The present article aims to discuss a more general issue: is it methodologically correct to argue that all late antique near-eastern frontiers stretching from the Euphrates to the Red Sea must be seen as a more or less coherent system having the same demographic, economic and military features in all its sections? In the last years, a fundamental change has occurred in the ways scholars have perceived the character of the late-antique Near East: they have stressed how it was a world where economy and commerce developed, cities were thriving, the number of settlements in the countryside was expanding, and a demographic peak was attained. The refreshing air that penetrated into the scholarly world was, at least to a large degree, the result of new archaeological campaigns carried out according to modern methodologies and using better criteria for dating ceramic material. In fact, excavations and surveys conducted at several sites showed the extraordinary vitality of late-antique settlements.1

A stimulating introduction to an important volume has thus stated confidently that (and this is worth quoting at length): “The permanent deployment of soldiers in the East acted as a stimulus for settlement in the desert fringes, especially following the reorganisation of the limitrophe from the Red Sea to the Euphrates under Diocletian. Centres ... developed in such a climate ... , when limitanei manned the impressive chain of posts and mansios on the fortified Strata Diocletiana, the military road built to quickly move troops along the frontier and which

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stretched from Bostra to the Euphrates ... In this period of demographic growth and cultural and military reorientation, which saw the Church ubiquitous even in the desert margins and the army entrench itself in the Syrian steppe . . . , the unprecedented urbanisation of central Syria hardly seems accidental. Way stations on the Strata Diocletiana policed the highway and provided security, and their garrisons attracted merchants and eventually a permanent population, as had their early imperial predecessors elsewhere.² Such observations present a stimulus for a more subtle and deeper investigation. In the sixth workshop of the present series, The Impact of the Roman Army, I already tried to show that the great economic and demographic development in the late fifth and sixth century of two different marginal areas, the Negev and Central Jordan, was not due to the presence of the army there. Other factors were sufficiently influential to cause the expansion of the settled area and to improve the economy. Moreover, it can be observed that the features of these two areas did not remain the same throughout the centuries of Late Antiquity. They both underwent changes in their economy and in developments of trade and agriculture.³

Equally, it is interesting to note that other studies have strongly argued against the idea of one generalised development for all areas of the Near East in Late Antiquity. Some areas were less vital in late antiquity than in previous times, whereas for others changes or fluctuations are less easily detectable.⁴ In evaluating the wide world of the near-eastern frontier, it will appear immediately clear that we are dealing here, too, with a large mosaic, in which each part had peculiar features of its own. But we can go further than this. The character of the various sections of the frontier changed several times during Late Antiquity: these changes were caused by several factors, such as the policy of the