

## The concept of Limes from roman times to the present day: reinterpretation and interdisciplinary perspectives

There is an urgency today to reinterpret the concept of borders and frontiers (Schmoll, 2022), by focusing on artificially constructed distances rather than naturally defined ones. The aim of this paper is therefore to re-examine, from an interdisciplinary perspective, the meaning of “border” starting from the Roman concept of limes, through a diachronic analysis of various aspects of frontier spaces (Rocco, 2020; 2024). In ancient Rome, tracing borders did not merely signify creating dividing barriers but, rather establishing multiple relationships: of a political, military, economic, and, naturally, cultural nature. In this context, the present study aims to propose a re-contextualization of the concept of limes as an anthropo-ecological metaphor (Strongoli, 2021; Malavasi, 2007), and thus, an educational-cultural one, serving as an interpretative non-place in contemporary society, characterized by a need to rediscover a dialectical and intercultural dialogue

(Fiorucci, 2020; Agostinetto, 2022) with otherness.

In this era of border fetishism [...] there is an urgent, political, but also intellectual question: what do we see when we look at the border from the other side?  
Khosravi, 2010



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## THE ROMAN LIMES: GEOGRAPHICAL AND ETYMOLOGICAL TRACES

In Hellenistic-Roman times, two complementary terms were used to mark geographical boundaries: *limes* and *confinis*. The following section will examine both their semantic aspects and their etymological spread. The first term, *limes*, can be literally translated as “an object placed transversely” and is related to the noun *Līra* [2], or “soil raised between two furrows.” The term is also linked to various Indo-European roots; one example is the Gothic *laists* (“track”), from the verb *laistjan* (“to follow tracks”); another is the term indicating the “furrow” left by a cart, originally from the Old High German language *leisa* (*wagan*). Semantically, the noun *limes* does not have one single translation and tends to vary depending on the context; its meanings, however, can often be traced back to the term “road”, particularly significant in early imperial Roman historiography. The presence of this term, in its literal usage, will be analyzed in historical sources throughout the first century AD, though its origin is in fact much older. The earliest sources where the term *limes* and its variations appear primarily belong to the fields of legal land and building administration, in practices such as castrametation and centuriation. An example is the *Lex Ursonensis* or *Coloniae Genitivae Iuliae* of 44 BC, from the city of Urso in Baetica, present-day Osuna in Andalusia. This inscription is part of the so-called *leges datae*, the laws by which Rome granted colony status. This particular law was promulgated by Mark Antony shortly after Caesar's assassination, as can be seen in the image below (Figure 2):

Qui limites decumanique intra fines (coloniae) G(enitivae) deducti facti/que erunt quaecum- q(ue) fossae limitales in eo agro erunt / qui iussu C(ai) Caesaris dict(atoris) imp(eratoris) et lege Antonia / senat(us)que / c(onsultis) pl(ebi)que sc(itis) ager datus atsignatus erit ne quis limites / decumanosque opsaepitos neve quit immolatum neve / quit ibi opsaepium habeto neve eos arato neve eas fossas / op-

