

Frontiers and fortifications in the  
later Roman Empire

June 2007

## Introduction

In this essay I will be examining the changes made to the fortifications and frontier defences of the Roman Empire in the third and fourth centuries.<sup>1</sup> I shall begin by examining the possible definitions of ‘frontier’, as it is a word which is often used in works on the subject of the reach of the Roman Empire, without its meaning being adequately discussed and explained. In this definition, I shall also be addressing the question of how to define the word ‘boundary’ in relation to the Empire, and discussing whether or not this word has the same meaning as ‘frontier’.

In addition to this, I shall be examining the question of whether the changes to the frontiers and fortifications, both in their placement and the methods by which they were defended, had any social implications, or indeed whether these changes took place because of social, economic and political reasons, as opposed to the military explanations which are often used to explain the changes which were made. Within the scope of the changes to the frontiers and fortifications, I shall be discussing Luttwak’s concept of a ‘grand strategy’, involving an alleged change in the frontier defences from a static boundary to a more flexible system of defence in depth.

Finally, I shall be restricting the scope of this essay to the western empire – and specifically the areas around the Rhine and the Danube, as well as Roman Britain to an extent – as this is where a significant amount of our evidence comes from. To include the eastern empire, whilst an interesting subject in itself, would require an amount of space which, unfortunately, is not available here.

## Definition of frontiers

Before discussing how frontiers changed and what the effects of these changes were, we must first define what we mean by the term ‘frontier’. Too often this term is bandied about without a proper definition being provided. Several scholars have put forward various suggestions as to what they believe frontiers should represent. Hanson (1989, p.55) suggests that a frontier should be seen as ‘an area of interaction between two cultures as well as the relatively simplistic concept of the interface between the Roman army and native opposition.’ However, I would suggest that this definition is a little vague, for

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<sup>1</sup>All dates are A.D. unless otherwise specified.

two reasons. First of all, a frontier does not necessarily mark an interaction between two cultures,<sup>2</sup> as not all such interactions are marked by what we would call frontiers, and not all frontiers have different cultures on either side. Secondly, I do not think that an interface between the Roman army and native opposition can be adequately described as a ‘relatively simplistic concept’, even if it is used in comparison to cultural interfaces. However, Hanson is describing the frontier as an ‘area’ (or a zone), which I think is a sensible way to define the term.

Alföldi (1952, p.1), on the other hand, suggests that ‘the frontier line was at the same time the line of demarcation between two fundamentally different realms of thought, whose moral codes did not extend across this boundary.’ This is similar to Hanson’s argument in that it points to the frontier representing a difference in cultural values, but Alföldi makes it very clear that he sees a frontier as a line (a word which he uses twice when describing the frontier) rather than a zone of control. However, whilst a given line might represent the *border* of the Empire, I do not believe that such a line should be labelled as the *frontier*. Apart from anything else, one would assume that garrisons were stationed around the borders (and the ancient sources certainly suggest this – which I shall discuss shortly), and the zone of influence in which these troops would usually operate might be a more accurate representation of the frontier.

Leading on from these two definitions, a common problem which occurs when examining the issue of defining a frontier is the difference between a frontier and a boundary. These two terms are often used interchangeably, as if have the same meaning, but I would suggest that this is not necessarily the case. I agree with Hanson that these two terms should not be taken to be synonyms which can be used interchangeably,<sup>3</sup> and that a clear distinction should be drawn between the two words and their different definitions. Several of our ancient sources, including Lucius Annaeus Florus<sup>4</sup> and Appian,<sup>5</sup> also suggest

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<sup>2</sup>‘No cultural boundary existed: no-man’s lands have never worked.’ (Whittaker 1994, p.62)

<sup>3</sup>‘The two [frontier zones and marked boundaries] should not be confused, though all too frequently they are.’ (Hanson 1989, p.55).

<sup>4</sup>‘He [Caesar], therefore, sent Lentulus and pushed them [the Dacians] beyond the further bank of the river; and garrisons were posted on the nearer bank.’ (Florus 2.28). Pushing the Dacians ‘beyond’ one bank of the river of the river and having the garrison on the other side would suggest that the Danube was the *boundary* of the Empire in this area, but that a *zone* (which I would suggest is the frontier) existed around it which foreign aggressors would be discouraged (by force if necessary) from entering.

<sup>5</sup>‘On the other side of these rivers, however, some of the Celts beyond the Rhine are under Roman sway, and beyond the Danube some of the Getae, who are called Dacians.’

that such a distinction existed, even if they do not explicitly use the word 'frontier'.

