

# Did the Roman Empire have a military strategy and were the Jafnids part of it ?<sup>1</sup>

Ariel S. LEWIN  
Università della Basilicata, Potenza

**Abstract** - The existence of a Roman military strategy is a highly debated issue. Specific cases, like the one studied in the present paper, can reveal how in late antiquity the Romans organized the defence of the Near Eastern provinces against possible attacks by Arab tribes. The creation of a military system based on the cooperation between the army led by *the magister militum per orientem* and the various limitanean armies under the command of the *duces* provided fruitful results. Over time, the Arab phylarchs with their men became involved in supporting the imperial army. Consequently, important phylarchs were appointed to the position of provincial phylarch. These Arab chiefs provided assistance to the imperial army against the tribes allied to the Persians. Moreover, at times they participated in the campaigns against the Persians. Finally, they were active in suppressing internal disturbances. In Justinian's time external circumstances pushed the imperial authorities to adopt a different military organization, increasing the position of one of the provincial phylarchs. Consequently, we must admit that the character of the imperial defensive strategy underwent an interesting change.

1. I thank Geoffrey Greatrex for having improved the present paper in several ways. A last revision of the text was made by Wolf Liebeschuetz who enriched it with other new suggestions. He deserves my gratitude for having spent so much time in correcting it and in subdividing it in chapters. They are not responsible for any mistakes which may remain. It must be clarified that, contrary to my custom in previous publications, I have accepted the suggestion of the organizers of the present congress that it is more correct to refer to the important Arab group who became an ally of Rome in the sixth century as the Jafnids. By doing so we make a proper distinction between the tribe of Ghassân and a dynasty of Ghassânid princes who became allies the Romans, i. e. the Jafnids. So also, it was the Nasrid, a dynasty of Lakhmid princes who were allies of the Persians. See Robin 2008; Fisher 2011b.

## INTRODUCTION

In the present paper I shall discuss three main issues. Firstly, relying on the documentation concerning the Near East area, I shall deal with the problem of the presumed existence of a Roman strategy or grand strategy in Late Antiquity. It will be argued that the empire was able to conceive a coherent strategy for the defence of the provinces. Secondly, I shall briefly discuss the degree of the integration of the Arab chiefs, the phylarchs, into the imperial structure. I shall go on to examine the precise part played by the Empire's Arab allies in Roman Empire's military operations against the Persians and their Arab allies. Thirdly, I shall work out the aims of the Roman authorities in appointing the Jafnid Hârith (Arethas) to the position of chief of all the Arab allies of Rome, with a particular focus on the military implications of this decision. Furthermore, I intend to examine how far the position gained by the Jafnids in the sixth century represented a completely new development in the relations of the Roman Empire and its Arab allies. Finally, I shall discuss the changes that affected the Roman military organisation in the sixth century. Some major issues in political and military history will be clarified. In particular, the view that the Arabs allied of the Romans represented a powerful independent organisation will be rejected. Against this, it will be argued that the Roman imperial authorities displayed a good degree of flexibility: they modified the defensive strategy traditionally employed in the area and gave the Arab allies new and more important duties in the defence of eastern provinces, but they did not give an independent position.

## SECTION I

### Did the Later Roman Empire have a grand strategy ?

#### 1: The discussion

A well known book by Edward Luttwak, *The Grand Strategy of the Roman Empire. From the First Century A.D. to the Third* represented a landmark in the study of the military history of the Roman Empire.<sup>2</sup> The author argued that the Romans were able to conceive and produce effective strategies. In the first and second-third century A.D. (from the death of Nero to the death of Septimius Severus) they employed a preclusive defense with soldiers deployed along the borders of the empire. Linear barriers and military structures were built along the border of the empire. This system was used in order to counter minor endemic threat, but was also used "as base lines for mobile striking forces, which forestalled large-scale attacks in a tactically offensive manner, but within the framework of a defensive strategy".<sup>3</sup>

As a consequence of the crisis of the third century two new strategies emerged in turn: the elastic one, which did not require the stationing of soldiers along the frontiers, and relied on a mobile army to intercept the enemy force only after it had penetrated deeply into Roman territory. At a later stage Diocletian succeeded in organizing a shallow system of defence in depth in which only the outer zone would be ordinarily exposed to the ebb and flow of warfare. In order to make this strategy

2. Luttwak 1976.

3. Luttwak 1976: 55-126, 66.

effective Diocletian organized a series of fortified outposts designed to intercept enemy attacks on the far side of the frontier. There are two preconditions for a successful defence in depth strategy: first, the establishment of a resilient network of fortifications laid out in depth; secondly, the deployment in every sector of forces sufficiently powerful to deal effectively with local threats. Constantine adopted a different solution creating the field army. This brought about a transition from the shallow defence in depth of Diocletian to a deeper system based on strong field armies and rather weak sectoral forces.<sup>4</sup>

The ideas formulated by Luttwak caused considerable controversy in the scholarly world. Admiration of Luttwak for having supplied new documentation and a new perspective on an important issue was balanced by serious criticism. He was charged with having introduced modern conceptions into the discussion of an ancient institution. Not only did the Romans not have anything like a centre of strategical studies; but unlike a modern state, they were not even interested in marking the boundaries of the empire. It was also objected that the Romans did not have an effective intelligence service and that they lacked a good geographical knowledge and that this precluded their planning a defensive strategy. Moreover, it was stressed that in the first centuries of the empire Roman military policy had an offensive stance. The emperors were not concerned with how to defend the Roman territory; their aim was rather to win glory and riches by subjecting new peoples to imperial domination. The presence of the army in the provinces of the Near East resulted from the need to control the recently conquered local population, forestall insurrections and to suppress banditry.<sup>5</sup>

Other critics denied that the frontier works had any military value and maintained that the military structures and barriers constructed at the limits of the empire were used for customs levies. The very existence of a hostile threat was minimized.<sup>6</sup> The army did provide security against banditry, controlled the routes and patrolled the territory; moreover, the soldiers supported the government in exacting taxes and in supervising quarries, mines and imperial estates.<sup>7</sup> Most probably the presence of the army at the limits of the Empire was also dictated by the need to monitor the nomadic tribes, which used to cross into the sown land during their seasonal transhumance. In special circumstances a severe drought could push them to penetrate deeply into the agricultural land in search of water.<sup>8</sup>

More recently, stimulated by some cogent comments of Everett Wheeler, a new wave of scholars has redressed the balance. First of all it has been argued that in the warlike relations between Rome and the Parthians the conflict was at least in

4. Luttwak 1976: 131-190. The idea that in Late Antiquity the emperors produced a strategy of defence in depth has been endorsed by Ferrill 1991.

5. Graf 1989 (= 1998); Isaac 1990.

6. Whittaker 1989; 1994.

7. Isaac 1990; Findlater 2002. Graf 1997 maintains that the military build-up of the late third century was also a response to internal threat: the provincials were exacerbated by the burdens of taxation and by forcible military conscription and consequently turned to banditry. Sartre 2007: 270-271 restates such ideas offering new documentation, but nonetheless he does not deny that there was a nomadic menace as well. Whittaker 1994: 137-138 believes that in Late Antiquity there was a serious Saracen threat, although not accepting the idea that the late Roman military apparatus was a reaction to it.

8. Parker 1986: 6-9; Gichon 1989: 584.

some cases initiated by the Parthians and the stationing of such a large army in Roman provinces cannot be explained by a single cause such as the need to control the local population and to suppress banditry. It has also been showed that the Romans had sufficient geographical knowledge to enable them to plan military campaigns and to deploy their military units at suitable places at the limits of the empire, that they had an efficient system for gathering intelligence and that at least in late antiquity they went to some trouble to mark imperial boundaries.<sup>9</sup> In short, we have been given every reason to think that the general organization of the late Roman Empire was sophisticated enough to devise and execute a defensive strategy as the one suggested by Luttwak.<sup>10</sup> Although I admit that the late Roman army stationed in the Near East was certainly employed for a multitude of tasks, I must insist that the protection of the provinces from enemy attacks was nevertheless the fundamental reason for the army's presence.<sup>11</sup> It must be stressed that the situation had been different in the first centuries of the empire when the Roman provinces were not the object of any serious attack brought by Arab tribes living beyond the imperial territory.<sup>12</sup>

In Late Antiquity the Arab tribes living beyond the provincial borders came to be perceived as a new and important factor in the conflicts being fought out

9. Wheeler 1993; 2007; Lee 1993; Zuckerman 1998; Graham 2006; Greatrex 2007.

10. Kagan 2006 is devastating in her criticism of Luttwak's interpretation of the strategic systems of the first centuries of the empire. See already the doubts advanced by Millar 1982 and the quite different reconstruction of the history of the Near East in Millar 1993: However, Kagan accepts the idea that the Romans were able to produce a grand strategy, although of a different kind with respect to the one envisaged by Luttwak. Le Bohec 2006: 140-142 offers a quite balanced view on the late Roman strategy: he stresses that we must take into consideration the fact that the Roman world was not capable of conceiving complicated strategies as is now the case; nonetheless the Romans succeeded in building a rudimentary strategy of defence in depth. Nicasie 1998: 175 is more inclined to accept the idea that "The Romans ... were able to develop and put in practice what might be called a grand strategy". However the same scholar explains that his conception of grand strategy is different from the one described by Luttwak. According to Nicasie it was impossible for the Romans to plan "a complete, empire-wide defensive system as part of a single master plan", but nonetheless he says that "As a result of the similarities of all the borders of the empire the defence of the Roman Empire did amount to this in practice". Elton 2006: 339 accepts the idea that "Roman frontier strategy from the third century onwards was defensive." According to Mann 1979: 181 (= 1996: 91), a system of defence in depth was put into operation only in the desert frontier of the Near East, and most probably already during the Principate. Mann relied on Gichon's works. It is interesting to note that Kennedy & Riley 1990: 237 suspect that the fortified city fortresses in Mesopotamia provided a defence in depth. Whitby 2007: 157 admits the possibility that in the mid-fifth century Balkan provinces a defence in depth had been activated by the Roman military authorities. Breccia 2005 rightly argues that in the fourth century the Roman authorities had developed a system of defence in depth, which implied the employment of the *comitatenses* as a regional strategical army.

11. See Nicasie 1998: 136 where it is stated that the *strata diocletiana* "served the dual purpose of controlling and monitoring any traffic, either hostile or the result of regular transhumance, into and from the Roman territory and of ensuring, when necessary, the rapid and safe redeployment of troops towards the Persian front in Mesopotamia."

12. On the meaning of the presence of the Roman army in the East in the first centuries of the Empire see Isaac 1990; Millar 1993. Specifically on Arabia see Lewin forthcoming; Macdonald forthcoming.

in the Near Eastern arena. Both the Sassanians and the Romans started to exploit them as allies in order to damage the interests of their rival. It was also the case that some important Arab tribes were employed by the Romans for defending the agricultural land from enemy incursions. In other words the increased importance of the Arab tribes in Late Antiquity compared to their relative unimportance during early centuries of the Empire was the result of an escalation of the conflict between Romans and Persians. The Arab tribes exploited the warfare between the two empires for their own advantage.<sup>13</sup>

## 2: Which strategy ?

It is certainly true that Luttwak's theory about the existence of a system of defence in depth in the Near East in Late Antiquity was strongly influenced by the writings of two scholars, a book of Denis van Berchem and a series of papers written by Mordechai Gichon.

