Mommsen published *Die Provinzen von Caesar bis Diocletian* in 1885 and although our understanding of the limits of official authority (*provincia*) is now more nuanced, it does not appear that historians have made very much progress in defining the spatial limits of territorial provinces. Indeed, the standard geographical reference states clearly, at least of the eastern provinces, that “Provincial boundaries are approximate and in many cases, very uncertain.”Provinces were, nonetheless, the essence of the empire: next to the standing army, the administration of the provinces was what kept the empire together for over 800 years. While it is more or less clear how provinces were accumulated—from inheritance through conquest to acquisition—it is much less clear what they were for. Not one single ancient source describes the rationale behind the definition of territorial provinces, nor the reasons behind the transfer of territory from one to the other. Our only reference is the unreliable testimony of Lactantius that Diocletian chopped up the Empire to give more jobs to his cronies.

In terms of the functions of provinces there has been relatively little scholarship using documentary evidence to assist in clarifying the problem of territorial assignment, although prosopography gives invaluable information on the roles of officials in provinces, and there remains

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much to be mined from other documentary sources, as recently demonstrated by Sipilä.\(^5\) It is time to use other data, and a potentially fruitful starting point is to better improve our knowledge of provincial borders, so that, by observing the changes over time, we might be able to calculate the reasons for those changes. It is still a commonplace to ascribe to Diocletian the major provincial reorganizations in Late Antiquity, and yet, as the history of change in Judaea/Palaestina and Arabia shows, small to large sections were reassigned both before and after his reign.\(^6\)

Provincial territory was defined from the inside out, as it were, with cities and their associated lands being assigned to a province, and the outer extent of all those territories forming the border. Some of this territorial knowledge is preserved in a variety of ways, somewhat better in the west than the east.\(^7\) The province in which particular cities were placed is usually known from general historical documents, or more specific texts such as itineraries, geographical works or even church council attendance lists,\(^8\) and these often also indicate dependent settlements. Inscriptions are invaluable sources. City (or other) territories can be defined by cadestrations or boundary markers.\(^9\) Some provincial boundaries can be calculated where they cross major roads, based on milestones, or where there were settlements at the border.\(^10\) Land deeds show clearly


\(^{10}\) R. Laurence, ‘Milestones, communications, and political stability’, in L. Ellis—