



Not Solely a Military Frontier, and Not Only a Line: the Lower Germanic Limes as Imperial Borderlands

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In this article we examine the dominant, militaristic interpretation of the Roman Limes, particularly within UNESCO World Heritage sites and national heritage narratives. Focusing on the Dutch context of the Lower Germanic Limes and comparing it with Germany and Britain, we trace how national research traditions, political agendas, and site materiality have shaped a narrow, one-dimensional view of the Limes as a military borderline. Drawing on concepts from Critical Heritage Studies and Border Studies, we advocate for a more inclusive, multi-dimensional interpretation using the concept of 'Imperial Borderlands'. This framework reimagines the Limes as dynamic zones of interaction, emphasizing social, economic and cultural exchanges alongside military functions.



The Stage is Set

In 2018, David Breeze published an article in this journal that lamented the declining academic interest in Roman frontiers while underscoring their significance for understanding the interactions and relationships between the Roman Empire and its neighbors. In the present article, building on his call, we demonstrate how an alternative theoretical approach on imperial borderlands can offer fresh and more inclusive perspectives on the Limes. We argue that this is relevant both for developing a more interdisciplinary research agenda in Roman archaeology and for advancing a critical heritage approach to the legacy of the Limes.

In 2021, the World Heritage Committee nominated the Lower Germanic Limes — the Roman Empire's former border spanning the present-day Netherlands and western Germany — as UNESCO World Heritage. The thematic and chronological scope of the inscription was limited: the dossier singled out the so-called Middle Roman period (AD 70–270), with a particular emphasis on the second century AD. Moreover, it highlighted both the fixed linearity of the border along the River Rhine (Ployer et al. 2017) and its military role. In this article, we argue that this representation is seriously flawed, carrying major implications for both scholarship and heritage practice. The border of the Roman Empire was not a fixed or static phenomenon; as an imperial frontier, it was continuously in flux, shifting and evolving over time. The World Heritage (WH) narrative not only overlooks the multifaceted roles of the Limes — such as facilitating trade, cultural exchange and diplomacy — but also anachronistically imposes a modern nation-state framework onto the Roman Limes, even though the concepts of 'nation-states' and state borders, as we understand them today, did not exist in the Roman period. Such state-centered, anachronistic framing of the Roman Empire within national, bordered-off areas is referred to as the 'territorial trap' in Border Studies and Political Geography (Agnew 1994; Van Houtum 2024; Winkelmoelen et al. 2024).

Concurrent to the UNESCO WH inscription, various Dutch towns and heritage organizations began promoting the Limes locally to raise public awareness, boost cultural tourism, and stimulate economic development. Similarly, these representations often portray the Limes as an impressive linear military installation, constructed by the Romans to defend the empire against non-Roman, allegedly 'barbarian' incursions. The urgency of visualizing the Roman connection was driven not only by a desire to capitalize on their WH status, but also by a broader trend of cities leveraging historical narratives for city-branding and marketing purposes. Admittedly, visualizing the Lower Germanic Limes poses a significant challenge,

as this section of the Roman Empire's border has left few material traces. Many archaeological remains are still hidden in the ground or have been removed, prompting communities to rely on visual markers in public spaces, as well as reconstruction drawings and maps, to indicate their presence and illustrate their relation to the Limes (Figures 1–5). At the same time, however, a romantic 'romanization' discourse may be encoded indirectly in the aesthetics of the Limes. Similar to many Dutch archaeological appraisals, public discussions of the Romans tend to be informed by a quasi-nostalgic, even romantic perspective that emphasizes their military strength and cultural superiority, portraying the Romans as the first civilizers of the region. Such a representation clearly reinforces a linear and military imagination of the Limes (Van Houtum 2024).



Figure 1: 'Tot Hier' ('Until Here') – a large steel artwork erected on the south bank of the River Rhine near Rijswijk (province of Gelderland). The letters, measuring 3.65 m. were designed by the artist Jan Kleingeld and demarcate the Limes as an end point of the Roman Empire. In addition, the artwork is a tribute to the alphabet that was introduced by the Romans (Photo: Romeinse Limes visualisatie / Nederlandse Limes Samenwerking CC BY 2.0).



Figure 2: Steel Roman legionary at Alphen aan den Rijn (Photo: Claudia Thunnissen; Erfgoedhuis Zuid- Holland; CC BY 2.0).



Figure 3: Street art installation in the city of Nijmegen, 'Waalpaintings', representing life along the Limes. The assumed presence of military force is evident. Artist: Dosa (Photo: Waalpaintings 2023).



Figure 4: Image representing the Limes as part of the Dutch national historical Canon that is used in national primary history education in the Netherlands (Robbert Damen 2012, for the Canon van Nederland. Reproduced with permission).



Figure 5: 'Flooral' made by Cleon Peterson on one of the streets in Heerlen's Roman quarter that houses the Roman Museum, home of the first century bath complex, and the provincial center for archaeology (Photo: Saskia Stevens 2023).

The dominant representation of the Limes at UNESCO WH sites and related institutions reflects an oversimplified, fragmented and limited interpretation of the past. Where does this predominantly one-dimensional, largely militaristic perspective come from? How has it shaped our understanding of the past and influenced the interpretation of archaeological data? How has this subsequently affected the design and focus of various visualization projects? Finally, how can we move toward a more multidimensional and inclusive interpretation of the Limes as World Heritage?