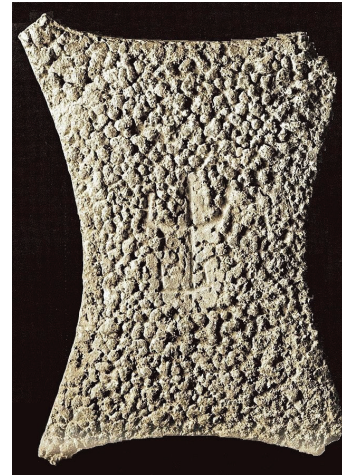


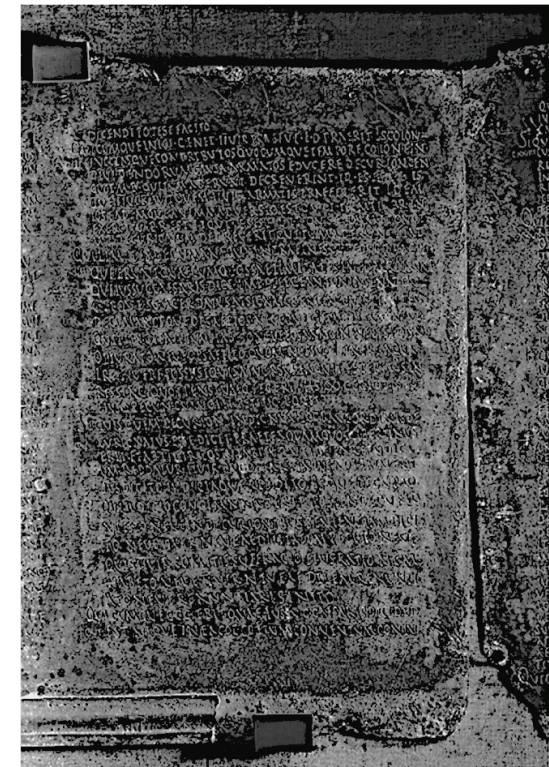
Fig. 1 - “taurino quantum possent circumdare tergo” [1].

turato neve opsaepito quo minus suo itinere aqua / ire fluere possit. [4]

Within the boundaries of the Genetiva colony, all the limits and decumani traced or established, as well as all the boundary ditches existing in that territory assigned and designated by order of Gaius Caesar, dictator and emperor, by virtue of the Antonian law, the decrees of the Senate, and popular deliberations, shall not be closed or obstructed in any way. No construction or obstacle shall be placed upon them, nor shall those boundaries be plowed, nor those ditches obstructed or closed, thereby preventing the water from flowing freely along its natural course [5].

As noted, in this case, the term *limes* and its variations are used to indicate the external boundaries (the *fossae limitales*) and to mark the road network within the colony (*limites decumanique intra fines coloniae*). In technical and engineering culture, these meanings and uses of the term *limes* remained unchanged throughout the Principate. Another emblematic case involves Virgil, and refers to his family's estates in Andes. This episode is conveyed in the first Eclogue of the *Bucolics*,

Fig. 2 - Lex Data (Foundation Law) of the Genetiva Julia colony [3].



where Virgil expresses his dismay and discontent regarding the expropriation of these lands:

En umquam patrios longo post tempore finis, pauperis et tuguri congestum cespitem, post aliquot mea regna videns mirabor aristas? Impius haec tam culta novalia miles habebit, barbarus has segetes: en, quo discordia civis produxit miseros; his nos consecvimus agros [6].

Will I ever see again, even after much passing of time, the land of my fathers and the grassy roof of my humble hut? Or beyond the few ears of grain will I ever contemplate my domain? A soldier will possess these revered fallow lands, a barbarian my fields [7].

Virgil's personal story intertwines with the major events of the late Republic. The expropriation of his properties in the Mantuan area is attributed to the large concessions that Mark Antony granted his veterans after the Battle of Philippi in 42 BC. It is interesting to note how land confiscations for the benefit of veterans could also affect well-known citizens [8].

Turning now to the other key term, complementary to the first, the Latin etymology of *confinis*-is is composed of the prefix *cum*- and the word *-finis* (end, limit). An interesting note regarding this term is the shift in meaning from singular to plural. The change to *finēs* (referring to territory, not the demarcation line) places the word in a close etymological-semantic relationship. This term can be traced back to the Proto-Italic \**þiḡsnis* [9] which refers to the procedure of drawing boundaries by plowing the land and creating a furrow to separate peoples. The association of *finis* with the verbs *figere* and *findere* is also worthy of note. The following brief passage, excerpted from C. Milani, serves to understand the distinction between the former, understood as a physical boundary determined by human action (e.g., a furrow dug in the ground), and the latter as a symbolic marker (e.g., markings carved into trees):



Fig. 3 - Commemorative milestones marking the agreement between the Patavini and the Atestini [11].

If *finis* is cognate with *findere*, it would refer to a "limit, boundary" constituted by a furrow "cut, dug" in the ground, unless the notion of incision associated with *finis*-*figere* refers to markings carved into trees that could have constituted the boundary; this supposition also holds for *finis*-*findere* in the sense that it could refer to a boundary constituted by "cut trees" [10].