Van Berchem knew Poidebard's book of aerial and terrestrial photographs of the line of forts and military roads running all along the eastern frontier.<sup>14</sup> Moreover, he discussed the information available from the *Notitia Dignitatum* and from a few other sources. Van Berchem argued that there existed in the ducates of Syria, *Phoenice* and *Palaestina* a complex system of defence, which had been conceived by Diocletian. This scholar noted that the *Notitia Dignitatum* lists a succession of military units such as *alae* and *cohortes* which were deployed in *Phoenice* along the *strata diocletiana*, at the edge of the inhabited area in the steppe and bordering on the desert. In addition, units of *equites* were deployed in the rear, along the main roads leading from the *strata diocletiana* to the interior of the provinces. Van Berchem accepted the essential truth of a passage of Malalas, which described a great work of fortification along Eastern frontiers carried on by Diocletian and Galerius. This led him to argue that Diocletian built up a complex defence system stretching 70 km in depth. The *alae* and the *cohortes* were deployed along the Syrian frontier, while the *equites* units occupied forts located along the main axes of penetration, to the rear of the frontier. Moreover, the passage of Malalas would imply the existence by Diocletian's time of

13. Lewin 2007: 243-246. According to Carrié 1999: 168 the changes in the relations between Romans and Arabs in the third century were dictated by three main elements: troubles connected with tribal migrations, the crisis of caravan trade and the turning of the nomads to banditry. These factors were surely influential in shaping a new atmosphere in the Near East. The importance of the changes is acutely perceived by Isaac 1998: 459. It has to be stressed that the same scholars who support the idea that the army monitored nomadic thanshumance also believe that Diocletian rebuilt the defences of *Arabia and Palaestina* as a result of the emergence of a new kind of threat. See Parker 1986: 136-143; Parker 2006: 538-552; Gichon 1989; 2004. On the late Roman fortifications on the fringes of the settled area of central Jordan as a proof of the Saracen menace see Parker 1991; 1997; 2006. Finally it must be observed that by the third century and especially by the fourth century horses had a wider diffusion in the Arab world. See Robin & Theyab 2002. It is possible to deduce that this development strengthened the military effectiveness of the Arab tribes. Joshua the Stylite, 79 says that the Persian war of Anastasius was the cause of much enrichment for the Arab allies of both sides.

14. Van Berchem 1952; Poidebard 1934.

a dual military command: the *praeses* exercised his authority over the *alae* and the *cohortes*, while the *dux* commanded the *equites* and the legions.<sup>15</sup>

The Swiss scholar detected the existence of a similar system in *Palaestina*; in this ducate, the units of Illyrian *equites* were deployed in the rear of the main line of defence while the *alae* and the *cohortes*, with few exceptions, occupied stations on the frontier itself, mostly along the *via nova Traiana*.<sup>16</sup> It is worth noting that this kind of system does not altogether correspond to the model of the defence in depth proposed by Luttwak. Some of the forts of the *equites illyriciani* are located too far away from the frontier, for the units of the ducate to be deployed in a shallow defence in depth.<sup>17</sup>

For van Berchem, the danger for the inhabitants of *Palaestina* was represented by the Arab tribes coming from the peninsula. Gichon in papers that have appeared over the span of approximately 35 years argued that the menace for the inhabitants of the Negev was represented both by Arab attacking from the Hejaz and by the incursions of bedouin tribes living in the Sinai and southern Negev. In order to cope with these two threats the emperors built a coherent system with several units deployed in depth along an axis leading from west of the Dead Sea through *Birosaba* to *Menois* and *Birsama*. Other units deployed along the route leading to Jerusalem supported the system. Gichon argued that this military organization was the so-called *limes Palaestinae*.<sup>18</sup> However, the chain of fortifications mentioned in the *Notitia Dignitatum* runs north of some of the main settlements, in particular north of *Elusa* which already in the first half of the fourth century is mentioned in the sources as a *polis*. This makes it unlikely that these forts were sited to meet incursions of the nomads from Sinai and southern Negev. Moreover, we do not have much evidence of the reality of such a threat.

As we have already noted, van Berchem also relied on a passage by Malalas, which he understood to describe a military system consisting of two lines of defence, the second one, to the rear, under the command of the *dux*. Unfortunately, his translation of this passage is wrong; actually Malalas does not say that the *duces* with their soldiers were deployed in the rear of the line of forts, but *in* the forts themselves.<sup>19</sup> So the value of the only literary source cited to prove the existence of

15. Malalas, *Chronographia*, XII, 40; van Berchem 1952: 10-24.

16. Van Berchem 1952: 24-26.

17. In particular it is worth noting that the forts of *Menois* and *Birsama* are not very distant from the Mediterranean shores.

18. See especially Gichon 1967; 1971; 1986. Gichon 1967 argued that the Diocletianic system had a Flavian forerunner, but Shatzman 1983 proved that these military installations were built in Late Antiquity, most probably by Diocletian.

19. Mann 1977, n. 8, 14 (= 1996: 242); Isaac 1988: 141 (= 1998: 370-371). Seston 1955 (= 1980) accepted that Malalas' passage points to the deployment of the *duces* with their armies along a second line of defence. However, he easily destroyed the idea of a dual command at provincial level. An important point in Malalas' passage remains unexplained: why after having mentioned the *limitanei* who were deployed at the frontiers of the empire does he say that the *duces* lived in the forts with a large military force? I suspect that Malalas interpreted his source in the light of the situation of his own times when, in addition to the *limitanei*, the *duces* had also units of *comitatenses* at their disposal. See in particular Malalas, *Chronographia*, 426 where it is said that the *dux* of Emesa was transferred to Palmyra with a *numerus*, that is a unit of *comitatenses*. They joined the *limitanei* who were already in the city. See Greatrex 1998: 36.

this particular defence in depth is irrevocably demolished. Nonetheless, the general view of van Berchem that the Diocletian produced a complex system of defense, where some military units were installed on the edge of the desert and others in the rear, along the main roads leading from the *strata diocletiana* or from the military route in Jordan to the interior of the provinces, remains a convincing one.

It is certain that Diocletian had an extraordinary impact in the area, constructing new forts and other military structures along all the frontier from the Euphrates to the Red Sea.<sup>20</sup> He organized a symmetrical system deploying two legions and one unit of *equites promoti indigenae* in each ducate. Furthermore the *Notitia Dignitatum* shows the presence of several kinds of cavalry units (*equites illyriciani* – *Dalmatae*, *Mauri*, *scutarii*, *promoti* or also *Thamudeni*) in the ducates of the Near East. Again, we may suspect that Diocletian was responsible for at least a great part of this distribution. It is noteworthy that in order to set up his symmetrical military organization, which as we have seen required the stationing of two legions in every ducate of the Near East, Diocletian redefined the boundaries of *Arabia* and *Palaestina* by inserting the Negev area and the south of Jordan into this latter province.<sup>21</sup>

We must note that Diocletian reorganized the military route between Suriyya (Sura) and Palmyra, constructed the *strata diocletiana* across the desolate lands beyond the Jebel Rawaq between Palmyra and Dumayr and constructed a new military system of roads, forts and watchtowers in central Jordan running from Umm al-Rasâs to Qasr al-Thurayyâ. This system runs along the edge of the desert approximately 20 km east of the *via nova Traiana*, descending to the bottom of the wadi and then rising to the high round south of the Wâdî al-Mûjib, with the legionary camp of Lajjûn (*Bethorus*) as a military pivot.<sup>22</sup>

Diocletian also established a series of arms factories all over the empire. Some of them were located in the Near East. Malalas says that he sited one at Damascus in order to supply weapons for use against the Arabs. Moreover, in a later passage he informs us that Saracens were terrorizing the Near East from the Euphrates to the Red Sea.<sup>23</sup> Damascus is located at the centre of this frontier region and selection of this location shows that geographical knowledge and logistic considerations

20. Lewin 2002; 2008.

21. Barnes 1975; Tsafirir 1986; Mayerson 1984: 223-226 (= 1995: 224-227); Sipilä 2004: 317-331; 2007: 201-202; 2009. See also Gichon 2004: 218-219. For a new discussion of the issue see Ward 2012. The absence of a second legion from the list of the duchy of *Palaestina* in the *Notitia* remained a puzzling issue for the scholars. Nonetheless one of them suspected that the fort of Udruh was a legionary base, built at the time of the Tetrarchy and abandoned some decades later. It was argued that the fort was built for host the *legio VI Ferrata* that was transferred from its former base at *Caparcotna* in lower Galilee; see Speidel 1979. Now an inscription recently found splendidly confirms such an hypothesis; see Kennedy & Falahat 2008. See also Lorient 2010; Davenport 2010. Brennan 1998 argues that the units of the *equites promoti illyriciani* were sent from the armies of some Danubian provinces to the Near East at the time of the Persian wars in 297. Later they were deployed in near eastern duchies. We cannot be certain about the timing of the deployment of the other units of *illyriciani* in the Near East; see Lewin 2004: 231-234.

22. Lewin 2001; 2002.

23. Malalas, *Chronographia*, XII: 38; 48.

determined the imperial decision. Indeed, the geographical distribution of military *fabricae* over the empire strongly suggests the reality of central planning.<sup>24</sup>

We return to the initial issue: did Diocletian have a strategy in mind or did he simply build all this stuff at random? I think that scholars who deny that this emperor conceived and produced a rational defence system are really too sceptical about the ability of the Roman government to grasp a complex of military problems and work out a systematic response to them. We might suppose that Diocletian built such a huge apparatus merely as a psychological device in order to impress potential invaders. That could be true, but only to a very limited extent. The massive forts with their impressive projecting towers hardly seem necessary to deter would be attackers who were relatively unsophisticated desert nomads. On the other hand, Luttwak has argued that an effective system of defence in depth requires massively fortified cities, forts and farmsteads so as to turn them into strong points capable of holding out while the enemy occupies the surrounding territories, a situation that is likely to arise in the course of strategic defence in depth.<sup>25</sup>

Some scholars, especially those who deny the existence of a strategic plan of defence in depth, have suggested that the stationing of the army in the marginal areas on the edge of the desert was part of a bigger essentially civilian project whose objective was to extend settlement and agriculture.<sup>26</sup> Late antique emperors and especially the Tetrarchs issued laws offering incentives to people who intended to cultivate *agri deserti*,<sup>27</sup> but the situation on the eastern frontier was quite different from that in North Africa. In fact, the branch of the Diocletianic route called *strata Diocletiana* between Palmyra and Dumayr had some forts built in a rough territory where agriculture was never practised. No *vici* arose near the forts, and no military structures were erected between one fort and the other. This section of the frontier was abandoned during the fifth century.<sup>28</sup> The quarrel that occurred in 539 between Hârith and Mundhir about the control of this sector could not have happened if the Romans had remained in this zone.<sup>29</sup> The soldiers that had occupied the forts in the fourth and in part of the fifth century must have had a hard and uncomfortable life. It is difficult to believe that Diocletian deployed regular army in such a difficult area only to expand the land available to agriculture.