The subjectivity and socio-political dimensions of heritage representations, particularly at WH sites, have been well-documented in archaeological literature (Meskell 2018; Plets and Van der Pol 2022; Hanscam and Buchanan 2023). Building upon this literature, in this article we investigate the fondness for — if not obsession with — the military dimension of the Roman Limes, a theme central to both scholarly and public discourse. We critically analyse how, over time, the Limes has been framed and commodified within local and national heritage contexts. We examine how these efforts prioritized a linear, territorial and militaristic understanding of the Limes, often at the expense of alternative interpretations that account for the broader social, economic and cultural dynamics at play along Roman frontiers.

To this end, we begin by exploring historical heritage discourses related to the Roman Limes in the Netherlands. We then look to neighboring countries to frame and contextualize these developments in terms of dominant national research traditions, and the materiality of specific sites and archaeological assemblages (Harrison 2013; Plets 2024). By tracing the origins of Dutch Limes scholarship and comparing them with developments in Germany and Great Britain, we provide an overview of how, over time, the military aspect has come to dominate academic and heritage narratives. We then contrast these prevailing linear and military-centric interpretations with insights from recent debates in critical archaeological theory and Border Studies. These insights offer more nuanced understandings of ancient borders as dynamic, permeable spaces of interaction rather than fixed, linear boundaries. Since the 1990s, scholarly attention in these fields has transitioned from viewing borders as formal, fixed demarcations to understanding them as fluid, processual and dynamic constructs (Newman and Paasi 1998). In border studies, this conceptual shift is reflected in the adoption of the verb 'bordering' rather than the noun 'border' (Van Houtum and Van Naerssen 2002; Van Houtum 2021). Conceptualizing the border as a continuous construction process foregrounds its dynamic, mobile and relational character (Rumford 2012).

Building on this perspective, we propose the concept of Imperial Borderlands as a working term to enhance and broaden the public presentation and exploration of the Limes. Engaging with the idea of Imperial Borderlands compels us to view the Limes as

an assemblage of military, civic and rural components situated within a larger contact zone between the Roman and non-Roman worlds. Just as contemporary borderlands can occasionally adopt a security focus and exhibit a more linear division, they more frequently function as broader zones of contact, manifested in a sprawling economy, cultural interactions and vibrant exchanges of ideas. In this latter scenario, the Limes is not merely the periphery of the empire but acts more as regions of interaction and exchange. Nonetheless, as a Roman construct, the Limes remains embedded in an imperial context, characterized by uneven power relations and subject to significant interventions from the center. A key insight in borderlands thinking is that borders are not strictly military lines signaling absolute ends; they are also open to certain activities and people, functioning as zones of contact and exchange, and can thus also act as sites of new beginnings rather than merely marking final limits. Finally, we conclude this paper with suggestions for a more holistic approach to interpreting the Lower Germanic Limes.

The Heritagization of the Limes in the Netherlands

Becoming World Heritage

To inscribe a heritage site on the World Heritage list, nation-states must convince both the international experts of ICOMOS and the 21 nation-states of the World Heritage Committee. The vision and narrative characterizing a site are articulated in the Statement of Outstanding Universal Value (OUV), which forms part of the nomination file. Political changes at UNESCO have contributed to the increasing politicization of nomination narratives (Meskell 2018). In the formulation of the OUV of the Lower Germanic Limes, both the German and Dutch states emphasized a set of reasons why a selection of forts and waterworks merit the WH designation. They also highlighted the transnational nature of the broader 'Frontiers of the Roman Empire (FRE)' WH site, of which the Lower Germanic Limes is part. In assembling the historical significance of the Lower Germanic Limes, the authors of the OUV statement consistently emphasized the civilizational importance of the Roman Empire for global history.

The military infrastructure, in particular, is positioned 'as evidence of the remains of one of the world's greatest civilizations and as a symbol of common heritage' (Polak et al. 2019: 36). Throughout the broader nomination file, the military character of the Lower Germanic Limes is also notably emphasized. Most of the included sites relate to military infrastructure, such as roads, surveillance systems and river works. The file generally excludes sites that signify cultural interaction within the Imperial Borderlands, as well as the broader implications — both positive and negative — of Roman imperialism. Similarly, in the narrative of the Lower Germanic addition to the

FRE, military posts and their substantial supportive infrastructure are celebrated as ‘unique testimonies of water management strategies and constructions employed by the military command of the Roman Empire’ (Polak et al. 2019: 13). In the opening words of the nomination file, the Dutch Minister of Culture stressed the role of the Roman military in ensuring a ‘flourishing exchange between cultures and peoples’ (Polak et al. 2019: 4). Here, the celebratory OUV description of the Lower Germanic Limes aligns with the master nomination file of the ‘Frontiers of the Roman Empire’: one that celebrates Roman imperialism and reduces borders to military infrastructure.

This foregrounding of the ‘greatness’ of Roman civilization is a trope well known in European cultural history (see also Winkelmolen et al. 2024). Even before the Renaissance, medieval political elites were captivated by the legacy of the Roman Empire — a fascination that deepened during the Enlightenment with the rediscovery of ancient texts (Enenkel and Ottenheim 2019). Rome’s enduring infrastructure served as both inspiration and model for Europe’s modernization in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. At the same time, (proto)nationalists in search of the historic roots of their ethnic groups and the legitimization of territorial claims found ample inspiration — and progenitors — in the Roman past (Dietler 1994). France has Vercingetorix, Belgium Ambiorix, Germany Arminius and the Battle of the Teutoburg Forest, and the Netherlands has Julius Civilis and the Batavian Revolt. In short, as is often the case in heritage politics (Harrison et al. 2020; Plets 2024), the legacy of the Romans was never about the past *an sich*, but was instead mobilized to invent, promote and consolidate new futures. In this way, archaeological heritage is deployed politically as a future-making practice (Winkelmolen et al. 2024).

