# THE LIMITS OF EUROPE: BORDERS, FRONTIERS AND THE *LIMES ROMANUS*

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Borderlands are not places which divide peoples. They are places where peoples meet. Sometimes these meetings are peaceful and productive. Other times they are violent and destructive. Whichever the case, these lands, spaces, and places are shared experiences between peoples. Through these experiences, maps are redrawn, states reformulated, and relations renegotiated. While some borders may persist for many years, the experience of borders like any other spatial experience changes and shifts over time.

Some borders are manmade. Others are natural features such as rivers, coastlines, or mountain ranges. Thinking about ancient borders, they are often misconceived as being things which divided regions. Since the acceptance of automobiles and trains as the main modes of human transportation, waterways, seas, and lakes have been things to go around or avoid. Today, we mostly cross rivers at bridges, but in pre-industrial times these waterways were things which tied peoples together. It was far easier, safer, and quicker for a trader to move goods, such as amphorae filled with wine or oil, along rivers or over sea routes than to travel overland. In many ways, rivers and seas were the motorways of the past. Just as service stations, rest stops, and fast food restaurants have grown up as meeting places along our contemporary motorways, so too did towns and ports throughout Europe in the past. The peoples on either side of the Danube share more than what we might think of as a border between Slovakia, Hungary, Croatia, Serbia, Romania, Bulgaria, Moldova, and Ukraine. They share a way of life that has been tied to the movement along this great river for thousands of years.

This sense of movement is something which all borders share. Sometimes the dynamics are along the border. Other times they are across or through it. Whichever the case, the engagement with these spaces creates a richly socialized space. As a place, borders are not simply physical structures. They are places of agreement, negotiation, or contestation. They are conceptions responding to interpersonal exchange relating to how we as peoples engage with the lands we share. The significance of a border thus is not so much in its physicality but in the emotional, psychological, and physical energy required to maintain it.

The traces of ancient and contemporary borders across Europe are not simply evidence of politically maintained cohesion or cultural cores, but they are evidence of vigilance relating to social interaction, exchange, and difference. An archaeology of these borderlands provides rich social narratives of acculturation, diffusion, and distillation. Like ancient hedgerows in Ireland that demark townland boundaries, ancient borderlands are places with some of the richest biodiversity in Europe. In the same way, these borderlands are evidence of long traditions of social negotiation and cultural diversity.

The lines drawn to represent borders on two-dimensional maps of Europe create vertical divisions in our lands, but the histories and pre-histories of these verticals are neither linear nor two-dimensional. Below the surface of contemporary geopolitics and cartographic knowledge is a rich palimpsest of horizontal strata where the vertical lines of borders ebb and flow, erase, appear, and re-erase.[1] Archaeologically, the becoming of Europe's borders is a complex three-dimensional space pregnant with traces of a fourth dimension, time. Excavating these shifting borderlands adds potent dimensions to the map of Europe, opening a deep trench through temporalities and conceptions of Europe and its lands. As the European Union has been expanding over the past few years, meeting new peoples and exploring new cultural relations, it perhaps is useful to reflect on the archaeology of some borderlands in Europe that have left a particularly strong impression on the landscape we share today—the *Limes Romanus.*

**Building Limits in Europe: The *Limes Romanus***

Throughout the history of the Roman Republic and into the first century of the Roman Empire, the frontiers of Roman influence in the European and Mediterranean worlds expanded and contracted, shifted and changed. Though by the reign of Publius Aelius Hadrianus (Hadrian, AD 117–138), expansion slowed, and the frontiers of the Roman Empire were consolidated. Hadrian then began a process of formally articulating the *limes.* This resulted in the first constructed series of transcontinental borderworks in Europe and the Mediterranean world.[2]

There is no precise term in Latin meaning "frontier." The closest concept is *limes.* Generally defined as "a path between two fields," *limes* can also refer to any road or channel or even any distinction or difference. The formalization of border regions and frontier lands under the reign of Hadrian resulted not only in an extensive building program undertaken by the Roman army but also in a reconceptualization of the possibilities of Roman influence in the world. Rome's imperial ambition and influence was given a limit—the *Limes Romanus.*

The *Limes Romanus* is a historical concept that encompasses Roman frontiers along the Rhine and Danube Rivers in the North, a series of frontier works in the East and North Africa, and the uniquely substantial construction of Hadrian's Wall in Britain. The different forms and iterations of the *limes* responded to and reflected the different topographies and sociocultural situations throughout the empire. The characteristic that is shared by all *limites* is not that they were borders or divisions but that they were places of movement and commerce—"paths" between peoples.