To conclude: our evidence shows that Diocletian conceived a large project of defensive works whose main purpose was to defend the eastern provinces from the Arab menace. This surely means that he adopted a definite military strategy. However, one question remains: was the military organization described in the *Notitia Dignitatum*, which seems to represent the deployment of the military units designated to serve some form of defence in depth, really created in the reign of Diocletian? Were the Illyrian units deployed in the same forts under Diocletian as they are listed in the *Notitia Dignitatum*?

Diocletian build up a strong military presence supported by powerful fortifications. In spite of the doubts that we have advanced, that system most likely implied

24. James 1988; Lee 2007: 90-92.

25. Luttwak 1996: 161-170.

26. Isaac 1998: 459; Graf 1989; Findlater 2002.

27. See on this subject Bar 2005; Ma'oz 2006.

28. Bauzou 1989: 219; 2000: 87-88; Lewin 2008: 119-122.

29. Procopius, *Bella*, II: 5-11; see Greatrex & Lieu 2002: 102-103.



the organization of a *shallow* defence in depth. Some decades later, the army of the *magister militum per Orientem* included several units that were quartered in the cities, far from the frontier. That army emerged only under Constantine and Constantius II. As a result, the *comitatenses* were organized to form the backbone of the regional army. In other words, as some scholars have argued, it remains possible that the strategy of Diocletian was to build up a strong military presence supported by powerful fortifications rather than to organise defence in depth. Constantine and his successors may well have modified the Diocletianic system, at least to a certain degree, although it is not certain how and when the *comitatenses* were organized to form the backbone of the regional armies.<sup>30</sup>

Consequently, we must admit that Constantine and his successors modified the Diocletianic system. They relied on a strong defense in depth, based on the cooperation between the *limitanei*, stationed on the borders of the provinces, and the *comitatenses* who served as a regional reserve.<sup>31</sup>

Ammianus Marcellinus in his excursus on the provinces of the Near East asserts that Arabia was:

*opima variegata commerciorum, castrisque oppleta validis et castellis, quae ad repellendos gentium vicinarum excursus sollicitudo pervigil veterum per opportunos saltus erexit et cautos. Haec quoque civitates habet inter oppida quidam ingentes, Bostram, et Gerasam atque Philadelphiam, murorum firmitate cautissimas*

“a land producing a rich variety of wares and studded with strong castles and fortresses, which the watchful care of the early inhabitants reared in suitable and readily defended defiles, to check the inroads of neighbouring tribes. This region also has, in addition to strong towns, great cities, Bostra Gerasa and Philadelphia, all strongly defended by mighty walls”.<sup>32</sup>

30. Seston 1955: 284-296 (= 1980: 483-495) *contra* van Berchem 1952 minimized the difference between the Diocletianic *comitatus* and the Constantinian army of the *comitatenses*. Jones 1964: 55-57 evaluates the policy of Diocletian as a reactionary one because he decreased the *comitatus* and greatly strengthened the military apparatus on the frontiers. Moreover, during the fourth century the army stationed at the frontiers would have become weaker because some units or detachments were transferred to the central field army. Other units were destroyed in the wars and never replaced. Le Bohec 2006: 145 stresses that Diocletian intended to reestablish the organisation of the first centuries of the Empire, deploying a solid army along the frontiers. Mann 1979: 181 (= 1996: 91) is worth quoting: “Only on the eastern desert frontier, among all the frontiers of the Empire, can one convincingly argue for a planned and coherent system of defence in-depth, and there the impression is that the main effect on Diocletian’s reorganization was a great reinforcement of the frontier line itself, not of any great defensive network behind.” He ranges himself alongside Jones as far as the typology of the deployment of the Diocletianic army is concerned; their views helped to shape the concept of *shallow* defence in depth argued by Luttwak.

31. Carrié 1993: 129-131 argued that at the beginning the *comitatenses* were soldiers of the Constantinian army rewarded for their behaviour during the civil wars. On the first mentions of the regional armies in the literary sources and in the laws see Jones 1964: 124-126. The *Notitia Dignitatum* lists at the disposal of the *magister militum per orientem* ten *vexillationes comitatenses*, nine *legiones comitatenses*, ten *legiones pseudocomitatenses* – that is legions that earlier had been part of the *limitanean* army – and two *auxilia palatina*.

32. Ammianus, *Res Gestae*, XIV: 8, 13 (trans. J. C. Rolfe).

We do not know who the *veteres* were who had built the *castra* and the *castella*. It is possible that Ammianus intended to say that such structures had been erected in a distant past, even prior to the Roman occupation of the area. However archaeology has revealed that soldiers did occupy many forts and towers located in spectacular positions, on the crests of hills or on cliffs overlooking gorges in Late Antique *Arabia*. Consequently, no matter whether these defensive structures were constructed in the distant past or recently, we cannot avoid inferring that Ammianus is telling us that these fortifications were manned in his own time.<sup>33</sup>

Ammianus also tells us that Bostra, Gerasa and Philadelphia had massive city walls. We do not have any evidence that these cities had such strong circuits before Late Antiquity. The whole description regarding the character of the *castra* and the *castella* and the *firmitas murorum* must be taken together. The writer is surely describing the militarized character of the province in his own times, the second half of the fourth century, and he also states that these structures had been built in order to protect *Arabia* from neighbouring peoples, and these are surely the Arabs living across the frontier.<sup>34</sup> Several other writers confirm that Diocletian had built a very solid protective belt on the fringes of the provinces.<sup>35</sup> It is certain as anything is in ancient history that he did so.

How did the system work after Diocletian's time? Luttwak reconstructed the way the defence system worked at that time basing himself only on the fact that *limitanei* were deployed on the borders of the provinces while the *comitatenses* were stationed in cities in the rear. He did not rely on any literary source. But, actually, we have interesting literary information capable to reveal how the defensive organization of the eastern frontier worked in the fourth century. In fact, an extraordinary episode in Roman military history illustrates how the army operated in the case of an Arab attack. In the year 377 Mavia, the queen of an Arab tribe allied to Rome, revolted against the Empire. To meet the impending menace, the *dux Foenices* called on the *magister militum per Orientem* for assistance. After a certain time the *magister militum* with his men arrived in the area of the conflict and joined the *dux* who had assembled some of his own units in order to suppress Mavia's army which had invaded *Phoenice* and *Palaestina*. When the Romans faced the enemy on the battlefield, the *magister* ordered the *dux* not to intervene. This arrogant commander, who must be identical with the general *Iulius* praised by Ammianus in another context, intended to engage the Saracens with his *comitatenses*, without the support of the *dux* and the *limitanean* units. Events showed that he had overestimated his forces, because he was on the point of suffering a humiliating defeat. Luckily for him, the *dux* noticed how dangerous the situation had become for the *magister* and disobeying his superior's orders he entered the battle. Fighting valiantly, the *dux* and his *limitanei* saved the general and successfully covered his retreat.<sup>36</sup>

We perceive here that the Roman military authorities were able to conceive and to execute a complex defence strategy that required the coordinated operation of

33. Moreover, we cannot exclude the possibility that Ammianus intended to say that the *castra* and *castella* had been built by emperors of the past. Ammianus uses *veteres* for emperors of the previous centuries and in some cases for Diocletian as well.

34. See discussion at length on the passage in Lewin 2008: 155-173.

35. Lewin 2008: 47-49.

36. Sozomen, *HE*, VI: 8; Lewin 2007: 246-250.

the units of the *magister militum per Orientem* and the forces of the *dux*. It is of little relevance that we have here an operation directed against a group of revolting allies taking place within the borders of the empire. It is however worth noting that the *duces* and the *magister militum per orientem* were assigned different tasks. Whenever a major hostile threat materialised it was the task of the *duces* to try to slow down the incursion. They would gather a number of their units in order to hold up the hostile advance. They would then call on the *magister* for assistance. In such a situation it was the role of the *comitatenses* led by the regional *magister* to serve as a mobile reserve. The *magister* had his headquarters at Antioch and the troops at his disposal were usually garrisoned in various cities near the coast. Their ability to defeat invaders and defend the Roman territory depended upon the speedy assembly of the scattered units, but this necessarily took some time.

The modalities of this operation suggest a strategy of the kind envisaged by Luttwak. It would seem that, at least at the time of Mavia's uprising, the *limitanei* were not employed as a barrier at the frontier, but that they had first to be assembled from their various and scattered stations by their commander, the *dux*, and that they were therefore only in a position to engage the invader after he had already advanced a certain distance into Roman territory. The regional *magister* would then intervene with his *comitatenses* in order to help the forces led by the *dux* to decisively defeat and expell the invader. We can therefore assume that the *magister militum per Orientem* was summoned to support the *limitanei* whenever there was a serious Arab attack. For instance we are informed that in the reign of the emperor Marcian (450-457) the *magister* Ardabur was fighting the Saracens near Damascus and that at a later stage he negotiated a peace with them.<sup>37</sup> Another source mentions that in 452 the *dux Palaestinae* Dorotheos was fighting the Arabs in Moab.<sup>38</sup> It is probable that these two commanders were in action in different sections of the frontier but leading their armies against the same major incursion<sup>39</sup> and that in this case also the *magister militum per orientem* was operating in the frontier region of the empire after being summoned to support the *limitanei* against the hostile attack.

I do not see why we should not call this procedure defence in depth. But unlike the one that was operative in the time of Diocletian, the second phase of the defensive operation was now carried out by the *comitatenses* of the regional army and not just by the units of *equites* of the ducal army.<sup>40</sup>

It was therefore a long established practice of the Roman military authority to rely on a regional *magister* to draw on units deployed in the rear of the frontier in order to support a *dux* in a sector facing an enemy attack. But this strategy had a serious weakness. What could be done if the frontier forces in *Palaestina* or *Arabia* came under sudden attack at a time when the *magister* was already occupied on a distant frontier north of the Euphrates? This situation might require some reorganization to meet the emergency. Our sources record what seems to be the case of this happening. In an inscription from Palmyra dated between 325 and 365 one *Platanius*

37. Priscus fr. 26.

38. Nicephorus, *HE*, XV: 9.

39. Shahîd 1989: 55-58; Lewin 2007: 254.

40. Jones 1964: 685; Carrié 1986: 458-459 argue that the forces of the regional *magistri* were a tactical reserve on a regional level. However, we must prefer to describe them as a strategical reserve on a regional level. In fact, the episode of Mavia's revolt reveals that the *comitatenses* had a wider range of intervention than a tactical one.