To be sure, the Lower Germanic Limes WH site, along with the broader FRE nomination, has not been intentionally used to normalize imperialist or militaristic perspectives on frontiers. However, it continues to rely on an iconography and language that celebrate Roman grandeur and the traditional national narratives associated with it. Moreover, it fails to foster a more comprehensive view of the Roman Limes and, by extension, Roman imperialism — one that recognizes the Roman soldier not simply as a bringer of culture and civilization through infrastructure, but as an agent of an imperial agenda dictated by Rome, in which violent oppression, war, forced migration, enslavement and terror were not exceptions. Furthermore, it completely overlooks the ways in which the diverse material culture of the Lower Germanic Limes was shaped by indigenous people and actors from ‘the north’, the area north of the river Rhine.

The visual culture of the Limes

The heritage of the Roman period in most parts of the Netherlands and Germany is preserved primarily in the form of buried artefacts, soil features and archaeobotanical

deposits. Although the Netherlands possesses some exceptionally well-preserved large wooden remains — such as river boats and infrastructural constructions — most archaeological evidence is no longer visible above ground. Given the limited material remains, heritagization efforts play a crucial role in cultivating identification with, and representation of, Roman archaeology. The Roman heritage discourse — especially visualizations in the form of maps, reconstructions and symbols — is pivotal in making this history visible today. In addition to the well-known cartographic depictions outlining the chain of forts, and the divide between Roman civilization and the constructed notion of barbarism (Van Houtum 2024), the dominant imagery of the watchtower stands out (Figure 6).



Figure 6: The Roman watchtower at De Meern, near Castellum Hoge Woerd, decorated in celebration of the Lower Germanic Limes' fifth anniversary as a UNESCO World Heritage Site (Photo: Saskia Stevens 2026).

That this symbol has become a trope demonstrates the power of visual signifiers in activating the Roman Limes, while simultaneously highlighting the selective histories they encode. We argue that the watchtower's omnipresence serves both as a metonym for the widespread use of banal militaristic symbols in the Limes' visual culture and as a reflection of the striking absence of colonial critique.

Illustratively, the watchtower features prominently in several Dutch contexts: in the logo of the official Dutch site holder of the Lower Germanic Limes World Heritage (*Nederlandse Limes Samenwerking*) (Figure 7); on the official tourism signs of the national Dutch tourism organization; as a commonly reconstructed Roman archaeological structure in the Netherlands (De Meern, Vechten, and Opheusden); on the front pages of numerous booklets and popular science publications about the Limes; and even on the label of a local brewing company (Figure 8).



Figure 7: The logo of the official Dutch site holder of the Lower Germanic Limes World Heritages (© *Nederlandse Limes Samenwerking*).



Figure 8: Limes Red Ale, a beer produced to celebrate the Lower Germanic Limes' UNESCO World Heritage status in 2021 (© Maximus Brewery, Utrecht).

The selection of this form of visualization is understandable from a practical perspective, given its prominent visibility within the landscape, recognizability and relative ease of construction. Nevertheless, such decisions appear to have been made with limited consideration of their interpretive implications. They reflect a broader tendency to prioritize spectacle and accessibility over critical engagement with the complexities of historical representation and the ways in which the past is materially and visually constructed in the present.

Banal as these examples might be, they further normalize the military dimension of the border. Signs, reconstructions, dioramas and imagery matter, and are particularly important in a field like archaeology, which relies heavily on reconstructions. From a Lacanian sense, they allow us to imagine the past and operate at the level of the subconscious, internalizing a visual culture of the past that shapes our (historical) consciousness (Žižek 2006). Although many heritage interpretations, including the UNESCO nomination, present the role of the border as a facilitator of contact, resource exchange and connectivity, the emphasis on the watchtower and the security-military nexus has become the most dominant theme. What we see then is that, combined with a nostalgic discourse on the greatness of the Roman Empire, this narrow heritagization is deployed — sometimes subtly, sometimes overtly — by various contemporary actors to reinforce a broader ideological narrative of a securitized society (Winkelmolen et al. 2024).

Beyond representing banal nationalism and militarism, the watchtower, along with other narratives glorifying the Roman past, also embodies banal colonialism, as it signifies control over indigenous populations and the restriction of their mobility within borderlands. Similarly, tales of Roman cultural and economic progress often obscure a darker reality of violent conquest, forced assimilation, strategic ethnic manipulation and slavery. Just as the celebrated achievements of ‘Western’ modernity are shadowed by colonialism, environmental degradation, inequality and exploitative capitalism, Roman ‘civilization’ too had a colonial underside (Mignolo 2011). When this is ignored in favor of romanticized images — such as the benevolent Roman soldier building roads and trade — the colonial legacy risks being reduced to a necessary, or even acceptable, cost of progress.

The Dutch Historiographical Limes Debate

It is fascinating to explore how the dominant Roman military perspective, as represented in the UNESCO nomination, has emerged in the Netherlands. The dominant discourse and visual culture of Roman heritage are in part artefacts of selective paradigms in the historiography of the Lower Germanic Limes. As is often the case in continental Europe, the Authorized Heritage Discourse (Smith 2006) is shaped by experts, in this case archaeologists. Not only have they been involved in the inscription of the site as World Heritage, but over the past decades they have also played key roles in numerous heritage and museum projects.