The Rhine and Danube rivers, like all rivers, facilitated quick movement of goods and, given their size, were convenient choices for borders. The flat topography of the Rhine meant that is was fordable, and this led to the construction of formidable defensive works while the steep gorge of the Danube required less intensive building presence. In general, the adoption of these rivers as provincial borders may have had more to do with their being bureaucratically convenient. Julius Caesar noted as much when we stated that their selection as borders was mainly an arbitrary assumption (*The Gallic Wars* 4.4, 4.16).



The 2,500-miles-long African frontier spanning from Rabat in the West to the Red Sea in the East was generally undeveloped and minimally administered with only two legions stationed along the entire expanse, with the exception of Egypt. This area south of the North African coast was mainly an expanse of sparsely inhabited mountainous areas and arid desert regions, and since the defeat of Carthage in 146 BC there was no organized opposition to Roman control of the region. The case was different in the eastern region of Egypt from the Nile River valley to the Red Sea, which was rich in gold, emeralds, and granite. Here roads and *limites* were critical to the movement of goods and resources. Roads connecting Egyptian cities such as Qina and Coptos (present-day Qift) to Red Sea ports were lined with regular garrison posts and signal towers that oversaw the transport of commodities back and forth between the Nile and the Red Sea. The southernmost of these routes was formalized in AD 137 by Hadrian. The road to the seaport of Berenice (present-day Medinet-el Haras), which was the shipping point for trade with India, Arabia, and Upper Egypt, was lined with forts and garrisons posts and became known as the Via Hadriana. These garrison posts were outfitted with cisterns and external enclosures suggesting that Roman soldiers occupied the structures for an extended period of time and thus that the policing of the route was important.

In the East, the frontiers were initially the steppe-lands of Eastern Anatolia, the mountainous region of the Transcaucasian Sarmatians, and the desert stretching south through the lands of Palestine, Mesopotamia, and Arabia. As Rome relinquished desire to conquer Parthia in the East in the late first century BC, a road lined with garrison posts was constructed along the Eastern frontier. It was administered by a garrison of two legions while six other legions were tasked with maintaining peace in Palestine.

Finally, the case of the British frontier and Hadrian's Wall is unique in Roman history.[3] The conquest of Britain had always been more of a quest for propaganda and glory than for resources and profit. Both Caesar and Claudius used their invasions of Britain to further their political careers at home in Rome. Throughout the early period of the campaigns in Britain, it was understood that Rome would eventually exercise control over the entire island. It was not until the governorship of Agricola (AD 77/78–83/84/85) that it was thought that Rome's expansion might stop short of the whole island. From the time of Agricola onwards, Rome began to consolidate its forces in the portion of Britain that it controlled. A series of forts were constructed and concentrated along the northern border of the province. The culmination of this effort was the construction of Hadrian's Wall, which lay north of the Tyne River on the Solway Isthmus. Despite its formidable presence on the landscape today, Hadrian's Wall was not as impenetrable as it may seem. It functioned more as a *limes,* a path or road, which facilitated movement along the frontier. Gates were constructed at regular intervals along the wall, implying that it was possible to cross the wall. This is especially the case since archaeology has shown that a number of Roman settlements existed north of the wall, and eventually Roman interest north of the wall required an additional wood, ditch, and bank wall (known as the Antonine Wall) to be constructed on the Firth-Clyde Isthmus circa AD 139–142.

The presence of Hadrian's Wall created a new social space. It was a meeting place for Roman military forces and indigenous peoples of Britain, and the result was the development of a rich and diverse cultural exchange. Forts such as at Housesteads in Northumbria developed a *vicus,* a town of civilians many of whom would be from Britain. These people offered services to the Roman military and they thus became vibrant economic sites for people living both north and south of the wall.

The *Limes Romanus* developed over time, but the extensive physical boundaries realized under Hadrian suggest a shift in the understanding of frontiers and the nature of the empire as a whole. It has been suggested that the massive building programs that resulted in many of the *limes* fortifications works may have been propaganda campaigns to impress the provinces or those living beyond the *limes.* They may also have been a method for occupying a disillusioned and unengaged military stationed along the borders during the long duration of the *Pax Romana.*[4] In either event, the formalization of the *limes* under Hadrian points towards a social awareness of a defined boundary of Roman *imperium.* They also suggest a social understanding of a limit of *Romanitas* and social status associated with Roman citizenship or provincial status. By defining the limits of Roman administration, Rome consolidated and limited the scope of its efforts to raise peoples to higher statuses in the Roman Empire and to include new peoples within the empire.