*Serenianus* is described as a *dux Orientis*. This *dux* is probably the same man as the *dux Serenianus* who according to Ammianus some time after the battle of Nisibis in 350 failed to prevent the devastation of Thelsee in *Phoenice*, identified with modern Dumayr. *Serenianus*' failure in *Phoenice* happened precisely at the same time as the *magister militum per Orientem* was operating in the neighbourhood of Nisibis where Persian attacks were expected.<sup>41</sup> It is likely that it was an Arab incursion that caused the devastation of Thelsee, for we have other evidence that the Saracens were threatening the Near Eastern provinces in those years.<sup>42</sup> It would therefore seem that *Serenianus* had been given an extraordinary regional command embracing all the oriental provinces from the Euphrates to the Red Sea because the *magister* was busy in Nisibis, too far away to support the *duces* of the Near East against Arab incursions.

The circumstances of the widening of the command of the *dux Serenianus* suggest that when, almost two centuries later, the Roman authorities decided to enhance Hârith's position they were following a well-established strategic precedent. Procopius remarks that the military aim in attributing higher power to Hârith was to give him authority over as many Arab tribes as possible because the *duces* and the provincial phylarchs alone were not able to cope with al-Mundhir's raids.

## SECTION II

### What was the role of the Arab tribes in the defence of the Empire before the reign of Justinian ?

Already before the end of the third century, several Arab tribes were living in the interior of the frontier provinces and their chiefs used to select men of their tribes for service in military units who were put at disposal of the Empire. It seems that their commanders continued to be Arabs.<sup>43</sup> These units were probably given the status of ethnic units:<sup>44</sup> this meant that while members of the *alae* and *cohortes* of the regular army received military diplomata containing the concession of citizenship and other privileges at the time of their discharge, no diplomata were issued to the members of the ethnic units.

Allied Arab tribesmen who were employed in order to fight the Persians are mentioned for the first time in a panegyric of Constantius II delivered by Julian. The author recalls a successful imperial diplomatic mission of the year 338. He praises the emperor for having turned certain previously hostile Saracen tribes against the enemies of the Empire. However, we do not know anything about these particular Saracen groups or about their contributions to the defence of the Roman territory.

Next, we are informed that in 378 Mavia, queen of some Saracens some time after the settlement of her conflict with the Romans, sent some troops to Constantinople

41. See Ammianus, *Res Gestae*, XIV, 3: 1-4 on frictions at the borders of *Mesopotamia* and *Osrhoene*; XIV, 7: 7 on *Serenianus*; 9: 1 on *Ursicinus* at Nisibis. For the identification with the *Serenianus* mentioned in the inscription from Palmyra see Lewin 2008: 73-75.

42. Gatier 1999: 209-214.

43. Sartre 1982: 122-127; 1993: 145-150; Brüggemann 2007. See also Scharrer 2010: 314-325. Probably, the famous inscription of Ruwwafa of the time of Marcus Aurelius testifies to the same procedure of recruiting soldiers among the Arab tribes and of creating military units. See Macdonald 1995 (= 2009: VIII).

44. On this kind of units see Speidel 1975.

in order to help the Roman forces to defend the capital against the Goths.<sup>45</sup> The Saracens led by Mavia are designated as *hypospondoi* by Sozomen, and consequently we can be sure that they had the status of *federates*. But again, literary source do not explain how precisely the contribution of Mavia's Saracens fitted into the overall military strategy of the empire.

In the fifth century, the Roman authorities initiated the practice of appointing some Arab chiefs to an important official post in the Empire. Around the year 420 the Arab chief Aspebetos, who had left Persia and entered the Empire accompanied by his son Terebon and his tribesmen, was accepted into an alliance with the Romans and appointed phylarch of the province of *Arabia*. According to our source, the initiative for this important decision was taken by the *magister militum per Orientem Anatolius*. We don't know whether there were precedents for the practice of appointing an Arab chief to the rank of phylarch giving him authority over an entire province. If this was indeed the first time that a phylarch obtained a status of superiority over the other chiefs of the tribes living in the province, the new departure would seem to have been a personal reward for Aspebetos, the chief of a powerful tribe who had broken his alliance with the Persians.<sup>46</sup>

The story of Aspebetos and of his son Terebon is a fascinating one. The holy man Euthymius healed Terebon from an illness and some time later the tribe converted to Christianity. Aspebetos, who had changed his name to Petros, settled his tribe in the Judean desert, in the neighborhood of Euthymius' cell. Some time later, the patriarch of Jerusalem ordained Aspebetos-Petros bishop of the *parembolê*, that is bishop of the camp of the tents of the Saracens. In the following years Petros became an influential man in the dispute between the orthodox Church and the Nestorians; his activities at the time of the concil of Ephesos in 431 are well attested. By the time he had obtained the position of bishop he was presumably no longer phylarch of *Arabia*.<sup>47</sup>

Approximately forty years after the time of the installation of his tribe in Roman territory, that is around 459-460, Terebon became somehow involved in the plot of a certain *symphylarchos* and was consequently detained in jail at Bostra for some time by the provincial governor of *Arabia*. The source does not clarify whether Terebon had inherited the superior phylarchate of his father; in other words we cannot be sure that the provincial phylarchate of *Arabia* had survived the death of Aspebetos. It is quite possible that Terebon was simply an ordinary phylarch like some others in the province. The fact that he was jailed by the *dux Arabiae* might imply that he was under the jurisdiction of that ducate. Although a part of Terebon's tribe lived now in the *parembolê* in *Palaestina*, it is possible that other groups had remained in *Arabia*. It is however significant that Terebon, after he had been freed thanks to the intervention of Antipatros, the bishop of Bostra, is said to have returned to his

45. Socrates, HE V, 1: 4.

46. Cyril of Scythopolis, V. *Euth.*, X; Sartre 1982: 149-150; Grouchevoy 1995: 120-121.

47. Cyril of Scythopolis, V. *Euth.*: X; XV; XX; XXIII; XXVIII. On the participation of Petros at the congress of Ephesos in 431 see Cyril of Scythopolis, V. *Euth.*: XX. On some documents, which reveal that he played a prominent position in the doctrinal disputes there, see Millar 2006, 106 who duly underlines the fact that Petros was able to speak and read in Greek. On the bishops of the *parembolai* see Arcuri 2002-2003: 84-93.

protector, the holy Euthymius, in the desert of Judaea.<sup>48</sup> If so, it is possible that he was a phylarchos of *Palaestina* or a part of it, the *parembolê*.

A final episode in the story of this tribe is significant: the settled tribesmen of Aspebetos were unable to prevent hostile tribes from devastating the territory where they lived. Some time in the reign of Anastasius the *parembolê* was attacked and destroyed by raiding Arab tribes. The chiefs of the *parembolê* then built a new encampment and a church in another location, near the monastery of abba Martyrius. But once again the raiders penetrated into the area, killing many persons and taking many captives. The survivors went to live in some villages nearby.<sup>49</sup>

A passage in Cyril of Scythopolis *Vita Joh. Hesych.* XIII probably refers to one of these two episodes. The author informs us that certain Roman phylarchs gave instructions to the monks to prepare themselves against the barbarian attacks led by al-Mundhir. The same source specifies that the event happened after the capture of Amida, that is after January 503.

In 473, towards the end of the reign of the emperor Leo, the Arab chief Amorkesos succeeded in capturing the island of Jotabe, previously held by the Romans. After having ejected the imperial tax collectors, he seized some villages nearby. He then requested from the Roman authorities the appointment to the position of phylarch of *Palaestina*, most probably *Palaestina tertia*. Accordingly the emperor received Amorkesos in Constantinople with all honours and acceded to his request besides granting to him the rank of first *patricius*.<sup>50</sup> Amorkesos is described in the literary source as an *hypospodos* (ὑπόσποδος), that is a *foederatus*.<sup>51</sup>

An inscription from Khanâsir (*Anasartha*), in Syria, which is most probably to be dated to the fifth century, reveals that a certain *lamprotatos*, Silvanos, “*aei kratein en Erembois*” (ἀεὶ κρατεῖν ἐν Ἐρεμβοῖς; ruling perpetually amongst the Erembois [Arabs]) had built a martyrion in honour of his daughter, Kasidathê, who had been married to another *phylarchos* according to the will of the sovereigns.<sup>52</sup> Two important aspects of the inscription have to be noted; firstly, the fact that Silvanos has a non Arab name reveals the extent of the assimilation of the phylarch into Roman culture. Secondly, there is the fact that the phylarch has the rank of *lamprotatos*. It is noteworthy that in an edict of Justinian regarding the administration of *Phoenice* the *phylarchoi* of that province are described as having this same distinction.<sup>53</sup> We see that the Roman authorities exercised a close control on their phylarchs. They honoured them with lofty titles of rank but they also reserved the right to authorize and therefore also to prohibit marriage alliances between their families.

An edict found at Beer Sheva and most probably to be dated to the sixth century, reveals the existence of an “*archiphylos tou koinou tôn archiphylôn tou Konstantinianou Saltou*” (ἀρχίφυλος τοῦ κοινοῦ τῶν ἀρχιφύλων τοῦ Κωνσταντινιανοῦ Σάλτου; the *archiphylos* of the *archiphiloi's* commonwealth of the Konstantinianos Saltos area).

48. Cyril of Scythopolis, *V. Euth.*: XXXIV; Sartre 1982: 149-153. Grouchevoy 1995: 121.

49. Cyril of Scythopolis, *V. Euth.*: XLVI.

50. Malchus, *Fr.*, 1; for a discussion of the passage see Lewin 2008: 157-159.

51. Malchus, *Fr.*, 1. See Lewin 2008: 157-158 for a discussion of the geographical area of Amorkesos' competence.

52. Feissel 2002: 209-220.

53. Justinianus, *Edicta*, IV: 2. In this law the *dux* is described as having the rank of *peribleptos*, the same that by now the emperor had attributed to the civil governor, previously a simple *lamprotatos*.

This document shows the hierarchical complexity of the organization of the structure of the tribes settled inside the Empire. An *archiphylos* having authority over several other *archiphyloi* is known from the district of *Palaestina* called *Konstantinianos Saltos*. We must infer that even a subdivision of *Palaestina* had their own chief phylarchs who in turn were the superiors of yet more phylarchs and that all these were recognised by the imperial authority, which had an official list of them all.<sup>54</sup>

Some sources show that in the years 528-536, the Roman authority used to appoint a chief phylarch for each ducate of the Near East. He is described as a partner of the *dux* and consequently we must argue that his main duty was a military one.<sup>55</sup>

### SECTION III

#### The superphylarchate of Hârith

It is time now to discuss what was the strategic reasoning behind the decision to raise Hârith to this new and powerful position. Let us begin recalling the famous passage by Procopius describing the position to which Hârith was appointed: "This man (Alamoundaras), holding the position of king, ruled alone over all the Saracens in Persia, and he was always able to make his inroad with the whole army wherever he wished in the Roman domain; and neither any commander of Roman troops, whom they call 'duces' nor any leaders of the Saracens allied with the Romans, who are called 'phylarchs', was strong enough with his men to array himself against Alamoundaras; for the troops stationed in the different districts were not a match in battle for the enemy. For this reason the emperor Justinian put in command of as many clans as possible Arethas, the son of Gabalas, who ruled over the Saracens of Arabia, and bestowed upon him the dignity of king, a thing which among the Romans had never before been done. However Alamoundaras continued to injure the Romans just as much as before, if not more, since Arethas was either extremely unfortunate in every inroad and every conflict, or else he turned traitor as quickly as he could. For as yet we know nothing certain about him."<sup>56</sup>

In short, Procopius tells us that Justinian decided to appoint Hârith, the phylarch of Arabia, to the position of chief of as many tribes as possible in order to counteract the ability of Mundhir to damage the Roman provinces. Moreover, he bestowed upon him the dignity of king.