From a vernacular and "popular" perspective, the term *confinis* is often associated with legal terminology, particularly in the context of delimiting the urban boundaries of settlements. The following example, consisting of a commemorative milestone (Figure 3), represents a particularly suggestive instance of this concept:

L[ucius] Caicilius Q[uintus] f[ilius] pro co[n]s[ule] terminos / finisque ius[us] sit statui ex senati / consolto inter Patavinos Atestinosque [12]. Lucius Caecilius, son of Quintus, proconsul, established the boundaries and limits between the Patavini and the Atestini according to a decree of the Senate [13].

The above inscription is associated with Senator Lucius Caecilius Metellus Calvus, particularly during his proconsulship in 141 BC, and testifies to the fact that, by resolution of the Senate, the proconsul solved a territorial dispute between the inhabitants of Patavium (Padua) and Ateste (Este). Through arbitration, the patrician drew the boundaries using boundary stones engraved with inscriptions, like the one above, to demonstrate the authority granted to him by the Roman Senate through a *senatus consultum*.

As for the meanings of verb-noun associations in literary sources, we have two particularly interesting cases, although far apart in time. The first is a testimony from Varro's *De Lingua Latina*: "In hoc tempore faciundo arbores constitui fines apparet" [14] where the *arbores fines* or *arbores finales* refer to the practice of using natural elements to delimit sacred spaces.

The other, much later example comes from Saint Isidore of Seville, a Doctor of the Church, who mentions the use of "stretched ropes" to demarcate field boundaries, with an interesting analysis of the origin of the terms:

Fines dicti eo quod agri funiculis sint divisi. Mensurarum enim lineae in terrarum partitione tenduntur ut dimensionis aequalitas teneatur. Limites appellati antiquo verbo lima dicebant; a quo et limina ostiorum, per quae foris vel intus itur, et limites, quod per eos in agros foris eatur. Hinc et limus vocabulum accepit, cingulum quo servi publici cingebantur obliqua purpura. Termini dicti quod terrae mensuras distinguunt atque declarant. His enim testimonia finium intelleguntur, et agrorum intentio et certamen auferuntur [15]. The boundaries were thus called because the fields were divided by thin ropes. When land is partitioned, measuring lines are stretched on the ground to ensure uniform division. [2] The term *limites* derives from the ancient word for transverse objects, as the ancients called all transverse things *lima*; hence the name of the threshold of a door, which one crosses to enter or leave a house, and similarly the boundaries, which one crosses to enter or leave the

fields. From this, the term *limus* was also derived, referring to the belt adorned with an oblique stripe of purple worn by public slaves. [3] The term *termini*, or boundary stones, was so called because they indicate and define the *terrae mensuras*, or the measurements of a field. Through them, secure testimony regarding the expansion of field boundaries is provided, thus avoiding disputes and conflicts [16].

This excerpt illustrates the use of both terms discussed so far (*finis* and *fines*), with a clear reference to Saint Isidore's theory regarding the etymological origins of the words he employed. Moreover, the geography of the border was in constant evolution as the Romans were continuously engaged in defending territories from enemy attacks. Borders were identified based on the geography of the territory according to natural delimitations (rivers, deserts, and mountain ranges) or artificially established through structures built for military and defensive purposes (e.g., bridges, walls, fleets, valleys, etc.). With the concept of *limes*, therefore, the Romans identified a frontier area that included "Romanized and non-Romanized spaces", within a difficult dialectic woven with fragile truces, uncertain treaties, and intense commercial and cultural exchanges (Rocco, 2024). In this sense, it would appear possible to discern, already in Roman times, a cultural value attributed to the concept of the border that foreshadows reflections that will be more fully developed in the following paragraph. This aspect, further emerges from Tacitean sources, where the *limes* is described indirectly through accounts of Germanic lifestyles, societies, and culture. The Germanic people are described as warmongers, living in constant conflict with the Empire, providing us with valuable testimony on how the Romans perceived their northern border and the challenges they faced to protect it. The *limes*, thus, assumed the meaning not only of a physical barrier but also of a symbolic and religious boundary to be considered "inviolable" by foreign populations. The northern *limes*, in particular, was a complex defensive and terri-

torial system that the Roman Empire possessed both in terms of political-military and cultural force compared to the neighboring populations. For example, if a population living on the *limes* requested asylum, the empire dealt with the request in an extremely autocratic manner. This testifies to the fact that "peaceful crossings of the *limes*" occurred only if the Roman authority consented, on the basis of agreements of submission to imperial authority. For example, a condition for being granted asylum was the payment of specific tributes in exchange for the concession of a piece of land [17].