What can be noted, then, is that Dutch academic debates have gradually shifted since the publication of the seminal monograph *De Romeinen in Nederland* (The Romans in the Netherlands) by Wim van Es (1981). While Byvanck (1943) emphasized written sources and historical narratives, focusing on population movements and military conquests and treating material culture mainly as illustration, post-war archaeologists typically treat archaeological data as primary sources and engage with classical texts more critically. Van Es’ work, *De Romeinen in Nederland* exemplifies this change: it remained focused on major military campaigns, yet also highlighted non-military themes, giving explicit attention to everyday life, the economy and the landscape. In so doing, compared to Byvanck, Van Es added nuance to the military focus and to the linearity of the border. His periodization into three major phases — conquest, defense, decline and fall — remained the norm for decades (Van Es 1981: 22–59). Functionally, the pre-border conquest period (57 BC–AD 47) was followed by the presentation of the Limes from its ‘start’ in AD 47 to its demise in 270 as a structure policing the region and dividing the Romanized South from the North. Although Van Es (Van Es 1981: 262–271) devoted only nine pages to the area north of the Limes, his passionate plea for more

research on this region and cross-border integration influenced scholars like Ernst Taayke (1996), Henk Hiddink (1999), Michael Erdrich (2001), Henk Van der Velde (2011) and Annet Nieuwhof (2015), who further studied what Van Es nostalgically framed as ‘the Free Netherlands’.

Notwithstanding the widespread acknowledgement of the significance of Van Es’ publication, many contemporary works, such as Willems (1981; 1984) continued to reiterate older conceptions of the Roman border area, ignoring broader conceptualizations of exchanges and interactions in the Limes borderlands. In the Netherlands, military affairs, population movements and invasions remain central themes shaping the historical narrative of the Roman era. Moreover, it is striking that there is no comprehensive overview of the Dutch segment of the Lower Germanic Limes, with some exceptions including Jules Bogaers and Christoph Rüger (1974) and Tilmann Bechert and Willem Willems (1995). Key scholars such as Bogaers, Jan Kees Haalebos, Willems, and predecessors such as Albert Van Giffen, Willem Glasbergen, Maarten De Weerd and Willy Groenman-van Waateringe, predominantly concentrated on individual military sites like Woerden, Alphen aan den Rijn, Nijmegen, or Valkenburg (Glasbergen 1972; Bogaers and Rüger 1974; Bechert and Willems 1995; Haalebos 1997; Haalebos and Willems 1999). What further typifies the Dutch debate is that present-day borders between the Netherlands, Germany and Belgium have significantly influenced the research agenda, leading scholars to rely primarily on Dutch sites to reconstruct a past that predates these modern boundaries.

In their 2021 synthesis, Wilfried Hensing, Wouter Vos and Evert Van Ginkel criticized this partial, Dutch-centered focus and the limited topical scope of research. They lamented the limited engagement with broader ‘Frontier Studies’ from Germany and Great Britain, while acknowledging their own limitations, and advocated for a move away from the linear, military-centric perspective of boundaries toward a more holistic research approach. Within their proposed framework, patterns of military organization, infrastructure and landscape use along the Lower Germanic Limes can only be adequately understood through systematic comparison with other frontier regions, including Britannia and the Rhine–Danube zone. From this perspective, the Dutch section of the Limes should not be regarded as a peripheral or derivative case, but as an integral component of a dynamic and interconnected Roman frontier system shaped by the continuous interaction between local conditions and imperial strategy.

The dominance of the military perspective is also embedded in the Dutch National Research Agenda for Archaeology 2.0 (NOaA), where three of the four overarching research questions concerning the Limes are framed explicitly within a military paradigm.¹ Conversely, scholars like Carol Van Driel-Murray, Wilfried Hensing, Rien

Polak, Harry Van Enckevort, Wouter Vos, Mark Driessen, Erik Graafstal, Paul Van der Heijden and Jasper De Bruin explicitly rejected the notion viewing the Limes as an ‘iron curtain’. Instead, they advocate for interpreting the Limes in the middle-Roman period (i.e. AD 70–270) as a ‘frontier zone’ that encompassed both a ‘foreland’ and a ‘hinterland’. By lingering in the terminology of the frontier, their discourse remains implicitly shaped by a military and imperialist perspective. From a Roman point of view, there certainly was a military frontier. However, in addition, there was an array of other borders: fiscal, administrative, political, legal and cultural borders also played a role — frequently overlapping and collectively constituting the Limes borderlands to the north and south of the frontier. Similarly, by continuing to speak of a separate foreland and a hinterland, the one-dimensional interpretation of the Limes is highlighted, namely that of a border on the edge of the empire, shaped and defined from its center: Rome.

In addition to adhering to the Limes’ linear interpretation, many studies maintain an artificial division between Roman and indigenous cultures, largely based on studies from the 1980s (for example, Brandt and Slofstra 1983). The interactions between these cultures are often portrayed as unequal and one-dimensional, typically discussed under the concept of Romanization. This approach creates a stark division between indigenous farmers and Roman military personnel within the Limes borderlands, oversimplifying their complex interactions. Furthermore, it positions Rome as a benevolent force modernizing indigenous societies. A narrow focus on the technological sublime of Roman (material) innovations obscures the ‘dark side of Romanization’ (Mingolo 2011), including slavery, ecological degradation and the loss of indigenous, place-specific knowledge. Key critiques have emphasized Romanization’s predominantly top-down and unilateral perspective, as well as its strong focus on elite actors (Versluys 2014). As Mattingly (2024: 295–296) observes, Romanization has been employed to describe both a process and an outcome. He further notes a broader tendency within scholarship to prioritize perceived commonalities across the Roman world, often at the expense of attention to regional variation and difference.