The passage also points to the weakness and the fragmentation of the existing military commands as the main factor behind the bestowing of so great power on Hârith. The date was late 528 or early in 529.<sup>57</sup>

54. For a recent discussion of the so-called Beer Sheva edict see Di Segni, 2004: 131-158, with the text of fragment 4 at 154. Theodoret, *Histoire des moines de Syrie*, XXVI, 14-15 narrates that two tribes approached Simeon the Stylites, each one requesting a blessing for its own phylarch. Cyril of Scythopolis, *V. Joh. Hesych.*, XIII mentions the Arab chiefs who had the task of ruling the tribes and of overseeing the Palestinian desert. Again, we note the fact that in what was only one division of the province there was more than one phylarch.

55. See Sartre 1982: 163-177.

56. Procopius, *Bella*, I: 45-47; trans. by Dewing.

57. Procopius, *Bella*, I: 46-48. For the date see Greatrex 1998: 160. The character of Hârith's basileia is discussed by Shahîd 1995: 103-124; Robin 2008: 179. His kingship is not mentioned in official inscriptions and documents. It has to be assumed that he was entitled to adorn himself

Immediately after having been appointed *magister militum per Orientem* in April 529, Belisarius was active at Dara in preparing for war against the Persians.<sup>58</sup> He now was too far from the provinces south of the Euphrates to be in a position to coordinate the defensive operations if a new attack brought by Mundhir materialized in this area. The appointment of Hârith would help to resolve this problem. Hârith had been given the power on an almost regional scale to enable him to assemble an army capable of giving effective support to the *duces* whenever the provinces south of *Mesopotamia* came under attack.

It has been suggested that the defence of the frontier had been given to Hârith because the *limes* was now being guarded by too few *limitanei* so that the *duces* were no longer able to protect their provinces. This does not appear to have been the case. It is indeed the case that a number of years after the great reconstruction of the near eastern frontier undertaken by Diocletian the limitanean presence had been weakened. The withdrawal began during the last decades of the fourth century and in the course of the fifth century the military presence was greatly reduced in some sections of the frontier.<sup>59</sup> However this does not explain Justinian's decision.

In fact the sources do not suggest that in the years before the outbreak of the first Persian war Justinian intended to reduce the forces of the *duces* any further. On the contrary, it seems that we can detect a reversal of the trend. In *Arabia* the fort of Hallâbât was reconstructed by the *dux* in 529.<sup>60</sup> In the year 527, the emperor transferred a unit of *comitatenses* to Palmyra where they joined the limitanean unit, which had long been quartered there.

The practice of transferring units of *comitatenses* to the command of a *dux* had precedents. The first mention of this procedure dates to the reign of Anastasius who issued a law about it.<sup>61</sup> Palmyra now became the headquarters of one of the two *duces* of the district of *Phoenice*, who was transferred to Palmyra from Emesa.<sup>62</sup> The emperor also reinforced the garrison at Rusâfa, adorning the cities with houses, stoas and other buildings.<sup>63</sup> This proves that it was the emperor's strategy to move troops to the frontiers of the empire, the very opposite of a strategy that would leave the principal responsibility for the defence of the eastern frontier to Arab

only with a plain coronet. It was only later, in 580 at the time of his visit to Constantinople, that Hârith's son, al-Mundhir, was permitted to wear the diadema. Most probably according to the Roman government Hârith was entitled to use his kingship only as a status symbol among the Arab tribes, and not in formal relations with the Roman state. On his kingship as an honorific one see Fisher 2011a: 96-97.

58. Procopius, *Bella*, I: 13, 9-10.

59. Lewin 2008; 2011.

60. Littmann, Magie & Stuart 1913: 22-23, n. 18.

61. *Codex Justinianus*, XII, 35, 18 (492).

62. Malalas, XVIII: 2; Ravegnani 1988: 95.

63. Procopius, *De aed.*, II, IX: 3-9 who actually says that Justinian put a garrison in Rusâfa. However, he affirms that Palmyra was almost deserted before Justinian strengthened it with defences and provided a garrison of troops. See *De aed.* II, X: 10-12. Malalas clarifies that the emperor added a unit of *comitatenses* to the *limitanei* already present in the city. The archaeological researches conducted in some forts between Suriyya (*Sura*) and Tayyiba (*Oriza*) seem to show that they were continuously occupied since the fourth century until late sixth; see Konrad 2000.



allies. Moreover, he embellished the cities with new civic monuments in order to enhance the grandeur of the *romanitas* in the eyes of enemies and subjects.<sup>64</sup>

We have plenty of documentation revealing that at least until the year 541 the *duces* commanded effective armies capable of fighting enemies with success. A few examples are enough: in 528 several *duces* participated in a difficult expedition against the bases of the Nasrids in Persian territory. Two years later the *dux* Sounikas fought valiantly against the Persians who had invaded Syria. In 541 two *duces* were asked by Belisarius to participate in his campaign. They first refused claiming that they were not allowed to leave their provinces, as it was their duty, assigned by the emperor, to protect their provinces from the Arab incursions of al-Mundhir. However, after having been assured by Belisarius that the Saracens would be preoccupied with religious ceremonies for two months they agreed to join the expedition until the end of the Saracen holy period.<sup>65</sup>

Liebeschuetz has suggested that at the time of Justinian the field army of the *duces* was composed of *comitatenses* while the *limitanei* were peasant soldiers who had lost great part of their fighting capacity.<sup>66</sup> However, we must note that in some war situations the *duces* had some thousands soldiers at their disposition.<sup>67</sup> As normally there were not many *comitatenses* stationed in a single ducate, we must conclude that the large forces assembled by these *duces* included *limitanei* who must have remained effective fighting units. It would seem that at least the limitanean units of *equites* and the legions were still fit to be employed on campaigns and that they could be concentrated into an effective striking force by the *dux* whenever an enemy attack on the province materialized.<sup>68</sup>

Procopius's famous statement that Justinian left the *limitanei* of the near East unpaid for some years before finally disbanding them might lead us to conclude that the reinforcement of the position of Hârith was linked to the weakening of the *limitanei*. However, nothing supports the view that the weakening and disbanding of the *limitanei* described by Procopius – if indeed there is even a kernel of truth in his report – took place in the years before the first Persian war of Justinian.<sup>69</sup>

64. On Justinian's politics, aiming at displaying both the military strength and the vitality of the near eastern cities at the borders of the Empire see Janiardi 2006.

65. Malalas, XVIII: 16, 60; Procopius, *Bella*, II: 16, 17.

66. Liebeschuetz 1977: 499. On some sources showing that by the mid fourth century the *limitanei* shifted to the condition of parttime soldiers busy with managing their properties see Jones 1964: 662-663, 678; Zuckerman 2004: 155-159. But see an optimistic view about their effectiveness as a fighting force in Isaac 1988: 145-146 (= 1998: 377-378), who nonetheless argues that they were employed only as a local police. For other documentation revealing the good fighting abilities of the *limitanei*, see Whitby 1995: 68-72.

67. Sounikas, in 531, fought the Persian and Arab invaders having 4.000 men under his command. Nine years later two *duces* of *Phoenice* tried to defend Antioch with 6.000 soldiers. Malalas, *Chronographia*, XVIII: 60; Procopius, *Bella*, II, 8, 2.

68. In the *Notitia Dignitatum* the *magister militum per Orientem* had an army of approximately 20.000 men at his disposition. See Treadgold 1995: 50. Under normal conditions of peace with the Persians they were scattered in several ducates, from *Isauria* to *Libya*. It means that only one or two units could have been put under the direct command of one *dux*. The higher qualitative value of the *equites* and the legions compared to the *alae* and the *cohortes* has been argued by Brennan 2001: 261-166.

69. Procopius *Anecdota*, XXIV: 12-14. Casey 1996 basing his study on the coinage of some sites arrived at the conclusion that the problems about the payment to the *limitanei* began

We conclude that the *duces* still commanded an army capable of conducting offensive campaigns and of resisting hostile invasions.

The attribution of special powers to Hârith does not therefore mean that he and his Arabs were to replace a greatly weakened ducal army. The problem that induced Justinian to put as many Arab tribes as possible under the authority of Hârith was of another kind. We have seen that in the fourth and fifth century the imperial strategy against Arab incursions was one of cooperation between the ducal forces and the forces led by the *magister militum per Orientem*. In 527, the eastern front was in turmoil and attacks by al-Mundhir were expected to materialize. Malalas explicitly says that Justinian appointed Hypatius as *magister militum per Orientem* in order to protect the Near East from Saracen incursions.<sup>70</sup> However, a few months later, al-Mundhir succeeded in penetrating deeply into Roman territory, into the inner parts of Syria, almost as far as Antioch. Devastations and the booty were on a large scale. The angry emperor dismissed Hypatius whom he deemed responsible for the failure to intercept and defeat the enemy. He replaced him with Belisarius.<sup>71</sup>

This then was the situation when Justinian decided to enhance Hârith's authority. Just a few months earlier the Jafnid had been one of the leaders of the successful Roman expedition into Persian territory. Moreover, at the same time the Samaritans had revolted and the support given by the phylarch Abû Karib to the *dux Palaestinae* in suppressing the revolt was surely appreciated by the emperor. The two Arab chiefs were the rising stars in the military firmament of the Near East.

Cyril of Scythopolis narrates that Hârith as well was a *foederatus*, and consequently we must state that his army was made of federates: Cyril of Scythopolis narrates that Hârith and another phylarch, Asouados, fought a deadly war the one against the other.<sup>72</sup> The narrative establishes a date for the episode in the fifties, certainly after 544, possibly in 554/555.<sup>73</sup> Cyril describes the two antagonists as *hypospondoi*, that is *foederati*. It follows that Hârith too had the status of *foederatus* and consequently that his army had also been given federate status.

