

PHILIP MAYERSON

THE MEANING OF THE WORD *LIMES* (ΛΙΜΙΤΟΝ) IN THE PAPHYRI

aus: Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik 77 (1989) 287–291

© Dr. Rudolf Habelt GmbH, Bonn



### The Meaning of the Word *Limes* (λίμιτον) in the Papyri

In the past several decades there has been such a spate of interest in the *limes* that a colleague of mine has called it "the *limes* industry." This interest has been occasioned largely by surveys and excavations of military installations in the Roman provinces of Palestine and Arabia. From the time of Mommsen, Brünnow and Domaszewski to the present, the preoccupation with military installations and military organization has led investigators to interpret the word *limes* as meaning a fortified line of defense, and to formalize their conclusions by coining or using such terms as *Limes Arabicus*, *Limes Palaestinae*, Antonine, Severan, Diocletian, Justinian *Limes*.<sup>1</sup>

In an article on the Saracens and the *limes*, this writer has taken the position that, in its application to Palestine and Arabia, it is necessary to discard the association of the term *limes* with the words "border" or "boundary" or "fortified line"; that it is best to take the word as a broad geographical term meaning "frontier" (*BASOR* 262 [1986] 39). Among other citations in support of my view I pointed out that Malalas makes clear this meaning of the word when he relates (Dindorf, 434) an incident concerning the Saracen phylarch Arethas who, fearing the hostility of the *dux* of Palestine, fled "to the inner *limes* toward the Indies"; that is, he fled to the interior frontier region, the traditional haven of safety for raiding Arabs, far removed from forts, urban populations and civilization.<sup>2</sup>

B. Isaac, in a wide-reaching article on the meaning of the words *limes* and *limitanei*, has argued persuasively that for every period, from the first century to the sixth, the word *limes* had no specific connection with a fortified line of defense, whether linear or in-depth, and that from the fourth century the term became an "administrative concept denoting a frontier district administered by a military commander (*dux*) ... In time this formal term came to be used in an informal manner, to indicate the 'frontier district' (*JRS* 78 [1988] forthcoming)." In arriving at his conclusions, Isaac investigated the use of the word in literary and epigraphic sources. He did not, however, examine the use of the word in the papyri; hence, this opportunity to test both our positions on this very sensitive issue in which there is a heavy investment in scholarly publications.

<sup>1</sup> See e.g., S.T. Parker, "Toward a History of the *Limes Arabicus*," *BAR International Series* 71 (1980) 865-877; *idem*, *BASOR Supplement* No. 23 (1985) 1-24; I. Shahîd, *Byzantium and the Arabs in the Fourth Century* (Dumbarton Oaks 1984) 476-483 *et passim*; M. Avi-Yonah, *RE* suppl. 13 (1973) s.v. Palaestina, cols. 417-418; 448.

<sup>2</sup> *loc. cit.* 45. See also P. Mayerson, "A Note on the Roman *Limes*: 'Inner' versus 'Outer,'" *Israel Exploration Journal* (forthcoming). From a Roman point of view, the inner part of the frontier district was more remote than the outer parts, at least one of which bordered upon the Roman *oikoumenē*.

It is natural to turn first to Maspero's seminal work on the military organization of Byzantine Egypt. Maspero accepts the traditional meaning of the word *limes* as a system of defense, but he is confronted by a dilemma when comparing the defense-in-depth system described by Diehl for Africa and its absence in Egypt. It leads him to raise this question:

"Existe-t-il un *limes* semblable en Egypte au vi<sup>e</sup> siècle? Il nous en reste très peu de témoignages écrits; encore sont-ils des plus succincts. En général, l'expression de *λίμιτον* a ce sens très large de 'province frontière' .... Parfois pourtant elle se restreint, et, en Thébaïde au moins, désigne cette sorte de *marche* des confins qui est à cette époque le véritable *limes*."<sup>3</sup>

Maspero, in spite of being influenced by the traditional meaning of *limes*, has, in the face of the evidence, touched upon this writer's conclusion for the eastern provinces and Isaac's general statement for the late empire. Maspero's term "*marche des confins*" is the equivalent of "borderlands" or "border region" and is quite close in meaning to "frontier" or "frontier district." The fact that he reserved the word "frontière" to qualify "province" apparently did not provide the meaning he sought in connection with the Thebaid. As for defining *limes* as "frontière province," the phrase cannot serve as a general term to describe such provinces as Palestine, Phoenicia, and Syria. Maspero's *marche*, however, appears to have influenced the editors of *P. Abinn.* 1.5-6, who translate *comes limitis* as "count of the Mark." E. Bernard uses "marche" in *J. Philae* 194 but "province-frontière" in *J. Philae* 220-222 although all three refer to the Thebaid.<sup>4</sup> G. Zeferele translates *limes* as "Mark" and as "Grenzgebiet" (*Aegyptus* 9 [1928] 115 and 117). In *P. Mert.* I 43.17, however, where mention is made of a *κρατοπεδάρχης τοῦ Αἰγυπτιακοῦ λιμίτου*, the editor, relying on Maspero, notes (p. 143): "For *λίμιτον*, used either of a frontier province, or as probably here, of an area marked by a line of fortified posts."