For the Limes, it would be more accurate to describe the context as involving military communities that encompassed a wide range of roles and interactions between civilian, rural and military life (Goldsworthy and Haynes 1999). Veterans, with experience in both military and civic spheres, often served as intermediaries within these communities, bridging the gap between different social domains (Heeren 2009; Vos 2009; 2015). This represents one of several alternative perspectives for studying interactions between social groups in Roman border landscapes, alongside economy, material culture and exchange in the broadest sense. While the military dimension of Roman presence should not be ignored or excluded, it must also not dominate to the extent that it marginalizes

other important aspects of Roman life. Dutch Roman archaeology, however, has until recently tended to prioritize this perspective, and only gradually has the field begun to move beyond this narrow focus toward a more inclusive understanding of the Roman past. In the following two sections, these Dutch debates and perspectives on the Limes are examined in relation to developments in neighboring Germany and Great Britain.

German Limes *Forschung* and British Frontier Research

German Limes Forschung

Research on the Dutch Limes did not evolve in isolation. While contemporary national politics undoubtedly shaped the focus and interpretation of the Roman past, developments in neighboring countries — notably Germany and the United Kingdom — have also had a significant impact. This international influence remains evident today, as demonstrated by the collaborative and transnational UNESCO WH property ‘Frontiers of the Roman Empire’.

Although initial investigations into the Limes in Germany began as early as 1748, driven by interest in how far the Romans had penetrated into the country, systematic research truly commenced in 1852, with the founding of the *Commission für die Erforschung des Limes imperii romani*. Its work focused on mapping and studying the Obergermanisch-Raetische Limes, which ran from Reinbrohl in the west to Eining in the east (Kemkes 2015).

At the time, various local commissions in the German kingdom and duchies worked independently on Roman excavations, with little internal coordination. Theodor Mommsen recognized this inefficiency and advocated for reforms in 1873 and 1878. Only after the 1892 Limes Conference in Heidelberg did these groups unite as the Reichs-Limeskommission (RLK), marking the start of *Grensdanken* (Moschek 2010). With the rise of the German Empire, Roman frontiers became central to archaeological research, rendering Limes studies almost synonymous with Roman archaeology in Germany (Heising 2015; Kemkes 2015: 167–168).

The success of the new committee soon became apparent. Not long after its founding, the impressive 56-part series *Der obergermanisch-raetische Limes des Roemerreiches* was launched (1894–1937). The series focused primarily on the archaeology of the Obergermanisch-Raetische Limes, documenting palisade walls, towers, ditches, forts and canals. Through this work, the RLK established a structured and systemic approach to Limes research, centered on military structures and infrastructure, which would shape the field for decades to come.

In the early twentieth century, new archaeological institutions emerged, including the Römisch-Germanische Kommission (RGK) and the first German Archaeology chair

in Berlin (1902). Although Mommsen continued to advocate for Limes research, the RLK was dissolved in 1937, and its work was transferred to the RGK. Limes research came to a halt during the Second World War. Yet, the Limes regained symbolic value. In 1938, Hitler framed the construction of the Westwall (Siegfried Line) as a *Limesbauprogramm*, explicitly invoking the Roman frontier to bolster national confidence and project military strength (Moschek 2010).

The Limes' militarized image resurfaced in 1948 with the establishment of the Iron Curtain, which symbolized a rigid East–West divide (Kemkes 2015; Pohl 2021). As one journalist wrote at the time: '[...] while the other peoples and states of Europe lie entirely on one side or the other of the unfortunate Limes, for us it is also the bitter symbol of the unity we have been denied'.² The journalist's reference to the Limes must have evoked an image of a highly militarized boundary and a stark and rigid dividing line.

From the 1950s onward, research developed and included the Lower Germanic Limes. This work was led by Harald von Petrikovits, then director of the Landesmuseum in Bonn, who was the first to describe the Lower Germanic Limes as a coherent and multifaceted border system (Von Petrikovits 1959; Bechert and Willems 1995). Nevertheless, scholarly attention continued to focus predominantly on military infrastructure and auxiliary forts. In 1959, Limes studies in Germany was further revitalized with the RGK's four-volume *Limesforschungen* series (Ulbert 1959; Baatz 1962; Müller and Schönberger 1962; Walke 1965).

With the opening of EU's internal borders in the 1990s, the Limes re-emerged as a powerful symbol of division between empire and 'barbarians' (Kemkes 2011). This also coincided with a shift in research agendas, most notably the DFG's *Romanisierung* program (1993–2000), which foregrounded Roman–indigenous interactions, revealing a more complex, bi-directional process of cultural exchange (Heising 2015). In this context, the 2021 Bonn exhibition '*Germanen. Eine archäologische Bestandsaufnahme*' can also be situated, as it challenged persistent myths about the Germanic peoples (Uelsberg et al. 2020). In 2003, the *Deutsches Limeskommission* was founded to support the successful 2005 UNESCO nomination of the Upper–German Raetian Limes, further reinforcing the close association between the Limes and Roman archaeology in Germany (Kemkes 2015).

