoni castri nomine salutaria st[a]tuta conatur evertere ...

In view of the interests of soldiers of the frontier districts and of landowners in First, Second and Third Palestine a ruling has been issued that, when taxes have been paid at a fixed rate, exaction of payment shall be suspended. But the office of the *dux* in the name of the forts at Versaminum and Moenonium attempts to nullify this salutary statute

Essential in this text is the contrast between *pretia* and *species*. If assessments in money are paid, no exactions in kind are permissible. This is repeated later (*speciorum exactio* v. *adaeratio statuta*) and, despite appearances, is in the interest of the landowners, not the soldiers.

The *limitanei milites* referred to are not farmer-soldiers, but 'soldiers serving in a frontier command', as opposed to those in the field army. For the discussion of the meaning of the term *limes* it is of interest to see that there were such soldiers not only in Third Palestine, which included the Negev and the desert of Southern Jordan, but also in First and Second Palestine nowhere near any kind of frontier. Even if it is admitted that the term *limes* meant no more than 'frontier district', it is hard to see how any part of First or Second Palestine could have been so designated. We must, therefore, assume that the *limitanei milites* referred to are a specific category of soldiers under the command of the *dux* who had as the area of his command the three provinces of Palestine. An administrative meaning should be given to *limitanei milites* in this text; these soldiers were not necessarily ever stationed in an area described as *limes*.⁷⁹

This is also clear from an episode recorded by Cyril of Scythopolis. Upon the request of Sabas, Justinian instructed the *dux Palaestinae* to transfer funds for the construction of a fort, which was to protect the monasteries in the Judaeian desert (that is, in Palaestina Prima, far from what is usually called the *limes* in the Negev). After its construction the *dux* was ordered to put a garrison in it.⁸⁰ This shows again that the *dux* was responsible for security throughout the Palestinian region.

11. Fragments of imperial edicts from Beer Sheva: A. Alt, *Die griechischen Inschriften der Palästina Tertia westlich der Araba* (1921), nos 1-4, pp. 4-8; cf. Ch. Clermont-Ganneau, *Recueil d'archéologie orientale* v (1902), 13-147 and further, Alt, op. cit.

The amounts to be paid in coin, instead of supplies in kind as *annona*, are specified for the various communities listed. There is nothing in the reference to 'devoted *limitanei*' to suggest that they were farmer-soldiers. The laws cited above under (9) and (10) were measures which attempted to protect civilians against greed on the part of bureaucrats and soldiers.⁸¹ It is possible that the Beer Sheva edict had

⁷⁹ Grosse, op. cit. (above, n. 62), 66, already pointed out that part of the *limitanei* were not stationed in frontier zones, such as Isauria and Upper Egypt.

⁸⁰ Cyril of Scythopolis, *Vita S. Sabae* 73, ed. Schwartz, 178.

⁸¹ Similarly, Justinian's novel 102 regarding Arabia.

the same purpose.⁸² A comparable text from Cyrene actually specifies the functions of these troops (*SEG* IX, 356, paras. 11, 14)—essentially police—and guard duties; they controlled movement in and out of the frontier districts. In fourth-century Mesopotamia such duties were carried out by *stationarii* (Ammianus XVIII, 5, 3). That, of course, was not novel: in the second century the same duties were carried out by auxiliary troops.

12. The first enactments regarding land held by the military date to the fifth century. They are not numerous and it is important to establish what can actually be learnt from the texts.

(a) *CTh* VII, 15, 1 (29 April, A.D. 409) discusses

terrarum spatia, quae gentilibus propter curam munitionemque limitis atque fossati antiquorum humana fuerant provisione concessa.

Lands which had been granted to *gentiles* (natives) for the care and protection of the frontier district and the *fossatum* by a benevolent provision of past generations.

If such lands are held by others these persons are responsible for the care of the *fossatum* and the protection of the *limes*. Otherwise the land must be transferred to natives or to veterans.

The law deals with a specific situation in Africa⁸³ and has no general validity. Even in Africa it is not concerned with lands held and worked by regular border troops (*limitanei* are *not* mentioned). They were held by natives, many of whom had apparently abandoned their land. The purpose of the law is to establish that anyone working the land would be bound by the same conditions as the original natives. It is clear that we are faced with the organization of some sort of militia, but it is an organization distinct from that of the *limitanei*, who are not mentioned in this text.

(b) *CTh* VII, 15, 2 (7 March, A.D. 423):

Quicumque castellorum loca quocumque titulo possident, cedant et deserant, quia ab his tantum fas est possideri castellorum territoria, quibus adscripta sunt et de quibus iudicavit antiquitas.

'Anyone who holds the lands of military forts under any title shall withdraw and abandon such property', etc. Any private person who is found holding the territory of forts will be liable to capital punishment and confiscation of property.