*P. Abinn.* 1.5-6 (340/1), *P. Mert.* I 43.17 (V?) and nine others represent all the citations of the word *limes* in Egyptian documents prior to the Islamic era: *Stud. Pal.* XX 143.2 (435); *W.Chr.* I 6.15 (425/450); *SB* IV 7433.1.20 (468); *BGU* XII 2162.3; *P. Ryl.* IV 609.1 (505); *SB* VI 9598.3 (V); *P. Monac.* I 6. 11 and 28f. (VI); *BGU* II 670.4 (byz); *P. Cair. Masp.* I 67076.13 (byz). For the Islamic period, there are two, dated to 708: *P. Lond.* IV 1332.23 and 1333.25. In addition to the above, there are four inscriptions from Philae (194 and 220-222) that are often cited in discussions of the word *limes* in Egyptian documents (see n. 4).

In all instances, with the exception of *P. Cairo Masp.* I 67076, *P. Monac.* I 6, and *P. Lond.* IV 1332 and 1333, the word *limes* appears as part of the title of the *comes* together with the name of the province: *τοῦ θηβαϊακοῦ λιμίτου* or *τοῦ Αἰγυπτιακοῦ λιμίτου* or its Latin equivalent. In *P. Monac.* 6, a certain tribune (?) Menas is cited as *τοποτηρητῆς τοῦ λιμίτου*, and *BGU* XII 2162, 2f. is directed to a certain *commentariensis*, *ἀπὸ κομ[μ]ενταρησίων [--]ης στρα[α]τιωτικῆς τάξεως τοῦ θηβαϊκ[οῦ] λιμίτου*.

<sup>3</sup> *Organization militaire de l'Égypte byzantine* (Paris 1942) 19.

<sup>4</sup> *Les Inscriptions grecques et latines de Philae II* (Paris 1967). His numbers 194, 220, 221, and 222 refer to *Rec.* 592, 598, 599, and 600 respectively in G. Lefebvre, *Recueil des inscriptions grecques-chrétiennes d'Égypte*, Cairo 1907.

There is no question that in the several provinces of Egypt the *comes* --- occasionally called *comes et dux*, *comes rei militaris*, or *dux* --- was the imperial officer in command of the armed forces and military installations. However, the fact that the word *limes* was attached to his title cannot be taken as a formal imperial designation. The eleven citations that have come to light represent a statistically low number of occurrences. A sampling from Preisigke's "Besondere Wörterliste" (pp. 126-7; 206) shows that out of some 80 citations for *comes*, only 4 are followed by *limes*; out of 45 citations for *dux*, only one, and that is also cited under *comes*. Interestingly enough, however, the words τῆς Θηβαίων χώρας appear 4 times under the listing of titles for *dux*. I see here a close association in meaning between *limes* as "frontier" and χώρα in a more general sense as "region."

In *P. Lond.* IV 1332 and 1333, dated to the early Islamic period, an Arab official is charged with the duty of searching for fugitives and is ordered to go εἰς(ε) λίμιτ(ον). The use of the word without a qualifying place name has created somewhat of a dilemma as to its location. The editor of the papyrus believes that it probably represented one of the two Thebais which appears in Justinian's Edict XIII 22.1; or that it is the border district between Arcadia and the Thebaid.<sup>5</sup> Maspero, on the other hand, believes that it can only be the fortified zone facing the Nubian frontier (*op. cit.* [n. 3], p. 19). I would like to suggest another alternative. The two documents cite three distinct regions for which Arab officials were ordered to search for fugitives: the Thebaid, Arcadia, and λίμιτον. Wherever λίμιτον was, the Arab official knew where it was. If it was one of the two Thebais, it would have been so stated. It is possible, I believe, that over time, a region that was loosely called "the frontier" became formally known as a distinct region called The Frontier. (cf. the degeneralization of castrum becoming Chester.)

*P. Cair. Masp.* I 67076, a letter, is a compelling one since the critical word is not part of the title of a military commander, but deals with quantities of wheat, a money allowance, and the phrase "to send wheat from the *limes*" i.e., from the frontier. Maspero considers that the Thebaid is to be understood with the phrase (*ibidem* p. 19, n. 1). It is possible, however, that, as in *P. Lond.* IV 1332 and 1333, the writer was referring to a region known as The Frontier.