In 2021, the Dutch Limes Collaboration (*Nederlandse Limessamenwerking*, NLS) together with the DLK, secured UNESCO World Heritage status for the Lower Germanic Limes. To mark the occasion, five exhibitions titled '*Roms fließende Grenzen*' explored different aspects of the Limes and were accompanied by a comprehensive publication reflecting the state of German Limes research (Claßen et al. 2021a; Claßen et al. 2021b).

As the title suggests, the Limes is understood as a fluctuating border: a permeable yet dividing feature, not least because of its relationship to the Rhine as a natural boundary. The authors argue, however, that the differences between the two sides of the river were not as clear-cut as often assumed. In the chapter *Roms Grenzen*, Walter Pohl (2021) discusses the Limes both as a border and as a meeting place. When addressing the Roman imperial frontier as a divider, Pohl (2021: 56) characterizes it as ‘eine ideologische Scheidung zwischen Zivilisation und Barbarei, zwischen Kultur und Natur, zwischen Vernunft und Triebhaftigkeit, zwischen Gesetz und Gesetzlosigkeit, zwischen dem geordneten Gemeinwesen (*res publica*) und Tyrannie’.³ Yet, in his analysis, interaction across the border remains highly asymmetrical, primarily involving Roman military actors tasked with controlling the periphery of the empire and ‘barbarians’ who supplied goods and slaves (Pohl 2021: 59). Thus, although Pohl appears to move beyond a purely military interpretation of the Limes by conceptualizing the Limes as a meeting place, his analysis ultimately reproduces a persistent and rather traditional view of the Limes as a sharp divide between Romans and ‘barbarians’.

By tracing the development of Limes research in Germany it becomes evident that although early interest was shaped by broader cultural and socio-political concerns, scholarly attention has increasingly coalesced around the Limes as a militarized boundary separating the culturally ‘advanced’ Romans from so-called barbarians. From the late nineteenth-century Reichs-Limeskommission to its nationalist use under Hitler and later Cold War interpretations, the Limes has often been framed in German scholarship to emphasize sharp cultural and ideological divides. Although more recent scholarship highlights cross-border exchange and border permeability, such approaches still tend to reproduce a fundamentally asymmetrical view of the Limes. Recognizing this bias is crucial for Dutch Limes research, which should critically assess rather than adopt these inherited frameworks.

Influences from British Frontier Studies

Like in Germany, British study of the Limes — more commonly referred to as the Roman frontier — was shaped by contemporary political events and contexts. Although research was less institutionalized, investigations began in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Early interpretations were often critical of Roman despotism and corruption, but by the late 1800s, this view began to shift (Hingley 2000: 19–22). When Queen Victoria was proclaimed Empress of India in 1876, the perceived principles of Roman imperialism came to serve as an implicit model for British imperial strategy. In particular, Theodor Mommsen’s volumes *Römische Geschichte* (1854–1856) helped promote this view of Rome, as it created an image of ancient Rome and Italy that

resonated strongly as a role model for Britain's imperial ambitions. In the English translation of volume 5, which deals with the provinces of the Roman Empire, the influential scholar Francis Haverfield (1909: xv) echoed this perspective, writing that, 'we began to realize the achievements of the Empire, its long and peaceable government of dominions extending into three continents, its gifts of civilization, language, and citizenship to almost all its subjects, its creation of a stable and coherent order out of which rose the Europe of today'.

Closely connected to the British imperial elite, Haverfield developed a particular interest in Roman frontier policy and military archaeology (Hingley 2000: 12–14; Freeman 2007). Hadrian's Wall, long a dominant feature of the British landscape, consequently became a central focus of his scholarly work. Other early works by, for example, John Collingwood Bruce (1805–1892) also have been fundamental to British Limes research and predominantly focused on Hadrian's Wall (Hingley 2000: 40–41; Breeze 2003). In his book, *The Roman Wall* (1851), Collingwood Bruce introduced a numbering system for the Wall and its forts that is in use today, and that allowed for a systemized and holistic study of the complex. The prominence of Hadrian's Wall in the landscape encouraged a military focus of British scholarship, while archaeological information uncovered during excavations simultaneously influenced contemporary frontier policies in the British Empire (Hingley 2000: 42). The work of Lord Curzon of Kedleston, an imperial administrator, is also instructive in this regard. After completing his term as Viceroy of India in 1907, Curzon stated in a lecture at Oxford that the Roman frontier system of Rome served as 'the ancient counterpart and prototype for the British frontier in India' (Whittaker 2004: 181–186). His remarks reflect the broader tendency to connect British Imperial policy with Roman frontier politics. For much of the twentieth century, the Roman frontier in Britain was consequently understood as a fixed and stable line of military control (Whittaker 1994: 2–3; Wells 1996: 438). Scholarly work by John Collingwood Bruce, Eric Birley, David Breeze, Brian Dobson, Nick Hodgson and Paul Bidwell concentrated heavily on the construction and organizational system of frontier walls and installations. Illustratively, when Hadrian's Wall was inscribed as UNESCO World Heritage in 1986, the nomination dossier was still titled 'Hadrian's Wall Military Zone', and much of the subsequent signage and reconstruction continues to foreground this military, linear dimension.⁴ At the same time, albeit gradually, since the 1970s attention had already begun to shift toward the frontier as a zone of social and economic exchange and interaction between Roman and local populations (e.g. Breeze and Dobson 1976). For example, Andrew Gardner (2022) has most recently explored the potential of approaching Hadrian's Wall through a Border Studies perspective, allowing for a more inclusive interpretation of the Roman frontier.

