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[Review of] **The Limits of Empire: The Roman Army in the East.** By BEN- JAMIN ISAAC. Revised edition. Oxford: CLARENDON PRESS, 1992. Pp. xiv + 510; 5 maps. \$98 (cloth), \$29.95 (paper); CDN \$53.95 (paper).

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Review

Reviewed Work(s): *The Limits of Empire: The Roman Army in the East* by Benjamin Isaac

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This is that rare book combining critical discussion of detail with a broad historical vision. Isaac's command of classical, Talmudic, and archaeological evidence is impressive and provides a solid base upon which he builds a carefully crafted argument. *The Limits of Empire* is well worth reading for its in-depth description of both the peace- and war-time activities of the Roman army in the East, but it is best understood as part of a sharp debate in Roman historiography over the question of "grand strategy" in Roman imperial military planning.

In many respects, this book is a rejoinder to a work by the military theorist Edward Luttwak,¹ which attempted to set out strategic concepts behind Roman military dispositions. Luttwak's ideas, and particularly the notion that the Romans possessed a sophisticated notion of strategic planning, have been very influential among Roman historians.

Isaac argues forcefully that Luttwak's view of a defensive Roman Empire, guarding its borders against constant barbarian threat, is a modern one and anachronistic. The Roman frontier was a much more amorphous concept than the rigid boundary suggested by Hadrian's Wall and the defensive systems in Germany and Africa, and Isaac points out that the Romans did not necessarily see a line of fortresses as a national boundary in the modern sense. Such structures may not have been primarily intended as defensive installations but might well have been placed for other purposes, such as controlling traffic and raising customs revenues.

Isaac perhaps takes this argument too far. As E. L. Wheeler has pointed out in a lengthy review (and vigorous defense) of Luttwak,² a fort can serve both external and internal security. Nevertheless, Isaac's emphasis on the police and administrative functions of the army are an important counter-weight to historical theories that see the military strictly in its war-making capacity.

The book's most dramatic argument is that the Romans had no "grand strategy" in the modern sense at all. Isaac notes that the Romans lacked any sort of military staff, intelligence service, and, most importantly, the map-making ability upon which all modern military and political planning is based. While there are ancient maps, such as the Peutinger Table and

the Madaba Map, they lack scale, the most important element of modern cartography.

In any case, Isaac says, the Romans never had a defensive strategy and always saw their army as a potentially offensive force. Wars were conducted for a variety of reasons, including the personal glory of the emperor, which had no "strategic" element whatsoever.

To some extent, Isaac underestimates the sophistication of Roman military organization. The emperors did keep close track of military strength, and one should not reject the possibility of military intelligence or strategic thinking because no direct attestation of it has survived. Nevertheless, again, Isaac's book provides balance to Luttwak's schematizations, and his point about the personal element in imperial policy is important.

The book takes the long view, covering the period from the first direct Roman control in the East in the first century B.C. well into the Byzantine period in the seventh century A.D. While this approach does have its advantages, one problem is that the development of institutions is not always clear. This is especially the case in the sections covering taxation, requisition, and impressment (*angaria*) by the army.

Isaac's discussions of geography are detailed and are an important part of his argument. While the book's maps are fairly good, they are placed at the back of the book, resulting in much flipping back and forth. In many sections, where there are detailed geographic discussions, small, more detailed maps, keyed to the text, would have been most useful.

One of the strengths of Isaac's book is the way in which Talmudic material is integrated into the text and put into the context of Roman legal and military institutions. It is disappointing, therefore, that while Latin and Greek versions of classical texts are given, no Aramaic transcriptions are given. Oxford University Press certainly has the technical capability to do so, and a book which merited a second edition certainly deserved this modest additional investment.

Isaac covers an enormous amount of material with remarkable erudition. A brief review cannot do it justice. His chapter on veteran colonies (ch. 7), for example, is an important contribution to the field and deserves more discussion. Suffice it to say that *The Limits of Empire* is a classic study of frontiers and frontier policy in antiquity and as such belongs on the bookshelf of all ancient historians, whether their field is Rome or not. It is of value to those studying other Near Eastern empires: Isaac's geopolitical and military points are often applicable to earlier, and later, periods.

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¹ Edward N. Luttwak, *The Grand Strategy of the Roman Empire* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1976).

² Everett L. Wheeler, "Methodological Limits and the Mirage of Roman Strategy," *The Journal of Military History* 57 (1993): 7-41 (esp. p. 37), 215-40.