CHAPTER EIGHT

THE IMPACT OF ‘BARBARIZATION’ ON THE ROMAN ARMY

Any understanding of the many changes which took place in the later Roman empire must take into account the tremendous demands placed on the government by the military. The number and the intensity of the threats directed against the Roman state increased during the middle of the third century, creating an entirely new situation with which the Augustan frontier system could not cope. In the east, the Sassanian monarchy replaced the Arsacids in Persia and instituted a more aggressive policy of expansion at the expense of the Romans. Along the Rhine and Danube frontiers, more powerful coalitions of barbarian tribes appeared, such as the Franks, Alamanni, and Goths, who constituted a more dangerous and continuous menace than earlier barbarian attacks on the empire.1 The Romans now had to face many serious threats on multiple fronts at the same time, forcing them to greatly increase the size of the army and devote the greater part of the empire’s resources to the defense of the frontiers, or limes.

The Roman frontiers have been the focus of much scholarly research in recent years. Many of these researchers now argue that the limes were not the formidable defensive barriers that many previous scholars had assumed.2 As barriers, they were often artificial, as their actual location, in many cases, did not conform to any plan of defense based on terrain, but were either determined by the logistical needs of the units based in that area, or even arbitrary. Rather than constituting

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2 For the original thesis of a ‘grand strategy’ for the defense of the Roman Empire, see E. N. Luttwak, The Grand Strategy of the Roman Empire (Baltimore, 1976).
absolute barriers to outsiders, the Roman *limes* were ‘zones of interaction’ between the empire and barbarian peoples living on both sides of the frontier. Many of the rivers which marked the boundary between barbarian and Roman territories were highways, rather than impediments to travel. The guard posts and forts along the periphery of the empire may, in fact, have been placed more to regulate movement across the borders rather than to prevent it.

The frontier was largely an area where the Roman world confronted the outsider in the form of trade. The evidence for numerous trade exchanges and border crossings can be found both in the archaeological remains and in the sources. Eventually a ‘frontier’ civilization was created along the *limes* of the Roman empire, which also helped blur the distinction between Roman and barbarian, especially between those barbarians living on both sides of the border, thus making the issue of ‘us’ and ‘them’ a little harder to define in some cases. Members of the same tribe or nation could be found living in both Roman and barbarian territory, a situation which led to the assimilation of many barbarian peoples into Roman culture, as well as providing an impetus for those outside the empire to want to enter it and enjoy the advantages of Roman civilization. Thus, the frontier of the empire ceased to be a cultural boundary, a development which was to have major implications for Roman recruitment policy in the fourth through sixth centuries.

Historians often use the reign of Diocletian (284–305) as a convenient starting point for the later Roman empire or Late Antiquity. This is due to the fact that Diocletian instituted sweeping administrative, economic, political, and military changes which would characterize

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Please note that throughout this chapter the use of the term ‘barbarian’ or ‘Roman’ does not constitute an accurate description of the ethnicity of the peoples involved, nor is it meant to be pejorative, but merely a convenience to make a distinction between those inhabitants of the empire who enjoyed full rights of citizenship (Romans) and everyone else (barbarian). I fully appreciate that the Roman citizenship was possessed by peoples of a wide variety of ethnic and linguistic backgrounds, including former barbarians, during this time period.

A. D. Lee, *Information & Frontiers* (Cambridge, 1993), 97–99 notes that, before the construction of various canals during the nineteenth century, both the Rhine and Danube had numerous points along their courses which were shallow enough for men to wade across, see Amm. Marc. 14.10.7, 16.11.9; Tac. *Ann.* 4.73. For the view of Roman frontiers as ‘zones of interaction’ rather than as ‘natural’ or ‘scientific’ frontiers, see C. R. Whittaker, *The Frontiers of the Roman Empire* (Baltimore, 1994), 60–131; B. Isaac, *The Limits of Empire* (Oxford, 1992), 372–426.