Despite what has been summarily described, it hardly seems necessary to emphasize how the *limes* is a place of coexistence between peoples and cultures, with particular reference to the geographical area of the Middle Danube, which has left us examples of Roman-barbaric cultural mixing [18].

From what has been said so far, it seemed indicative to be able to place, the concept of *limes* as a valid construct for the interpretation of the modern meaning of the border. Although this intuition is in some respects supported by references in the literature, on a theoretical and methodological level, it still calls for a shared formulation.

#### LIMES: A CONSTRUCT THAT IS STILL RELEVANT TODAY?

Based on what has been said so far, it is clear that borders throughout history have served to delineate interests, purposes, and opportunities. Today, the debate surrounding borders has become a "hot" topic once again, in a time of new migrations and transitions often imbued with political and ideological connotations. If we were to reinterpret the concept of *limes* in the contemporary world, with its globalized dynamics and growing interconnections, it could gain new meaning in relation to current challenges linked to intercultural and multiethnic integration. Thus, the concept of *limes* could still be considered relevant, for example, in its "fluid" connotation

The contemporary *limes* invites us to reflect upon how to manage these new porous and constantly evolving frontiers. Today's borders respond to a need for security and control, balanced by the necessity to ensure the free movement of people within cultural exchanges. The modern border still retains a geopolitical character, bound as it is to the relationships between powers and the dynamics shaping the international order.

With regard to Mediterranean migratory movements, the definition of a multicultural society now seems to have been surpassed. Given that multiculturalism is an established fact rather than an exception, we face what Steven Vertovec has defined as super-diverse contexts (2007; 2023), complex situations with multiple variables significantly impacting immigration in the era of globalization. Indeed, the concept of superdiversity seeks to transcend the dichotomy between host and hosted, aiming for a transnational perspective that does not deny the importance of national borders but interprets them through interdependence.

In migratory contexts, the term "border crossing" is often used, when in reality, these strips of land represent suspended lives between moral landscapes (Schmoll, 2022) and cultural horizons, where separations are not even natural barriers but geopolitically, artificially created distances, as argued by the field of critical border studies [19]. Today's borders shift and multiply, organized in a less structured and normative way than in Roman times, when the creation of a *limes* was often linked to the continuity of an existing natural boundary that led Romans to adopt forms of intercultural education. Paradoxically, as philosopher Étienne Balibar writes about the concept of Border-Land associated with today's Europe:

[Europe] believed it had endowed itself with its own borders, but in reality, it has no borders and, as such, experiences a "complex border" that is simultaneously one and multiple, fixed and mobile, directed outward and inward—to put it in English, it is a borderland or "border country" [20].



In the frenzy of “borderization” that currently affects our societies, where interculturality defines identity, indeed our very “usness” (Agostinetti, 2022), what are we defending ourselves against and marking differences from?

In her latest work on the condition of migrants, especially women, in so-called hotspots and first reception centers between the Italian and Maltese borders, geographer and sociologist Camille Schmoll states:

The use of the notion of margin can also be problematic in geography insofar as it presupposes a naturalization of the spatial sphere and an overlap of the social sphere with the spatial one [...]. The margin thus becomes a political place, far from being an archaic and underdeveloped area. For me, it is primarily a rhetorical device that simultaneously, though not always concurrently, designates phenomena of spatial marginality, demarcation, and transgression of borders [...]. Margins can be considered both places of oppression and transformation.

Within the extreme marginal interstices of the “confined,” we find migrant women; in the aforementioned study, the researcher reiterates the need, especially when discussing migration, to “feminize the gaze” when observing a phenomenon too often approached from a male perspective. Moreover, while border crossings in the ancient world were certainly communal and collective movements, the contemporary border presents another paradox: in the era of globalization and hyper-connection, migration projects are personal and individual, “tensions of autonomy” (Schmoll, 2022), shifting the focus from the reasons for migration to the subjects themselves, emphasizing the agency of the individual migrant, who engages in a journey seen as a reflective opportunity for transformation and development.

