

Research on the Roman and early Byzantine frontier in North Syria

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From 1991 to 1996 the Damascus department of the DAI conducted a project on Roman fortifications in N Syria between Ġabal Bišrī and the Euphrates (fig. 1).¹ For long A. Poidebard's and R. Mouterde's publications of the aerial surveys dealing with Roman fortifications in the steppe-desert of Syria have needed confirmation by modern fieldwork.² This was further necessitated by the fact that ancient historians treating questions of late Roman military organization generally presume a Diocletian date for these installations even though there was no certainty about their date or indeed their precise number and size.³ This project chose the exterior line of fortifications on the fringe of the desert, the northern continuation of the *strata Diocletiana* that follows the 150 mm isohyet, an area where farming is possible only through intensive irrigation.⁴ Even today nomadism or semi-nomadism is the most appropriate and common lifestyle (fig. 2 colour, following p.240). To judge from sources of the 5th-9th c., it would appear that the climate in antiquity did not differ markedly from the present day's,⁵ but the landscape between Sura and Resafa has changed greatly as a result of new irrigation systems inserted to allow cotton to be planted after the wheat harvest in May.

From an earlier survey in the hinterland of Resafa and sherding at Sura and Quṣair as-Saila, we are well informed about ancient remains in the area.⁶ From them and from the recent

- 1 The project was directed by T. Ulbert: see id. 1989. For the final publication see Konrad (forthcoming).
- 2 Poidebard 1934; R. Mouterde and A. Poidebard, *Le limes de Chalkis* (Paris 1945), using the terms "inner" and "outer" fortification line in Syria according to the primary sources: Mal., *Chron.* 12, 308; Amm. Marc. 23.5.2; Theoph., *Chron.* 178.15; 179.17 (de Boor). For a (selective) discussion on this problem see B. Isaac, *JRS* 78 (1988) 137; id., *The limits of empire. The Roman army in the east* (Oxford 1990) 163; *RE* XIII 1, 654 ff. s.v. Limes (Schulten); Poidebard 1934, 118 f.; J. C. Mann, *JRS* 69 (1979) 181; D. van Berchem, *L'armée de Dioclétien et la réforme constantinienne* (Paris 1952) 17 f.; J. H. W. G. Liebeschuetz, "The defenses of Syria in the sixth century," in D. Haupt and H. G. Hagedorn (edd.), *Studien zu den Militärgrenzen Roms II. Vorträge des 10. int. Limeskongresses in der Germania Inferior, 1974* (Beih. *BjB* 38, 1977) 487; Poidebard 1934, 34 f., 42; M. Reddé, "Dioclétien et les fortifications militaires de l'antiquité tardive. Quelques considérations de méthode," *AnTard* 3 (1995) 91 ff., esp. 121 ff.; I. Shahīd, *Byzantium and the Arabs in the fourth century* (Washington 1984) 473 ff. S. T. Parker in D. H. French and C. S. Lightfoot (edd.), *The eastern frontier of the Roman Empire* (BAR S553, Oxford 1989) 355 ff. proposes to interpret the collaboration of *comitatenses* and *limitanei* as "defence in depth"; cf. very generally S. Williams, *Diocletian and the Roman recovery* (London 1985) 91 ff., esp. 94 with fig. 2 for a "defensive communication system", to which in his opinion also civilian fortified places belonged. In contrast to these theories, Teixidor 1993 (infra n.21) discusses the Palmyra-Hit road as an exterior line.
- 3 van Berchem *ibid.* 3 ff.; W. Enßlin, *Zur Ostpolitik des Kaisers Diokletian* (München 1942); Williams *ibid.* 80 ff., esp. 85 ff.; P. Southern and K. R. Dixon, *The late Roman army* (London 1996) 28 ff.; A. Cameron, *The later Roman empire AD 284-430* (Cambridge, MA 1993) 33 ff.; P.-L. Gatier, "Un moine sur la frontière, Alexandre l'Acémète en Syrie," in A. Rousselle (ed.), *Frontières terrestres, frontières célestes dans l'antiquité* (Paris 1995) 435 ff., esp. 452; cf. against this Isaac *ibid.* 1990, 162 ff.; Reddé *ibid.* 91 ff. deals critically with the archaeological evidence.
- 4 Cf. D. Kennedy and D. Riley, *Rome's desert frontier from the air* (London 1990) 25 fig. 2; E. Wirth, *Syrien. Eine geographische Landeskunde* (Darmstadt 1971) 253 ff. with map 10, esp. 438 ff.; Poidebard 1934 pl. 11.
- 5 Cf. B. Kellner-Heinkele in D. Sack, *Die große Moschee von Resafa-Ruṣāfat Hišām (Resafa IV, Mainz 1996)* 136 ff.; W. Brinker, "Zur Wasserversorgung von Resafa-Sergiupolis," *DamMitt* 5 (1991) 119 ff., esp. 119-21; cf. also *Vie d'Alexandre l'Acémète (PO VI 5)* 32, 34 (Paris 1911); Evagrius, *HE* 6.22 (London 1854).
- 6 M. Mackensen, *Eine befestigte spätantike Anlage vor den Stadtmauern von Resafa. Ausgrabungen und spätantike Kleinfunde eines Surveys im Umland von Resafa-Sergiupolis (Resafa I, Mainz 1984)*.