Vindolanda, located just south of Hadrian's Wall, played a key role in shifting Limes research toward a more sociocultural focus (Birley 1961). Since Eric Birley acquired the site in the 1930s, and especially from the 1970s onward, research has focused on the wooden writing tablets discovered there (e.g. Birley 1988). The Vindolanda Tablets have become central to recent British Limes research, offering rare insights into Roman everyday life. Alongside their online publication (RIB website), Southern (2016) developed a sociocultural interpretation of frontier life, based on this material. This work inspired publications such as *The Roman Army as a Community* (Goldsworthy and Haynes 1999) and *Life at the Limes* (Collins and McIntosh 2014), which broadened understanding of military communities to include veterans and civilians, and material practices. At the same time, it should be noted that established research traditions persist and continue to shape predominantly military readings of the tablets (e.g. Hodgson 2017).

Taken together, Britain's political developments and colonial ambitions, combined with the active involvement of archaeologists, produced a strong focus on Roman frontier policy, and allowed Roman imperial strategies to influence contemporary political thought. This raises a critical question: how can Limes research move beyond interpretations shaped by historical and political contingencies and arrive at a more inclusive approach of the borders of the Roman Empire? Things are moving forward however, for example in the community archaeology project WallCAP run by Newcastle University that includes local communities and volunteers in the study and preservation of Hadrian's Wall. One of the questions the project addresses is to better understand the historic use and reception of Hadrian's Wall.⁵ Another example is the Beyond Walls project (2021–2025), which shifted away from a purely military perspective by treating the areas north and south of Hadrian's Wall as dynamic borderlands where Romans and local communities interacted, sometimes through collaboration, and at other times through violent confrontation (Fernández-Götz *et al* 2022). A final example is the work done by Miguel Fernández-Götz, Dominik Maschek and Nico Roymans (2020) shedding light on the less visible and darker aspects of Roman expansion, creating narratives that are more balanced and inclusive.

The Potential of Border Studies and Borderlands

Returning to the European mainland and the Netherlands in particular, one way to move beyond a primarily militaristic and linear focus for Limes research is by adopting a different approach to characterizing the Lower Germanic Limes. Recent critical historical debates on the narrow interpretation of the Limes align closely with discussions in Border Studies; the notion of a border as a rigid, linear boundary is

increasingly being challenged. Traditionally, borders were conceptualized as definitive lines in classical geopolitics (Van Houtum and Van Naerssen 2002). State-centric cartography has played a crucial role in shaping this narrow understanding, presenting borders as fixed, linear entities (Branch 2014). Since the rise of modern nation-states, maps have served as powerful tools for visualizing territorial boundaries, reinforcing the notion that borders are clear-cut lines dividing political entities (Van Houtum 2024). This linear mapping practice is rooted in the logic of colonial geopolitics, in which borderlines were seen as essential markers of sovereignty and control. Borderline maps thus became instruments of state power, falsely suggesting exclusive authority over and homogeneity within the bordered entity (Harley 1989; Van Houtum 2024). By depicting borders as static, two-dimensional lines, cartography has therefore reinforced the idea that they are rigid and impermeable. This visual simplification has profoundly influenced both popular and political discourse, often conceptualizing borders as fences, walls and barriers that separate 'inside' from 'outside', reifying notions of exclusion and military defense.

To counter this static, linear logic, Border Studies has introduced a significant paradigm shift: from viewing borders as lines to understanding *bordering* as a verb, emphasizing borders as dynamic processes, practices and social constructions (Van Houtum and Van Naerssen 2002; Van Houtum 2021). Borders are not simply lines on a map; they are actively made, maintained, negotiated and contested through ongoing 'border work'. They are better understood as relational and performative, reflecting power relations, identities and social practices that produce and reproduce inclusion and exclusion. Building on these insights in border studies, we argue for understanding the Roman Limes not as a single, fixed and military borderline, but as imperial borderlands: a panorama of overlapping and dynamic borders — political, geographic, cultural, demographic and economic borders — that were constantly shifting, also in meaning. Ancient literary, epigraphic and archaeological sources illuminate on how the Romans practiced *bordering*. In the Roman world, multiple borders dynamically structured and managed daily life — from the private sphere of the home to the city, province and empire. These borders, shaped and changed by laws, rules and customs, held significance and could be both material and prominently visible, or intangible and unseen (Stevens 2017). The invisible borders became perceptible through human interactions, as they influenced and modified human behavior. To ensure these borders functioned effectively, the Romans invoked a wide array of major and minor deities for protection, reflecting a multilevel strategy to support the borders' multiple and changing functions (Stevens 2017; Garidou et al. 2025).

A second contribution from Border Studies is the critical examination of the term *frontier* and the exploration of more suitable alternatives. Typically, the term *frontier* is used to typify the borderzone of the Roman Empire (Whitaker 1994; Elton 1996; Parker 2006). Even though scholars note that the term *frontier* has been ‘extricated from its Turnerian tradition, and studied increasingly across time, space and academic disciplines’ (Rodseth and Parker 2005), and despite its continued use in the anglophone tradition, the military and colonial undertone of the term *frontier* remains. To avoid this connotation, insights from Border Studies prove helpful (Gardner 2023). As a discipline focused on understanding the societal phenomenon of border-making, it encourages Roman archaeologists and heritage practitioners to move beyond the overly singular, state-centric approaches to borders, particularly in European contexts shaped by nineteenth-century notions of nationalism and securitization. A key concept here is that of the Borderlands, which, in its basic sense, refers to lands created when a border is established. In Border Studies, it denotes geographic regions that extend beyond the border where cross-border interaction occurs, hybrid identities develop, and the concepts of inside and outside overlap. Instead of the Roman *frontier*, we propose the term *imperial borderlands* as a more comprehensive and nuanced interpretation of the Limes. This term encapsulates the complexities of the Lower Germanic Limes within the empire-wide context: it was not merely a border, a military frontier, or a contact zone, but all of these aspects simultaneously. It was static yet also dynamic, restrictive yet permeable, very visible in its military and civic infrastructure, yet more latent as a tax and administrative border. Roman life was therefore characterized by multiple, overlapping borders, creating a multifaceted landscape that both facilitated and necessitated border engagement.