It should also be noted that no citation for the word *limes* appears in any of the Egyptian documents earlier than the fourth century. Isaac has observed that the term became extremely common after the army reorganization of Diocletian and Constantine, and that from the fourth century and later it was used in the sense of a frontier district and that it was used frequently (*JRS* 78 [1988], forthcoming). The word soon entered the vocabulary of Rufinus (*HE* 2.6) when he reported Saracen raids (ca. 374) on "cities and towns of the Palestinian and Arabian *limes* ... and neighboring provinces." Jerome (PL 22.1086), in a letter dated 411, writes: "a sudden attack by barbarians ... ran through the *limes* of Egypt, Palestine, Phoenicia and Syria." To this may be added the much-quoted statement of Malalas (Dindorf 308)

---

<sup>5</sup> p. xx; *JHS* (1901) 120, n. 42.

regarding Diocletian's reorganization of the eastern provinces, that he "built εἰς τὰ λίμια κάκτρα from Egypt to the borders of Persia (ἕως τῶν Περσικῶν ὄρων).

It would appear that, from the fourth century or somewhat earlier, the imperial chancery required a word that would more closely define the relationship between lands that were controlled by Rome and those that were not. In regions where there was a fixed, or perceived, line between the two, the word *finēs* (boundary) was appropriate. By the fourth century, apparently, boundaries were difficult to define, and hence the word *limes* (frontier) more accurately described the situation in such provinces as Egypt, Africa, Arabia, and Syria. It is significant to note that in Justinian's edict 1.27, dated to 534, directed to the praetorian prefect of Africa and Belisarius as *magister militum Orientis*, the word *finēs* is used 6 times in 27.4 in urging the army to recover lands "to that point where the Roman state had its boundaries (*finēs*) before the invasion of the Vandals and the Moors." In the paragraphs which follow, (27.5-17), which specify the actions required by the prefect and Belisarius to maintain the frontier, the words *limes* and *limitaneus* are used exclusively, some 13 times.

To elaborate further on my opening statement to this paper, I have taken the position that, with respect to the eastern provinces, it is best to translate the word *limes* as "frontier" in the sense that it is used in the United States: i.e., as the land that forms the furthest extent of a country's settled or inhabited region (*BASOR* 262 [1986] 39). The word "frontier" is an elastic one and does not require sharp definition in terms of boundaries or lines of separation between states, provinces, ethnic groups, etc. A frontier lies at the hither edge of a desert, or of a region incapable of habitation or penetration; it is a region that is thinly settled, if at all. Because of the hostile nature of the environment, a frontier usually requires a system of defense to protect its inhabitants, to provide sanctuary in forts, fortlets, or towers in the event of attacks in force, and to keep open lines of communication between settlements and commercial entrepôts. Hence, we can speak of a frontier of settlement and a frontier of military defense. When Rufinus and Jerome speak of raids and use the word *limes* they are unquestionably referring to frontiers of settlement; Malalas' statement, on the other hand, refers to the action taken by Diocletian to organize the military defenses on the frontiers facing Persia and the east.

As for Egypt, the armed forces listed in the *Notitia Dignitatum* for the diocese, the military titles that crop up in the documents, and the physical evidence of forts and towers direct our attention forcibly to the military frontier, while little is known of the scattered settlement, monasteries, and habitations of ascetics that lay beyond the pale of the organized system of defense. Such was the case of the monastic settlements at Scetis and Nitria in the western desert, and the monasteries of St. Anthony and Paul in the eastern desert. In other words, the two frontiers do not necessarily coincide. This is perhaps truer for Egypt than for most other provinces since one does not have to go far to find the Egyptian frontier. All the lands to the east and west of the narrow belt of cultivation along both banks of the Nile, and several oases, represent the Egyptian frontier. Maspero has put it succinctly when he states: "Chaque ville, en un certain sens, est ville frontière puisqu' à travers les solitudes de sable ou de montagnes qui longent de si près chaque rive du Nil, les bandes pillages de nomades peu-

vent toujours circuler inaperçues et opérer une razzia dans les nomes les plus inattendus et en apparence les mieux protégés" (above, n. 3, p. 10).

To sum up, it is evident that there is ambiguity and confusion in giving meaning to the term *limes* as it appears in the Egyptian documents and other sources. One cannot use words meaning "border" where there are no borders in the conventional sense of the term, but only outlying districts of civilization or undefined tracts of land. Confusion is added when *limes* is taken without qualification as a line of military installations. To clarify what has become a muddied situation, it would be helpful to translate *limes* as "frontier," or "frontier-district" and their equivalent in other languages. It would help even more if it were possible to be more specific by distinguishing between the two different kinds of frontiers: frontiers of settlement and military frontiers. There may also be occasions where it would be useful to use the term "political frontier" when, for example, describing an uninhabited and unfortified region (*limes interior?*) that is under the apparent control of a governing power.

One additional item. If the view put forward by Isaac and myself has merit, it would be unfortunate should the word *limes* continue to be listed in further supplements of Preisigke's *Besondere Wörterliste* under Abschnitt 10: "Militär" without some cautionary note. The same would apply to the multi-fascicled entry "Limes" in the *Dizionario Epigraphico de Antichità Romane*.