In this sense, the *limes* represent an understood limitation of influence and identity. They demark regions where the Romans accepted differences with other peoples and worked to monitor and engage with processes of diffusion, distillation, and acculturation along the pathways between the peoples of the European and Mediterranean worlds. Though the material articulation of the *limes* in fortification works may have been bureaucratically, economically, and politically convenient, the attempt to halt the dynamic shifts, changes, and renegotiations of the Roman borderlands may have led to the inevitable collapse of the Roman frontiers. Rendering their borders as static physical structures, the Romans may have forsaken the mobility and flux that was inherent to their borders—*limes* as a shared path between peoples.

**Testing the Limits of Europe: The Legacy of the *Limes***

Hadrian's Wall, fortifications along the Rhine, and other works along the *Limes Romanus* are visible today throughout Europe and the Mediterranean world. They physically protrude through the landscape as stone and earthworks. It is, however, not just their archaeological materiality that exists with us today. Their conception as a space of social negotiation and their ambition to place limits on social interaction and political expansion resonate through contemporary European politics.

Nearly 1900 years since the formalization of the *Limes Romanus,* the European Union is facing similar debates and tensions regarding the articulation, formulation, and testing of borders. On July 13, 2008, French President Nicholas Sarkozy launched the Barcelona Process: Union for the Mediterranean. The move proposed a formal strategic and economic relationship between the twenty-seven member states of the European Union and seventeen non-EU states that border or are strategically close to the Mediterranean Sea and are part of the Euromediterranean Partnership.[5] Broadly understood as a possible stepping stone towards EU membership, this newly proposed community problematizes both the linear conceptions of the European Union as limited to the continent of Europe and traditional conceptions of Christian-centric European cultural identity.



The proposal also problematizes a fixed understanding of European borders. Embracing the waterways of the Mediterranean Sea as something which unites different peoples and places rather than divides them, the proposed community distills a fixed European border that halts at the southern end of the continent. The accession of the island nations of Malta and Cyprus on May 1, 2004 to the European Union already began this distillation of the European Union's borders through the waters of the Mediterranean. Both islands are richly diverse places of cultural diversity and have been meeting places of different peoples for centuries. The accession of Cyprus, in particular, shifted the understanding of borders from physical locations to social and cultural exchange. Cyprus's proximity to Turkey and to the Middle East and its history of social conflict and acculturation between the Greek and Turkish Cypriot populations reveal Cyprus to be more of a *limes*—a place shared by peoples—than a static linear border.

As stated earlier, borderlands are like ancient hedgerows. They are rich in social and cultural diversity. Exploring the networks of borders, old and new, through the three-dimensional space of a developing European Union perhaps exposes a psycho-geography of Europe's continual becoming. The networks of stonewalls, rivers, hedgerows, roads, railways, and seas reveal Europe to be a shared place with many pathways through the landscape shared by many different peoples.[6] Each of these pathways has its own stories and histories, some delving deep into Classical antiquity, others generated by more recent sociopolitical strife and conflict. Following the legacy of the *limes,* these borders are best kept as dynamic places of movement and mobility, maintained through our continual engagement and negotiation, and shared as places where we learn about ourselves through the meeting of others.

1 For a discussion of the politics of verticality in relation to the Israel-Palestine conflict, see E. Weizman, "The Politics of Verticality," *Opendemocracy.net,* April 24, 2002. http://www.opendemocracy.net/conflict-politicsverticality/article_801.jsp (accessed June 5, 2009).
2 For an extensive study of the archaeology of the Roman frontiers, see E. Hilton, *Frontiers of the Roman Empire* (London, 1996).
3 For an extensive discussion of Hadrian's Wall, see D. J. Breeze and B. Dobson, *Hadrian's Wall* (London, 2000).
4 The *Pax Romana* (literally "Roman Peace") was a period of limited expansion and relative peace throughout the Roman Empire. Ushered in under the reign of Caesar Augustus (63 BC–AD 19), the period lasted approximately 200 years into the second century AD.
5 The 17 non-EU States involved in the proposal of the Barcelona Process: Union for the Mediterranean include: Albania, Algeria, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Croatia, Egypt, Israel, Jordan, Lebanon, Libya (Observer Status), Mauritania, Monaco, Montenegro, Morocco, Palestinian Authority, Syria, Tunisia, and Turkey.
6 For an excellent discussion of pathways in the cultural landscape of Europe see: J. Clark et al., *Pathways to Europe's Landscape: European Pathways to the Cultural Landscape, 2000–2003* (Heide, 2003).