This perspective also underscores the significance of a postcolonial perspective. Responding to longstanding calls to decolonize Classics (Goff 2005), this conceptual shift allows us to critically reevaluate how these ancient borders have been traditionally understood and represented in history, archaeology and heritage discourse. Decentering the military perspective and focusing on bordermaking by indigenous actors allows for local meaning-making to be highlighted and demonstrates how borders, through the agency of local inhabitants, can signify new beginnings. In short, this approach gives what is traditionally seen as ‘periphery’ a more central place and space. Rather than examining the ‘influence of Rome’, it allows us to move beyond a traditional Romanization perspective to include and emphasize local influence. At the same time, we acknowledge the uneven power relations: local inhabitants exercised agency, yet small decisions from the imperial center could still drastically affect local life. Furthermore, this perspective foregrounds colonial practices such as slavery in the construction and

maintenance of the ‘grand’ border infrastructures, which has particularly relevance for heritage interpretation.

Conclusion

In the discussion above, we highlighted the one-dimensional nature of the World Heritage nomination for the Lower Germanic Limes and the limitations in its current visual representations. By examining it through the lens of banal nationalism and analysing the history of Limes research in the Netherlands, Germany and the UK, we shed light on the historic and socio-political roots of this rather narrow military and linear focus. We also observed a gradual scholarly shift toward a more nuanced understanding of the Limes. Building on this trend, we propose an ‘imperial borderlands’ perspective to better grasp and convey the complex dynamics of the areas on both sides of the Limes. This approach allows for a richer, more inclusive representation of the Limes area in the Roman period, while also enabling a more diverse reception in time.

Adopting this more comprehensive narrative aligns with recent academic shifts in Border Studies and archaeology, where borders are increasingly viewed as dynamic, socially constructed spaces rather than fixed, impermeable lines. The portrayal of the Limes as a mere military frontier oversimplifies its historical complexity and risks reinforcing outdated narratives. Instead, the Limes should be presented as a living, dynamic borderland that was far more than a rigid defensive line. It was a space where military, economic, cultural and social interactions intersected, influencing both Roman and local populations.

Attention to non-elite actors, such as traders, laborers and enslaved people, allows for revealing a more complex border-landscape. This approach also underlines soldiers’ roles in construction, production and local economies, highlighting the frontier as an area of continuous interaction. Future research could build on this by examining cross-border relationships, Roman activities beyond the formal Limes, and diplomatic networks that extended imperial influence far beyond the empire’s surveyed limits. Such a lens positions Roman borderlands as negotiated spaces shaped by movement, interdependence and overlapping spheres of authority.

This more nuanced representation could appeal to diverse audiences by highlighting the multiplicity of roles the Limes played, such as facilitating trade, cultural exchanges and human mobility. These more diverse themes can be used as inspirations for new illustrations in books and museums, as well as visual markers in the landscape. Deeply entrenched aesthetics in heritage presentations can only be overcome by reinventing the visual culture, the artscape of the Limes. New collaborations with visual artists

and curators who are aware of the selectivity of existing visual cultures, shaped by traditional Romanization imagery are crucial to this endeavor. Presenting the Lower Germanic Limes as a complex borderland rather than merely a military fortification line enables heritage communication to convey a fuller, more accurate view of its historical significance. This approach could also challenge the dominant public perception of borders as rigid, defensive lines, fostering a deeper appreciation of ancient borders like the Limes as spaces of negotiation and cooperation as much as of control and conflict. By weaving these insights into the narrative surrounding the Frontiers of the Roman Empire WH sites, we can foster a more informed and critical public understanding of borders, both past and present.

Notes

- ¹ The NOaA was commissioned by the Dutch Ministry of Education, Culture and Science under the direction of the National Heritage Agency. More than 100 archaeologists and other heritage professionals have contributed to its realization: <https://www.noaa.cultureelerfgoed.nl> (Last accessed 8 April 2026).
- ² 'Während aber die anderen Völker und Staten Europas ganz auf der einen oder ganz auf der anderen Seite des unseligen Limes liegen, ist er für uns zugleich das bittere Symbol der uns verweigerten Einheit.' (Die Zeit nr. 15/1948, 'Unteilbare Freiheit', nr. 15, 8 April 1948).
- ³ Translation: 'an ideological division between civilization and barbarism, between culture and nature, between reason and instinct, between law and lawlessness, between the orderly community (*res publica*) and tyranny'.
- ⁴ <https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/430/documents/> (Last accessed 8 April 2026) for the ICOMOS Advisory report regarding Hadrian's Wall inscription (1987).
- ⁵ <https://www.ncl.ac.uk/landscape/our-research/current-projects/wallcap/> (Last accessed 24 April 2026).

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Competing Interests

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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