

Where in the *orbe terrarum* were the Eastern Roman Frontiers of the Early Principate?

The frontiers dividing the Roman empire from Parthia and Armenia are difficult to locate, since it is largely agreed that rivers like the Rhine, Danube, or Euphrates cannot truly define a frontier in the way that they are often said to do (Isaac 1992: 401, Whittaker 1994: 73). Yet, in ancient texts, it is clear that such geographical features played a significant role in delineating Roman territory. This discrepancy stems from the modern focus on the precise, physical state of the frontier, rather than the way frontiers were conceptualized and represented in the ancient sources. Even if Roman authors could not accurately reflect the realities of their borders, they exhibit a theoretical understanding that is fundamental to their idea of empire (Braund 1996, Broderson 2006).

In my paper, I reassess the value of Roman perspectives on the eastern frontier. I will use Tacitus' texts to demonstrate the belief that geography, and rivers especially, were the primary factor in identifying the location of the Roman border. In this context, we will see how the Euphrates River functions as a clear point of division between Roman territory and the Parthians. In Armenia, however, there is no similarly prominent natural boundary, and thus the Romans themselves struggled to conceptualize its frontiers. I will show how this absence of a clear geographical boundary between Rome and Armenia contributes to Tacitus' depiction of the political confusion in Armenia as the origin of the turmoil and deterioration of Roman hegemony in the east.

I begin by exploring the explicit testaments to a river frontier in Tacitus' *Annales*. Very early in his text he states: *mari Oceano aut amnibus longinquis saeptum imperium* (Tac. *Ann.* I.9). The Euphrates in particular becomes the center of repeated battles with the Parthians.

Tacitus continually refers to this river as the guarded, natural frontier between Rome and Parthia (Tac. *Ann.* XII.12, Tac. *Ann.* XV.3, et al.).

I then turn to the larger conundrum posed by the ambiguity of Armenia. Without the delineation of the Euphrates, and with no other comparable river, Tacitus leaves the demarcation of Armenian territory uncertain: *ambigua gens ea...situ terrarium* (Tac. *Ann.* II.56). More concerning still is the Armenians' dubious trustworthiness—another problem Tacitus attributes, in part, to the undefined geography between Rome, Armenia, and Parthia (Tac. *Ann.* XIII.34).

In Tacitus' mind, the lack of clear geographic boundaries certainly contributes to the turmoil in the region of Armenia. Nearly every large-scale conflict in the east arises from Armenian dynastic struggles (Tac., *Ann.*, VI.32 ff.), and Parthian peace settlements require a full withdrawal of the Roman presence from both Armenia and Parthia (Tac., *Ann.*, XV.17). Tacitus' treatment of the case of Armenia thus shows how critical geographic boundaries were to his concept of the empire, and how the absence of such borders seriously undermined Roman power and influence in the region (Tac., *Ann.*, XII.14).

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