THE LIMITS OF EMPIRE IN THE RES GESTAE OF AMMIANUS MARCELLINUS

Jan Willem Drijvers

INTRODUCTION

In the Res Gestae of the emperor Augustus we read the following:

I extended the borders of all those provinces of the Roman people on whose borders lay people not subject to our government. I brought peace to the Gallic and Spanish provinces, as well as to Germany, throughout the area bordering on the ocean from Cadiz to the mouth of the Elbe ... My fleet sailed through the ocean eastwards from the mouth of the Rhine to the territory of the Cimbri, a country which no Roman had visited before either by land or sea, and the Cimbri, Charydes, Semnones and other German peoples of that region sent ambassadors and sought my friendship and that of the Roman people.2

One of the interesting aspects of this passage is Augustus' claim of German territory as part of the Roman Empire whereas, according to modern historians, Rome had not officially—albeit in effect—given up her efforts to conquer and incorporate the parts of Germany between the mouths of the Rhine and the Elbe not long after the disastrous battle in the Teutoburg Forest in 9 AD.3 Thereafter the rivers Rhine and Danube

---

1 I wish to thank Mark Graham, Daan den Hengst and Nick Hodgson for their comments on an earlier draft of this paper. Special thanks are due to Benjamin Isaac for his willingness to comment on a paper many of the views of which he does not share; I profited greatly from his critical remarks and he made me reconsider some of my opinions or put them forward in a more nuanced way. Alasdair MacDonald was kind enough to correct my English.

2 26.1–4: Omnium provinciarum populi Romani quibus finitimae fuerunt gentes quae non parerent imperio nostro fines auxi. Gallias et Hispanias provincias, item Germaniam, qua includit Oceanus a Gadibus ad ostium Albis fluminis pacavi ... Classis mea per Oceanum ab ostio Rheni ad solis orientis regionem usque ad fines Cimbrorum navigavit, quo neque terra neque mari quisquam Romanus ante id tempus adit, Cimbrique et Charydes et Semnones et eiusdem tractus alii Germanorum populi per legatos amicitiam mean et populi Romani petierunt; tr. Brunt & Moore.

3 On the Res Gestae as a geographical survey and catalogue of conquests asserting Rome’s control over the orbis terrarum, see C. Nicolet, Space, Geography, and Politics in the Early Roman Empire (Ann Arbor 1991), Chapters 1 and 2.
had become the demarcation lines between the Roman Empire and the ‘barbaricum’. However, Augustus and his contemporaries seem to have had a different concept of Roman territory than modern historians. The Romans still adhered to the idea of an *imperium sine fine*. Actual conquest, occupation, and provincialisation were apparently not necessary to let them consider Germania as part of the world under Roman *imperium*. This attitude has consequences for how the Romans perceived frontiers or borders in the early imperial period. The concept of an imperial frontier seems to have had little meaning and the Romans in the early Empire seem not to have been accustomed to thinking about frontiers as physical and static boundaries.⁴

Over time, however, the notion of *imperium sine fine* disappeared and since the third century the Romans came to see their empire more and more in terms of defined territory.⁵ Along with this new idea of empire as a defined territory, a consciousness of frontiers as dividing lines between Roman territory and the regions that lay beyond those lines seems to have developed. The perception that there were actual limits to the territory of the *imperium* of Rome was no doubt prompted by the threats made by northern ‘barbarians’ from the end of the second century onwards to what was considered Roman domain, and by the military invasions in the eastern provinces undertaken by the Sassanid Empire in the third century.

Four centuries after Augustus, the new consciousness of limits to Roman territory is well expressed by St. Augustine. Augustine, contemplating that Terminus, the god of boundaries, had several times given ground to Rome’s enemies, refers to Julian’s disastrous Persian campaign of 363 and the peace agreement that his successor Jovian was forced to conclude with the Sassanid king Shapur II. Territorial concessions had to be made: the city of Nisibis and five Transtigritane regions were surrendered to the Persians.⁶ Augustine remarks that peace was made and that the boundaries of the empire were fixed where they remain today, i.e. as in the second decade of the fifth century.⁷ Augustine uses the terms *fines* and *termini*, clearly indicating that there was an apprehension that there

---

⁴ M.W. Graham, *News and Frontier Consciousness in the Late Roman Empire* (Ann Arbor 2006), ix.
⁵ Graham 2006, op. cit. (n. 4), 2.
⁷ Augustinus, *De Civitate Dei* 4.29: placito pacis illic imperii fines constituerunt,