The application of this law, enacted in the east at Constantinople, is not confined to any particular province. It does not prove that land was assigned to army units, but shows rather that territories of forts were assigned to authorized persons who might, for example, be veterans. The two laws cited above both deal with lands originally assigned to specific groups which had been abandoned and taken over by others. The status of the land is, however, altogether different. Those who took possession of land assigned originally to *gentiles* had to fulfil certain obligations if they wanted to keep the property, but in principle they might keep it. On the other hand, it was absolutely forbidden for private individuals to hold military land. This is the first

⁸² Alt, p. 5, would then have missed the point in his translation: '[Es sollen ihre Abgaben entrichten die ... der] jeweiligen Duces, sowie die treuergebenen unter[stellten] Grenzsoldaten [und die übrigen Steuerpflichtigen] Jahr für Jahr in folgender Weise'. It is not impossible that the [??] of the Duces and the soldiers were to receive payment instead of paying others. Similar texts from the reign of Anastasius were found in Arabia, see E. Littmann et al., *Publications of the Princeton University Archaeological Expedition to Syria*,

in 1904–1905 III, *Greek and Latin Inscriptions* A2 (Leiden, 1910), p. 33, frs 15–19; *IGLS* XIII, 1, no. 9046; J. Marcillet-Jaubert, *ADAJ* 24 (1980), 122 f.; D. Kennedy, *Archaeological Explorations* (1982), 44–8: a text concerned with the payment of penalties by officials, which makes reference to, among others, 'those in charge in the *limes* of Palaestina and of Euphratensis' (i.e. Commagene). For the Beer Sheva edict see also P. Mayerson, *ZPE* 64 (1986), 141–8.

⁸³ See Matthews, loc. cit. (above n. 21).

post-Diocletianic text which refers to land assigned to army units,⁸⁴ but it certainly does not allow any conclusions about the transformation of regular troops into a peasant militia, let alone a hereditary militia.

(c) *NTh* XXIV, 1, 4 = *CJ* I, 60, 3 (12 September, A.D. 443):

agros etiam limitaneos universis cum paludibus omnique iure, quos ex prisca dispositione limitanei milites ab omni munere vacuos ipsi curare pro suo compendio atque arare consueverant, et si in praesenti coluntur ab his, firmiter ac sine ullo concussionis gravamine detineri.

All the lands in the border districts with marsh-lands and of every status which, according to previous regulations, the soldiers in the border districts were accustomed to work themselves and to cultivate for their own profit, exempt from any compulsory service ...⁸⁵

It is often stated that lands such as these were called 'fundi limitrophii'. As already observed by Jones, that is misleading and incorrect.⁸⁶ *CJ* XI, 60 has the following heading: 'de fundis limitrophis et terris et paludibus et pascuis limitaneis vel castellorum'. Three categories of property are clearly distinguished: (a) lands which must provide supplies to the army in the frontier districts; (b) property belonging to forts; (c) property worked by the troops in the *limites*. Then follow the texts of three separate laws: (1), dated A.D. 385, refers to 'possessiones quae ad limitem frumenta conveherent', that is category (a); (2) *CTh* VII, 15, 2, cited above, dated A.D. 423, category (b); (3), the current text of A.D. 443, category (c). But category (c) is not that of 'fundi limitrophii'; accordingly *CJ* XI, 60 contains no evidence on the existence of 'farmer-soldiers' before 443.

This is in fact the first reference to lands worked by soldiers for their own use and profit. It occurs in a lengthy measure aimed at checking corruption and neglect in the frontier zones throughout the East. Specific complaints are noted: the corruption of *duces*, military units not kept at the appropriate strength, insufficient training and exercise, forts and river patrol boats not kept in good repair, extortion of soldiers and native allies by the higher officers and their staff. Then follows the clause which emphasizes that lands granted to soldiers in the frontier area for their own use may not be transferred to others.

It is clear from this passage that in the fifth century soldiers in the frontier zone were allowed to work their own land. It is important, however, also to note what may not be deduced from it. There is nothing, for instance, to indicate that the status of these soldiers as *limitanei* was hereditary. Veterans' sons in all branches of the army had to serve, but not necessarily in the same type of unit as their fathers. It is misleading, moreover, to speak of a 'peasant militia'. Nor does this text by itself justify the statements common in modern works to the effect that the level of training and expertise of the army seriously deteriorated in this period. Complaints about the current state of affairs must always be assessed with some scepticism; after all, there is no lack of similar complaints about the deterioration of army discipline in earlier periods.⁸⁷ Nor, even if the description of the *limitanei* as a 'peasant militia' were correct, would it necessarily follow that they were poor soldiers.⁸⁸ Belisarius, for instance, used *limitanei* from Phoenicia-Libanensis for offensive operations in Mesopotamia.⁸⁹ Some of the best armies were and are militias and that includes the

⁸⁴ For Military land in the earlier period in the western provinces see F. Vittinghoff, *Ac. Naz. Lincei* 194 (1974), 109–24.