A group of inscriptions from Qasr-al-Hayr al-Gharbî dated to the year 559 reveals that by that time Hârith had received the honorific titles of *patricius* and *stratelates* and also the rank of *endoxotatos*,<sup>74</sup> that is a rank superior to the rank of *lamprotatos* normally conferred on provincial phylarchs. The edict 4 of Justinian dated to 536

around 540 and that the disbanding of the units occurred at the end of the second Persian war. However, he argues that the impact of Justinian's policies was restricted to *Palaestina*. But see *contra* Isaac 1998: 467-468. The documentation reveals that some units, most probably limitanean, were present in *Palaestina* much later, until the end of the century and indeed in the seventh, on the eve of the Islamic conquest. See Fiema 2002; 2007; Zuckerman 2004: 163-164. Isaac 1995 (= 1998: 437-466) argues that the toponyms mentioned in the edict of Beer Sheva and in *P. Nessana* 39 refer to military settlements. *Contra* see Di Segni 2004: 140-141. On the character of the ducal system in Justinian's time see Whitby 1988: 210-211; Greatrex 2007a.

70. Malalas, *Chronographia*, XVII: 20.

71. Malalas, *Chronographia*, XVIII: 34. See Greatrex 1998: 152-153.

72. Cyril of Scythopolis *V. Euth.*: 51.

73. Sartre 1982: 176-177; Shahîd 1995: 251-255.

74. *IGLS* V, 2553 b, d. For the reading *stratelates* in the inscription see Maccoull 1996: 157-158. For a discussion at length on the structures at Qasr al-Hayr al-Gharbî that must be considered an example of Syrian monastic architecture see the fascinating study by Genequand 2006: 63-83.

states that the phylarch of *Phoenice* was granted the title of *lamprotatos* and that the *dux* was granted the rank of *peribleptos*. On the other hand, Novel 102, also issued in the year 536, and dealing with the administration of this province of *Arabia* and the new civil office of *moderator*, states that the *dux* of that province was a *peribleptos*. The law does not specify the rank of the *phylarchos*. This has led one scholar to argue that at that time the *phylarchos* must have had the same rank as the *dux*, namely that of *peribleptos*. If that is right, Hârith, who now held the position of chief of the Arabs allied of Rome but continued to be the phylarch of *Arabia*, would in 536 still have remained a *peribleptos* and the rank of *endoxotatos* would have been awarded to him some time before 559.<sup>75</sup>

Around the same times as Hârith was appointed chief of as many Arabs as possible, a second Arab phylarch was appointed to a comparable number of imperial positions. Procopius narrates that a certain Abû Karib had presented a wild and barren land, the *Phoinikôn*, to Justinian and that the grateful emperor consequently appointed him phylarch of *Palaestina*. The writer describes this man as a particularly vigorous chief, a man to be feared by both enemies and subjects.<sup>76</sup> An inscription found at Sammâ', north west of Suweida reveals that the protection of the God of Saint George was requested by a certain *endoxotatos phylarchos* Abû Karib. The text is carved on what had probably been a lintel of a church and we must infer that it reveals a connection with Sammâ' of the aforementioned Arab chief. This Abû Karib must surely be identified with the chief mentioned by Procopius.<sup>77</sup> Abû Karib is listed together with Hârith in the famous inscription concerning the embassies sent in autumn A.D. 547 by various important authorities to the king of Himyar, Abraha. This text reveals that they both were sons of Jabala.<sup>78</sup> It is significant to note that on the Sammâ' inscription Abû Karib is given the honorific title of *endoxotatos (gloriosissimus)*, the same that is attributed to his brother Hârith on the inscription from Qasr-al-Hayr al-Gharbî. We conclude that while Hârith's position was certainly exceptional both he and his brother Abû Karib were honoured with more elevated titles than the other phylarchs.

In 528/529 Abû Karib had participated in the repression of the Samaritan revolt in *Palaestina*, joining his forces with those of the *dux*. The two commanders succeeded in defeating the rebels and the phylarch took much booty selling 20.000 captives in Persian and Indian (i.e. Arabian) territory. Our source says that some of the Samaritans had fled to Trachonitidis.<sup>79</sup> If so, the last stages of the conflict had led Abû Karib well outside his area of authority. However, the inscription at Sammâ' must be considerably later than 528/9. As we have seen, Justinian's Nov. 102 issued in 536 with rules for the governance of *Arabia* could state that the civil governor, the

75. See Shahîd 1959: 324-326 (= 1988), who argues that for a certain time before being elevated to the rank of *endoxotatos*, Hârith detained the rank of *inlustris*.

76. Procopius, *Bella*, I, 19: 7-14. The writer does not reveal any serious interest in grasping the importance of the *Phoinikon* in the context of the politics in the peninsula. See Cameron 1985: n. 36, 121.

77. Sartre 1993: 150-153.

78. *Corpus Inscriptionum Semiticarum* IV, II: n. 541. For a discussion of the date of the text see Beaucamp, Briquel-Chatonnet & Robin 1999-2000: 71-72.

79. Malalas, *Chronographia*, XVIII: 35.

*dux* and the phylarch were all endowed with the same rank of *peribleptos*.<sup>80</sup> So, since Hârith in *Arabia* was still a *peribleptos* there is no chance that Abû Karib in *Palaestina* had already obtained a higher rank. His promotion and hence the inscription must be considerably later.

We must not suppose that the emperors regularly accorded the phylarch a higher rank than the one bestowed on the *dux*. On the contrary, the *Ed. 4* regulating the governance of *Phoenice* shows that while the *dux* was a *peribleptos* the phylarch only had the rank of *lamprotatos*. It appears that at that time, that is in 536, only the phylarch of *Arabia*, that is Hârith, and perhaps also the phylarch of *Palaestina*, Abû Karib, held the same rank as the *duces*. However, an inscription dated to the year 580 reveals that the person who was *dux Arabiae* in that year had the rank of *endoxotatos*. We might suspect that Abû Karib obtained his high rank as a result of a general enhancement of the ranks of military commanders.<sup>81</sup>

It is clear that in the course of the early years of the reign of Justinian, the administration of the Arab tribes under phylarchs became more complex: there now were several chiefs officially recognized by the Roman authorities in each province. Moreover, the Romans appointed an Arab leader to the position of provincial phylarch in every ducate. Finally, a totally new position was created when Hârith received an authority that embraced a large sector of the Near East. Although he kept his old position of phylarch of the province of *Arabia*, Hârith was now endowed with a high authority that set him above all other phylarchs. At the same time, Abû Karib too was a phylarch with enhanced authority. As many scholars have rightly pointed out, the two brothers exercised power over two different sections of the near eastern frontier: Hârith was given authority over *Phoenice* and *Arabia*, and probably *Syria* and *Euphratensis*, while Abû Karib controlled *Palaestina* and the Hedjaz.<sup>82</sup>

The phylarchs were completely integrated into the provincial administration. Imperial laws regulating the administration of *Phoenice* and *Arabia* issued in the thirties of the sixth century name the official rank of a provincial phylarch alongside those of the *dux* and the civil governor. Equally he figures together with the *dux* and other important private persons in a list of individuals who are forbidden to take part in the illegal exaction of taxes.<sup>83</sup>

80. Actually the text does not specify the status of the phylarch, but he is mentioned without any honorific rank immediately after the *dux* who is designated as a *peribleptos* and consequently it is implied that they both detained the same rank.

81. On the *dux Arabiae* Flavius Paulus attested as *endoxotatos* in 580 see Sartre 1982: 112; on the rank of the *duces* after mid sixth century Maccoull 1996. The famous Abû Karib, as a pious Christian, could have visited the church of Saint George at Sammâ' also if he detained the position of phylarch of another province.

82. Sartre 1982; Parker 1986: 151; Casey 1996: 221; Robin 2008: 178-181.

83. Jones 1964: 611-612, 664-666 giving all the sources on the eastern federates. On the integration of the phylarchs and their armies of federates into the provincial structure see Isaac 1990: 244: "Eventually the phylarchs became a regular part of the Byzantine provincial organization;" see also Liebeschuetz 2006: 139; Sartor 2008. Mayerson 1989: 76 (= 1994, 318) is worth quoting: "Saracens were taken into the military establishment as soldiers serving under Roman officers, or as *foederati*, contingents serving under tribal leaders known as phylarchs." Theodoret, *HR*, XXVI: 15-16, narrates that a phylarch who came to visit Symeon the Stylite was established with his men near the fort of Callinicum. The episode occurred between 423 and 444. See Canivet 1977: 177-178. Theodoret's passage shows that the phylarchs commanded Arab warriors and we must posit that they cooperated with the Roman soldiers.

## SECTION IV

**The Arab federates and the *limitanei* in Roman military operations under Justinian and later.**

By 529 the Romans had greatly enlarged the range of responsibilities of the Arab chiefs. It is obvious that they appreciated the value to the Empire of the Arabs' military potential. However, it remains to explain how precisely the employment of these allies fitted in the Roman defence strategy. We have seen that the empire had already employed Arab allies in its service during the fourth and the fifth centuries, but we do not have any detailed information about their precise function at that time. It is only for the sixth century that we have information about the ways the allied Arab tribes were employed to support the military interests of the empire. In the year 503, during the Roman-Persian war of Anastasius, an important group of allied Arabs, the Tha'albites, sacked a caravan and succeeded in capturing many camels, but refrained from attacking the main centre of the enemies because all the population had fled.<sup>84</sup>

A quarter of century later, in 528, the Romans launched a well coordinated expedition in order to avenge an important Arab phylarch allied to the Romans who had been killed by the Nasrid al-Mundhir. Two Roman generals, the *dux Phoenices Dionysios* and the *dux Euphratesiae Johannes*, together with the phylarch

See Millar 1998: 175 (= 2006: 402), who identifies these Arabs with the *foederato*. Mayerson 1991 (= 1994: 342-346) argues that the noun phylarchos cannot designate an official position in the Roman administrative system. See also Robin 2008: 192-193. But see Macdonald 1993: 368-377 (= 2009: II), who argues that the title of *phylarchos* implied an official military command. Grouchevov 1995: 120-131 believes that since the beginning of the fifth century the noun *phylarchos* designated a functionary of the administrative system. On the other hand, Greatrex 1998, 25-26 argues that the soldiers under the command of the phylarchs belonged to the category called "*symmachoi*", and not to the federates. See also his paper in the present volume. Procopius, *Bella*, III, 11: 3-5 writes that in earlier times only barbarians were enlisted among the federates but that in Justinian's time federates had become a quite general name for various kinds of military units. Scharf 2001: 45-46 gives the relevant bibliography on the subject. It is worth noting that Theophilactus, *Hist.*, II: 2, 5 narrates that at the time of a battle at Solachon, in 586, two Saracen phylarchs led a force of Roman *symmachoi*. However, this episode occurred after the emperor Maurice had arrested Nu'mân and the Jafnid federation had disintegrated. There were now fifteen Jafnid princedoms and most probably the old system based on the provincial phylarchs had given way to a new kind of organization. See Sartre 1982: 189-193; Whittow 1999: 211-212, 215. Differently, Shahîd 1995: 550-553. Fisher, 2011a: 116-124 argues that the peace treaty agreed between Rome and Sasanians in 562 changed the status of the Jafnids and their allies from *foederati* to *symmachoi*. The attribution of the status of *symmachoi* implied the recognition of a greater contribution in defending frontier areas and also in maintaining stability in Syria in the provinces. If so, we should deduce that from that time the Arab princes were given a greater independence of action.