The debate around the limes thus gains renewed relevancy, inviting us to reflect on how to manage migratory flows in a humane, civil, and culturally sustainable manner. Globalization, by granting

us the gift of simultaneity and reducing distances, aims to erase otherness and create new artificial landscapes of waiting and suspension; non-places such as first reception centers and borders.

The border thus becomes a sociological device for understanding phenomena, and only through forms of education oriented towards an intersectional and interdisciplinary perspective can we grasp all the aspects orbiting around it. It is precisely through intersectionality that we can analyze another limes: that between subjectivity and identity, both marked by social structures (Forrari, 2023):

From this perspective, in intersectional thought, we find a rethinking of the notion of border in its original etymology of cum-finis, shared line, understood as the structure underlying the very processes of identity formation. A pluralization of barriers and lines that shape experience moves towards an analysis of the forms in which these lines intersect, giving rise to the emergence of previously invisible subjects in the eyes of society and theory. Liminal spaces, margins, intersections thus represent those spatial and metaphorical landscapes along which the narratives of the subject are reconstructed against the logic of identity and its bastions, on which the construction of modern citizenship is anchored [21].

From the broad systemic perspective of studies on super-diversity and intersectionality, the notion of identity would not be a given but a processual result, generated on a social level by a plurality of aspects such as social environment, economic level, and gender perception (Agostinetti, 2022). Today the frontier has become a mental construct for building cultural otherness; a mechanism for identifying belonging and marking differences. In contemporary times, steeped in technological development, the issue of securing geopolitical and digital borders (cybersecurity) also arises, as they become increasingly vulnerable, representing a crucial challenge for national security. The

path to follow therefore requires an educational orientation that focuses both on Media Education (lavarone & Aruta, 2022) and on forging a conscious and critical thought regarding the ecological connections of the world-system (Malvasi, 2020; Strongoli, 2021). Any form of Otherness will otherwise result in a metaphorical Other-place, negative to “Us,” in which to pour neuroses, anxieties, and social discomfort.

It therefore ensues that the limes can become a socio-cultural lens through which to educate generations to interpret the world, to rethink individual and collective responsibilities when faced with new challenges such as climate change, global inequalities, the safeguarding of the living ecosystem for the care of the planet as a “common home” (Pope Francis, 2020).

In the times we currently inhabit, the usefulness of intercultural pedagogy (Portera, 2012) lies in knowing how to locate itself between universalism and relativism, aiming to heal relations between opposites, through the tools of dialogue, confrontation and interaction.

## CONCLUSIONS

In a Europe submerged by borders, we felt it necessary in this brief reflection to return to the historical and etymological origin of the limes which, before separations based on ideology and identity, was merely a military and engineering device for delineating the territory.

With reference to the times we live in, shaken by violent outbreaks of war in the Middle East and Eastern Europe, we can observe two scenarios in which the problem of borders emerges with renewed force.

The Middle East, with its fusion of cultures, religions and conflicting geopolitical interests, illustrates how the conflict around borders, concrete and ideological, is deep rooted. In these cultural areas, the concept takes on polysemic value: the limes is confessional, linguistic, energetic, the latter, in particular, is linked to the control of resources that are often at the origin of conflicts.

Similarly, the war in Eastern Europe represents another example of conflict born around a limes: suffice it to think of how Ukraine has always been a borderland between Western Europe and Russia. The ongoing conflict is largely due to this strategic geographical position and Russia's desire to re-establish its sphere of influence. This situation has exacerbated internal divisions between the eastern regions, predominantly Russian-speaking, and the western ones, more Europeanist, thus fueling an invisible and internal border that divides the territory, making Ukraine a new geopolitical limes, across which the great powers confront each other.