⁸⁵ For references to supplies to the *limes* see above, with *CTh* VIII, 4, 6 (358); *CJ* XII, 8 (386).

⁸⁶ Jones, op. cit. (n. 63), 651.

⁸⁷ See Jones, op. cit., 663 for the suggestion that the *limitanei* and the *comitatenses* were equally poor soldiers.

⁸⁸ For reservations see also Luttwak, op. cit. (n. 65), 172 f., and for discussion of the quality of frontier soldiers in the late empire, G. E. M. de Ste. Croix, *The*

Class Struggle in the Ancient Greek World (1981), 261 ff.

⁸⁹ This is to be inferred from Procopius II, 16, 17; see also I, 13, 5; II, 8, 2; II, 19, 33. W. Liebeschuetz, *Studien zu den Militärgrenzen Roms II* (1977), 497, assumes that this force was separate from the *limitanei*, because these were intended for defence of their immediate locality. However, the troops from Phoenicia Libanensis used by Belisarius were intended for the defence of their own province, as emphasized by Procopius, who represents Belisarius' step as unusual. Moreover, the conclusion of this paper is that all troops under the command of a *dux limitis* were *limitanei*.

Roman army of the republic. The same scholars who sadly observe the deterioration of the frontier troops into no more than a static militia often credit Roman veteran colonies of the republic and early empire with the pacification of huge areas. Surely both assumptions must be reconsidered.

(d) *CJ* I, 27 (A.D. 534): Justinian's instructions regarding the reorganization of Africa following the reconquest.

In paragraph 8 it is specified that in addition to the *comitatenses*, *limitanei* are to be stationed in forts, soldiers 'who can defend the forts and the towns of the *limes* and cultivate the land so that other provincials who see them in those parts will settle there...' As observed by Luttwak, Justinian restored the pattern of organization as it had been in the fifth century, which perhaps indicates that it had not been totally unsatisfactory. The *limitanei* are expected to take care of local defence without the support of the field army; they cannot have been regarded as a totally inadequate fighting force.

CONCLUSIONS

To sum up, the following can be said of the use of the term *limes* in antiquity:

I. A limited number of literary sources referring to Germanic campaigns in the first century use the term in describing the construction of military roads.

II. From the late first century till the third century it is used to indicate a demarcated land border of the empire. As such it does not refer to military structures or frontier organization, nor was it used to indicate a river boundary. In this sense the term is not in fact often encountered before the fourth century.

III. From the fourth century onward it is the formal term used to designate a frontier district under the command of a *dux*. It denoted an administrative concept, again unconnected with the military structures which may have existed in the area. The *limes* is always mentioned as distinct from the frontier of the empire. In no single case is a *limes* described as something made or constructed, although the term is now used very frequently. The change in meaning coincides with the reforms of Diocletian and Constantine. In the course of time it came to be used as a geographical concept (instead of an administrative one), to indicate the eastern desert. The association with institutions specifically Roman was lost.

IV. More important, there is in Latin no term to indicate what modern frontier studies describe as a *limes*, a defended border. It must then be asked whether in many instances the military organization, as represented by the physical remains, should be explained along different lines. In other words, there can be no justification for calling any chain of forts in a frontier area a *limes*.

V. The *limitanei* of the late empire were not peasant farmers. They were simply units under the command of a *dux limitis*. That is not a novel conclusion, yet it needs to be reiterated, since the old theory, already discarded by Jones, is still repeated. *Limitanei* is a term first attested in A.D. 363 (*CTh* XII, 1, 56), in a text which applies to all troops assigned to specific border regions (*limites*) under the command of *duces*. The term *limitaneus* is, in fact, only attested after the appearance of mobile field armies and in order to distinguish frontier forces from them. Before that the term was not needed because the bulk of the army was on the frontiers anyway.

The first source that indicates that *limitanei* worked their own land, assigned to them by the authorities, dates to A.D. 443. There is no evidence that this seriously affected their professional qualities, and it is consequently misleading to speak of a peasant militia as though this necessarily has qualitative implications.

VI. A revised interpretation of the meaning of *limes* has consequences for the function of the *limitanei*. The commander in charge of a specific *limes* must now be considered to have held a purely territorial command, not a functional one. The *limitanei* were simply soldiers serving anywhere in the area assigned to the relevant *dux* and their duties were not necessarily connected with frontier defence. The task of these troops was to take care of road security, mainly in the frontier districts, but they

could be stationed elsewhere as well. They controlled movement across the imperial border and were expected to keep their district under control in times of disturbances. The existence of such units is not an indication of the deterioration of the army as a whole, any more than is the existence of a police apparatus in any other state.

All Souls College, Oxford
Tel Aviv University