84. Joshua the Stylite: 57. For the identification of the Tha'albites with the branch of Ghassan who came into alliance with the Romans in 502 see Robin 2008: 177-178. The treaty is described by Theophanes, *Chronographia*, AM 5995. See on it and on the campaign of the year 503 Shahîd 1995: 3-17; Greatrex 1998: 99. A discussion at length on important issues of the complex history of the Arab tribes of the peninsula in Late Antiquity is provided by Robin 1996.

Hârith and two other Arab phylarchs participated to the campaign, which reached areas quite remote from the provincial boundaries. Eventually, they succeeded in devastating the camp of the enemy, capturing men, women, children and dromedaries. Finally, after having burnt four Persian fortresses they returned victorious to the Roman territory.<sup>85</sup>

This had been a very important offensive campaign, which incidentally proves once more that the *limitanei*, far from being a run-down militia, still maintained good operational capabilities and were capable of launching an attack through desert at the heart of the enemy territory. Their contribution to the success of the expedition was considerable, not least the fact that their chiefs, the provincial phylarchs, led the Roman armies through difficult tracks across the desert.

In the second part of the same year the presence of some Arab allies is attested in a battle that was fought alongside the river Khâbûr, where the Romans had begun to fortify Thannuris. A Persian army together with allied Arabs hostile to the Roman empire tried to stop the work and a Roman army led by the *dux* Belisarius was collected to drive back the enemy. However, the Persians managed to lure the Roman troops to advance over a system of ditches that they had dug around their trenches. Many soldiers fell into these pits and were taken prisoners or killed. The cavalry was able to turn back and to flee to Dara, but the infantry was either killed or taken captive. The Roman leaders had included one Atafar, phylarch of the Saracens, who had been a life-long supporter of the Empire. In this rout he was struck by a missile, thrown from his horse and killed. The Romans lost a valorous and trustworthy ally.<sup>86</sup>

We have considerable, if conflicting evidence about the campaign of 531. Belisarius had inflicted a severe defeat on the Persians in 530 at the battle of Dara but in spring of the following year they and their Arab allies invaded *Euphratensis*. Advancing along the right side of the Euphrates, the Persians devastated the Roman territory through which they passed and eventually reached the area around Gabboulon in northern Syria. The *dux* Sounikas, who most probably was the military commander of *Euphratensis*, pursued the enemy with 4.000 soldiers and valiantly resisted the Saracens and Persians who were pillaging his territory. He took captives and succeeded in gaining information from them about enemy plans. In the meanwhile Belisarius having left Mesopotamia arrived at Barbalissos, where he was joined by some other military commanders. *Simmas*, *dux Osrhoenae*, came to Barbalissos with 4.000 men as did Hârith at the head of 5.000. Malalas says that a quarrel now arose between Belisarius and Sounikas because the *magister* blamed the *dux* for having engaged the enemies on his own initiative without waiting for orders.<sup>87</sup> We can easily imagine that Sounikas, a valiant military man, worried by the delayed arrival of the *magister*, had assembled the units of his ducate and attacked the enemy in order to relieve the suffering of the inhabitants for whose defence he was after all responsible.<sup>88</sup> The fact is that when the *magister* was preoccupied in

85. Malalas, *Chronographia*, XVIII: 16.

86. Zacharias, *Historia Ecclesiastica*, IX, 2; Malalas, *Chronographia*, XVIII: 26; Greatrex & Lieu 2002: 86-87. Atafar is identified with Jabala, Hârith's father, by Shahîd 1995: 63-67; 76-78. *Contra* Whittow 1999: 214-215.

87. Malalas, *Chronographia*, XVIII: 60. On Sounikas as *dux Euphratensis*, see Greatrex 1998: 197, n. 14-15; Lewin 2008: 94-95.

88. Greatrex 1998: 198-199, n. 17 stresses how the Roman ducal troops were particularly dismayed by Belisarius' strategy.

Mesopotamia he was unable to bring prompt support to the troops defending Syria, Phoenice, Arabia and Palaestina.

When we try to assess the working of the new defensive strategy in 531, we must keep in mind that the Persian attack of the year 531 came as a surprise to the Romans. This time, not only the Arab allies of the Persians but the Persians as well invaded the provinces south of the Euphrates. Following advice offered by al-Mundhir, the Persian king had chosen not to attack on the well defended provinces of *Mesopotamia* and *Osrhoene*, but had ordered his men to advance along the desert route on the right of the Euphrates, the most direct and swift route into the Gabboulon area of Syria. Naturally, it was the *dux Euphratensis* who was the first Roman commander to detect the movements of the enemy and to intercept them.

As for the apparent failure of Hârith and his men to support Sounikas we need not conclude that they were simply incapable of performing the defensive duties assigned to them. The enemy was much stronger than the usual marauding bands. It is therefore probable that Hârith, unlike Sounikas, decided to await Belisarius' orders, realizing that it would be unwise to attack a powerful enemy without the support of the army of the *magister*.

A few weeks later the armies of the two great powers met at Callinicum. Now Hârith and the Roman Arab allies did take part in the fighting. The details of the battle are differently described by Procopius and Malalas. According to Procopius, Belisarius deployed Hârith and all the Saracens on the right flank of the battle line, where the ground rose sharply.<sup>89</sup> The writer also describes the decisive moment of the battle.<sup>90</sup> He tells us that when the better part of the Persian army attacked the right flank of the Roman army where Hârith and the Saracens were stationed the latter immediately broke formation and without awaiting the oncoming enemy beat a hasty retreat. As a result they got the reputation of having betrayed the Romans to the Persians.

Malalas offers another version, which differentiates between the behaviour of different Arab chiefs in the battle.<sup>91</sup> When the Persian attacked, one Saracen *dux* called Abros was captured, while commanders of other tribal units were killed. In a second stage of the battle, the Phrygians turned to flight and the Saracens with them, but other Arab allies continued to resist together with Hârith. Malalas mentions that some people supposed that a number of the Saracens had fled because of the treachery of their phylarchs.

Malalas' narrative has probably been derived from the official report of the campaign. Although this version of the facts is not less partisan than that of Procopius,<sup>92</sup> we should probably believe him that Hârith had not in fact been guilty of betraying the Romans. On the contrary, he distinguished himself by valiantly continuing to fight the enemies when other Arab phylarchs had fled. If that was so, it makes sense that after the battle of Callinicum he was retained in the position of authority over many other tribes that he had been given in 529. The probable reason why Procopius does not make any distinction between the behaviour of Hârith and

89. Procopius, *Bella*, I: 18, 26.

90. Procopius, *Bella*, I: 18, 35.

91. Malalas, *Chronographia*, XVIII: 60.

92. See Greatrex 1998: 194-195.

that of the other chiefs and why he insists that all the Arabs were equally guilty is that he wants to reduce the responsibilities of Belisarius for the rout.<sup>93</sup>

The second Persian war of Justinian started in 540. It arose out of a dispute between Hârith and al-Mundhir over a matter of boundary lines. Each of the Arab chiefs claimed an entitlement to some lands situated on the *Strata*. To enforce his claim, al-Mundhir invaded Roman territory.<sup>94</sup> That he was able to do this without apparently meeting resistance does not prove that the *limitanei* had by now almost disappeared and that Hârith was therefore now the only effective Roman military presence on the near eastern frontier. It only confirms that the precise segment of the frontier south of Palmyra and beyond the mountains of the Jebel Rawaq had been denuded of *limitanei*, as indeed it had been since the fifth century. We have already noted that this was a very marginal zone where conditions of life were hard. *Vici* did not grow up near the forts as they normally did elsewhere and agriculture was never practiced.<sup>95</sup>

Other episodes show that in other areas the *limitanei* did remain an effective force also after the time when Hârith had been appointed to his special position. So in the year 540, when Chosroes with his men penetrated Roman territory and finally reached Antioch, two *duces* of *Phoenice*, Theoctistus and Molatzes, arrived there with six thousand soldiers in order to assist in the defence of the city. They failed to do this and the city was captured and burnt.<sup>96</sup> As in the campaign of the year 531, it was the *duces* who could be on the spot and attempt to check the enemy's advance. The *magister militum per Orientem* and the units of his field army were not in a position to help, and there is no evidence that Hârith and his men made any attempt to defend the province and its capital.

In the following spring, Belisarius prepared a counterattack, which would be supported by two *duces* in *Phoenice*, Rhecithancus and Theoctistus.<sup>97</sup> Belisarius also invited Hârith and his men to join his campaign and he ordered them to invade the enemy's country immediately. The Arab allies of the Romans then proceeded to pillage in the region of Assyria. Procopius tells us that Hârith feared that he would not be allowed to keep his booty, and therefore resorted to the ruse of making the leaders of the Roman army to believe that a serious attack by the enemy was imminent. Thereupon the Roman generals decided on immediate withdrawal, without waiting to investigate Hârith's booty. Later, when the Roman army was already back on Roman territory, Belisarius learned of the misbehaviour of the Arab king, but he was unable to punishing him because Hârith had already led his men to a distant locality that was quite out of reach of Belisarius' army.<sup>98</sup>

The sources describe the Nasrid al-Mundhir, the ally of the Persians, as a great enemy of the Romans, a warrior who had the ability to penetrate into the Roman provinces at will. His authority was undisputed and he led a very strong army for approximately half a century. However, in 545, after a treaty had been agreed between the Romans and the Persians, Hârith and al-Mundhir met in battle. They

93. For an important discussion of the battle and of the different details given by Malalas and Procopius see Greatrex 1998: 191-207.