Drawing upon these various considerations, we can re-consider the limes as a constructed social artifact and not an ontological condition; not only, therefore, a "physical device", but a relational and contextual process, subject to educational and cultural influences. The logical follow-through is therefore to embrace the pedagogical hypothesis of imagining educational figures such as the Intercultural Mediator-Educator (Fiorucci, 2020) who stands as a necessary resource, not to cancel the conflict, but to transform it by diluting it into moments of reflection and learning. The urgencies of contemporaneity testify to a need for a pedagogy imparted by professional operators able to mediate relations between communities in an interculturally correct manner and to design interventions by reflecting, time and again, upon the practices to be implemented, having as their only "boundaries" those of generating horizons of meaning.

In today's society characterized by presentism, a growing deterritorialization of practices, not only economic, but also social and cultural, detached from the borders of nation states (Portera, 2013) threaten the dissolution of identities and the loss of historical memory. The current geopolitical situation must incessantly remind us that man continues to create *limitēs* internalized only at a cultural level, which are often the result of colonial agreements and borders. A mosaic of *limitēs* that intersect and clash is thus created.

As has been illustrated throughout this study, from antiquity to the present day, borders, both physi-

cal and cultural, have often been at the center of clashes in which the value of intercultural coexistence appears to be at risk if not adequately transmitted and defended by effective educational and cultural antibodies.

The limes, therefore, needs to be socially and educationally rethought in light of the complex dynamics that require a reversal of the economic model, no longer exclusively oriented towards competition but, rather, towards international cooperation between peoples and sustainable development. It is only in this manner that we will reach a more just, equitable and supportive international order [21].

## NOTE

[1] Virgili, Aeneid I, v.367; “how much they could gird with taurine skin” translated by Puoti, image source: [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Lingotto\\_pelle\\_di\\_bue.jpg#mw-jump-to-license](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Lingotto_pelle_di_bue.jpg#mw-jump-to-license)

[2] J. Vendryes, Le sillon et la frontière, in *Mélanges* Paul Boyer, Paris 1925, p.14.

[3] Image source Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum, <https://lc.cx/reYhVJ>

[4] CIL II, 5439.

[5] Translated by A. Puoti.

[6] Virgilio, Bucoliche, I.

[7] Translated by C. Carena, Opere, UTET, Torino, 2013.

[8] Virgilio (a cura di) C. Carena, op.cit, IX, nota n°1, p.48.

[9] J. Müller, *Altitalisches Wörterbuch*, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, Göttingen, 1926, p.508.

[10] C. Milani, Il ‘confine’: note linguistiche, in M. Sordi (a. c. di), *I confini del Mondo Classico*, Contributi dell’Istituto di storia antica, volume XIII, VITA E PENSIERO, Pubblicazioni della Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore, Milano, 1987, p.5.

[11] Image source Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum, <https://lc.cx/YQwisr>

[12] CIL, I, 2501.

[13] Translated by di A.Puoti

[14] Varrone, *De Lingua Latina*, VII, 9; “In this temple, trees seem to be positioned and designated as boundaries”.

[15] Isidoro di Siviglia, *Etymologiae sive Origines liber XX*, XV,14,1-3.

[16] Translated by A.Puoti.

[17] Reference is made in particular to the crossing of the Tervingi Goths of Fritigern on the Danube in 376 AD and to the vast historiography on the subject.

[18] M. Rocco, *Limes: vivere e combattere ai confini di Roma*, Salerno editrice, Roma, 2024, pp.193-194.

[19] Regarding critical border studies, see the following interdisciplinary studies: M.Ambrosini, *Il ritorno dei confini*, in *Sociologia delle migrazioni*, il Mulino, Bologna, 2020; Anne-Laure Amilhat-Szary, *Qu'est-ce qu'une frontière aujourd'hui?* PUF, Parigi, 2015; Gianluca Bocchi (a cura di). *Borderscaping: imaginations and practices of border making*, Routledge, Farnham, 2015, pp.111-121; Paolo Cuttiitta, *Lo spettacolo del confine*, Mimesis, Milano, 2012.

[20] É. Balibar, L'Europe-frontiere e le “défi” migratoire, “Varcame”, 4 n.73, 2015, pp.136-142.

[21] The authors worked on this paper in a collaborative manner. Each of them is, however, responsible for a specific section: section 1 is attributed to Arturo Puoti, section 2 to Sara Gemma, and section 3 to both authors. We are deeply grateful to Professor Bronwen Hughes for her meticulous proofreading.

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