94. Procopius, *Bella*, II: 1, 3-7.

95. Bauzou 1989: 219; Bauzou 2000: 87-88.

96. Procopius, *Bella*, II, 8, 2; 17-19.

97. Procopius, *Bella*, II, 16-18.

98. Procopius, *Bella*, II, 19, 11-19; 26-46.



were now deadly enemies, two great leaders fighting to increase their power among the Arab tribes: “al-Mundhir captured one of the sons of Hârith in a sudden raid while he was pasturing horses and straightway sacrificed him to Aphrodite; and from this it was known that he Hârith was not betraying the Romans to the Persians. Later they both came together in battle with their whole armies, and the forces of Hârith were overwhelmingly victorious, and turning their enemy to flight they killed many of them. And Hârith came within a little of capturing alive two of the sons of al-Mundhir; however he did not actually succeed”.<sup>99</sup>

In 554, al-Mundhir with his men penetrated into the Roman territory and devastated it, but Hârith met them in the territory of Chalcis in Syria and finally killed his great enemy: “In the year 27 of Justinian, al-Mundhir (the son) of Shaqîqa went up into the territory of the Romans and devastated many regions. Harith (the son) of Jabala encountered him, fought against him, defeated and killed him at the source of the ‘Udaye in the region of Chalcis. The son of Harith, called Jabala, died, killed in the battle. His father buried him in a *martyrion* of this fort”.<sup>100</sup>

The range of the military activity of al-Mundhir, Hârith’s son and successor, seems to have been remarkably wide. He is credited by the sources with having launched a campaign in 575, which proved extraordinarily successful resulting in the capture and the destruction of Hira. Six years later, after having defeated the Nasrids in battle he joined Roman forces led by Maurice in an expedition aiming to capture Ctesiphon. However, the campaign turned out a failure and al-Mundhir was consequently accused of treachery.<sup>101</sup> In the following decades, Arab allies nevertheless continued to take part in imperial campaigns, which took them a long way from where they lived. Under Heraclius they joined the Roman army in an expedition that took them as distant as today’s Azerbaijan.<sup>102</sup> However, it must be stressed that the Arabs who participated in this expedition are very unlikely to have been Jafnids.<sup>103</sup>

All these episodes show the Arab allies taking part in very important offensive campaigns. We have much less information on the ways they were employed to defend the Roman provinces when they were attacked by the Arab allies of the Persians. Cyril of Scythopolis in a passage of *Vita Joh. Hesych.* mentioned earlier tells us that it was the task of the phylarchs to safe-guard the Palestinian desert. Yet, when al-Mundhir invaded the province, they merely instructed the monks to prepare themselves to cope with the invaders themselves. We are not told whether the Arab allies eventually engaged the Nasrid. So, while we have good evidence how the Jafnids supported imperial campaigns, our information about the way they defended the Roman provinces is quite inadequate.

99. Procopius, *Bella*, II, 28, 12-14 (trans. H. B. Dewing).

100. Michael the Syrian, *Chron.*, II: 269 (trans. Greatrex & Lieu 2002: 129). See the discussion on the episode by Shahîd 1995: 241-244.

101. For the sources see Greatrex & Lieu 2002: 153, 163-165. It is worth noting that according to John of Ephesos, *HE*, VI: 18, after the failure of the campaign, al-Mundhir was able to take revenge on both the Nasrids and the Persians. Moreover, he captured the Nasrid camp. Whitby 1988: 272-273 argues that the monophysite John is not reliable here because he intended to enhance the reputation of al-Mundhir who too was a monophysite. See also the doubts about the value of John’s witness advanced by Whittow 1999: 215-219.

102. Theophanes, *Chronographia*, AM, 6114; Shahîd 1995: 641-646; Kaegi 2003: 127.

103. Whittow 1999: 215.

## SECTION V

**The Roman army changes**

Writers of Late Antiquity noted that mobility was a distinctive feature of Saracen attacks. In a picturesque passage, Ammianus Marcellinus describes how they were quick to penetrate, devastate, capture and retreating.<sup>104</sup> Procopius discloses that two centuries later al-Mundhir's raids had the same character: "So suddenly did he move and so very opportunely for himself, that, as a rule, he was already off with all the plunder when the generals and the soldiers were beginning to learn what had happened and to gather themselves against him. If indeed by any chance, they were able to catch him, this barbarian would fall upon his pursuers while still unprepared and not in battle array, and would rout and destroy them with no trouble".<sup>105</sup>

A late sixth century historian says that the only people who had the chance to defeat the Arab allies of the Sassanians were other Arabs, for they had the same swift horses as their enemy.<sup>106</sup> Recent studies have pointed out that from the fourth century the Arabs' use of the horses increased significantly.<sup>107</sup> It was this, which enabled the warlike tribes to launch swift and effective attacks on the Roman territory. To meet this development the Roman authorities modified the character of the provincial armies of the Near East, by increasing the numbers of the cavalry. In the second century A.D. mounted soldiers represented only a small part of the forces in the provinces from the Euphrates to the Red Sea: in none of the provinces did the horsemen make as much as 20% of the total number of troops. In *Syria Palaestina* they represented less than 15%. On the other hand, a calculation based on the *Notitia Dignitatum* reveals that in A.D. 400 in all the ducates of the Near East there were more horsemen than infantrymen.<sup>108</sup> So, the increased importance of cavalry also help to explain why the Roman authorities decided to recruit so many men of

104. Ammianus, *Res Gestae*, XIV, 4, 1.

105. Procopius, *Bella*, I, 17, 42-43.

106. Evagrius, *HE*, V: 20. See also Whitby 2004: 160 who has rightly hypothesised that the increase of the cavalry in the ducates of the Near East – and to a lesser degree in the Pannonian ducates – was due to the need to provide an army capable of fighting an enemy which greatly relied on his horses. See also Isaac 1990: 243.

107. Macdonald 1996; Robin & Theyab 2002. The Arab allies of the Persians showed proficiency in the use of bow, lance and sword. See Syvanne 2004: 400-402. Hoyland 2009: 383-384 rightly argue that the Bedouin tribes certainly only began to use the horses in Late Antiquity. It is true that the value of this animal was already appreciated by them at least 300 years earlier, as is proved by graffiti showing the use of horses in hunting and battles. Nonetheless, archaeological documentation appears to prove that it was only in the fourth century A.D. that the widespread use of the horse begun. We may suppose that in Late Antiquity one of the two superpowers, most probably the Persians, intending to strengthen the military capability of their Arab allies, encouraged the tribes to breed horses in order that the Arab allies could employ them effectively against the Persians' enemies. The Romans would have naturally reacted by greatly expanding their cavalry. If so, the larger diffusion of the horse in the Arab world was not an endogenous process, but a result of the escalation of the military confrontation between Rome and Persia.

108. See Lewin 2008: 9-46.

Arab stock for the service in the regular army<sup>109</sup> and also why over time the Romans relied more and more on the forces of the Arab phylarchs.

The rise of the Arab allies and their phylarchs was paralleled by a reduction in the importance of the *magister militum* and his *comitatenses*. As far as we know, in the period between the time of the assignment to Hârith of a special authority over the tribes in 528/9 and the battle of Chalcis in 554, the *magister militum per Orientem* never took part in campaigns in the provinces south of the Euphrates. By that time, the strength of the army at his disposal had greatly weakened. In fact, after the conclusion of the *pax aeterna* treaty, Justinian issued some laws, which put even the comitatensian units stationed in the aforementioned provinces at the disposal of the *duces* and of the civil governors.<sup>110</sup> When the Persian wars were resumed in 540, the *magister* was now in command of only very few units permanently based in the Mesopotamian area. The same seems to have been true of the regional *magistri* in other sectors, who seem now to have been left in charge of only quite small armies.<sup>111</sup> Regional *magistri* as well as the *praesentales* were losing troops and importance to the commanders of frontier forces and to the leaders of the allied people, like Hârith.

## CONCLUSIONS

In the years after 529, Hârith consolidated his position among the Arab tribes. In time he was able to gather a strong enough army to undermine al-Mundhir's supremacy. After a quarter of a century, he came to be an experienced leader who knew how to intercept and destroy al-Mundhir. So, Justinian was right to take his famous decision in the year 528/9. He transformed the defensive strategy employed in the provinces of the Near East against the Arab incursions: in its defensive strategy the empire now no longer relied on defence in depth, but on the cohesion and the swiftness of the Arab allies who were supported by limitanean forces, which remained important. The entrusting to Hârith of an almost regional power, from Euphrates to *Arabia*, gave him the authority to gather and coordinate an Arab force sufficiently large to contend with enemy raids.<sup>112</sup>

109. We must point out that only the first generation of the soldiers of the *illyriciani* was of Balkanic stock at the time that such units were deployed in the Near East. Later entries were locally recruited. The *equites promoti indigenae* were not Arab units, as supposed by Shahîd 1984: 52. They were the legionary cavalry, which at a certain stage in Tetrarchic times became independent of their mother units; see Brennan 1998. However, we must suppose that after the first generation some of the new recruits were local Arab men. On conscription and hereditary service in the sixth century Near East, see Greatrex 1998: 35 with the relevant bibliography.

110. Zuckerman 2004: 161-162. The practice had initiated in the late fifth century; see *Codex Justinianus* XII, 35, 18 (492).

111. Schmitt 2007, 411-416; Zuckerman 2004, 161-163. On the organization of ducal armies in Justinian's time, see Greatrex 2007b.

112. Moreover, these powerful phylarchs could greatly assist Roman diplomacy. These chiefs were able to negotiate alliances with tribes that had been out of the Roman sphere of influence and which did not yet have formal contact with the Roman Empire. See Liebeschuetz 2006: 136; 140. On the character of the Jafnid power and of its army, see also the stimulating pages in Whittow 1999: 219-224. For an invaluable discussion of all the literary and epigraphical documents related to the Jafnid dynasty, see Millar 2010.

However, this authority did not go undisputed among the Arab allies. First of all, Hârith shared his position with his brother, Abû Karib, who was given overall military authority in the Palestinian sector. Moreover, their desertion at the battle of Callinicum suggests that other Arab chiefs were reluctant to obey him. Finally, Cyril of Scythopolis mentions that Hârith had a deadly quarrel with another Arab phylarch, Asouados and this episode occurred in the fifties, that is when Hârith was already a very powerful prince and on the way of further expanding his prerogatives.<sup>113</sup>

To conclude, Hârith, and after him his son al-Mundhir, did not have an easy task. They had to fight against a dangerous enemy. Moreover, their power was undermined by the fragmentation of the Arab world, which they were expected to coordinate. Other phylarchs were jealous of the prominence and of the honorific titles they had achieved. Finally, Hârith and his son had to remain cautious about the Romans themselves, for whom an Arab chief was always an easy scapegoat in the case of a military failure.<sup>114</sup> Eventually, disaster struck. In 581, the Jafnid al-Mundhir was exiled by the Roman emperor and three years later the same happened to his son Nu'mân. The golden age of the Jafnid power came to its end.<sup>115</sup> The Jafnids had perhaps risen to represent a problem for the Roman authorities. However, it is doubtful if the emperors reacted wisely to the growing power and influence the Arab princes were attaining.<sup>116</sup>

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113. See above n. 75 and 76. Finally, it must be observed that according to *Codex Theodosianus. Leges Novellae*, CIII, issued in the thirties, the *dux* had authority over the *limitanei*, *foederati* and other kinds of soldiers. If the Arab *foederati* were included under this entry we must assume that still at that time the phylarchs themselves were under the authority and the overall supervision of the *duces*, despite of the fact that the phylarchs received high honorific titles. See Mayerson 1989: 76 (= 1994: 318).

114. Scholars argued the support offered by the Jafnids to the monophysite doctrine caused serious frictions with the Roman authorities. For a new assessment of the position held by the Jafnids in that field, see Fisher 2011: 52-64.

115. For a sober scholarly discussion of the sources see Sartre 1982: 189-194. See also Shahîd 1995: 549-651, criticized by Whittow 1999: 215, 218-219.

116. In this respect, it is interesting to note Conrad 2002, 696, about the end of the Jafnid and of the Nasrid power: "The demise of the Arab client regimes marked not the shift from one system of frontier defence to another, but rather the opening of a great power vacuum..."

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