Having examined some of the suggestions put forward by other scholars, I would suggest that a suitable definition of a frontier is a zone around a territory which is controlled by a single power (e.g. the Roman Empire) or group of entities working as a single body. The frontier would also include three boundary lines, marking the three different levels at which it can be penetrated by enemy forces. The outermost boundary runs along the outer edge of the frontier, a central boundary runs through the middle of the frontier and the innermost boundary runs along the inner edge of the frontier (i.e. within the Empire itself). The three boundaries represent different stages of possible enemy incursion, which I shall now explain. The outermost boundary represents a point beyond which the enemy is not considered to be an imminent threat to the Empire, although naturally it would still be prudent to keep a watchful eye on their activities. An enemy which crosses the outermost boundary has not yet entered the Empire itself, but such an incursion, especially if prolonged over a period of time, should be considered cause for concern. Ideally the enemy should be dealt with whilst it resides in this zone<sup>6</sup> (between the outermost and central boundaries, within the frontier itself), as it is the area in which the garrisons can reach easily, but slightly beyond the boundary of the Empire so that there is no threat to the civilian population.

The central boundary within the frontier marks the actual boundary where the Empire stops and the rest of the world begins.<sup>7</sup> If an enemy force crosses this line, then they have entered the Empire itself, which should definitely be treated as a cause for serious concern and immediate action<sup>8</sup> should be taken to remove them before they can penetrate any further.

The innermost boundary represents the end of the frontier and the point at which one would expect civilian buildings to begin overtaking their military counterparts in numbers. Any enemy which manages to reach beyond this

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(Appian *pr.* 4). Again the use of the word 'beyond' implies that the rivers, whilst considered to mark the boundaries of the Empire ('These, with the nearest approach to accuracy, are the boundaries on the mainland.' (ibid.)), had some form of zone of control around them, which I would suggest should be described as a frontier.

<sup>6</sup>'it was preferable that attacks would be defeated beyond the borders of the Empire.' (Elton 1996, p.7)

<sup>7</sup>'A line which precisely demarcated the limit of the territory administered by Rome.' (Hanson 1989, p.55).

<sup>8</sup>Such action need not necessarily involve military force however, as sometimes barbarian hordes would be paid off rather than engaged in battle.

line has managed to penetrate the main part of the Empire, and the fact that this has occurred shows a failure on behalf of the frontier defences<sup>9</sup> to keep the enemies of Rome at bay.

Having reached what I feel is a satisfactory, if somewhat complex, definition for ‘frontier’, I shall now examine some of the possible reasons for why the frontiers of the Roman Empire stopped where they did.

## Why did the frontiers stop?

From the reign of Augustus onwards, the Roman Empire had enjoyed an extended period of rapid expansion, conquering vast areas of territory and bringing most of the Mediterranean under its control. This policy of continued expansion, observed by both Virgil<sup>10</sup> and Augustus<sup>11</sup>, continued for over two hundred years, but there came a point, generally agreed to be in sometime in the middle of the third century, where the frontiers started to become static and the rate at which the Empire was expanding gradually ground to a halt. The question is, why did an empire which had brought most of the known world at the time stop pushing forward its frontiers, and why did they stop where they did?

One possible explanation is that the frontiers of the Empire stopped when they reached natural boundaries (though the area of the frontier would, as discussed previously, stretch some distance beyond the physical boundary), particularly rivers such as the Rhine or the Danube.<sup>12</sup> Natural boundaries may have been used to mark the Roman Empire for a number of reasons, but the two which I think are most likely to have been the case are for logistical and defensive purposes. In terms of logistics, natural boundaries – particularly those which are difficult to cross, such as mountains and fast flowing rivers – can severely disrupt a supply chain, possibly to the point

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<sup>9</sup>This failure could occur in many ways, e.g. organisation of the frontier garrisons, the ability of any mobile forces to reach the enemy whilst they were still in the frontier zone or simply that the enemy forces were too numerous to be held back.

<sup>10</sup>‘The walls he [Romulus] builds will be the walls of Mars and he shall give his own name to his people, the Romans. On them I impose no limits on time or place. I have given them an empire that will know no end.’ (*Aeneid* 1.276-279)

<sup>11</sup>‘I extended the boundaries of all the provinces which were bordered by races not yet subject to our empire.’ (*Res Gestae* 26)

<sup>12</sup>‘In Europe two rivers, the Rhine and the Danube, for the most part bound the Roman empire.’ (Appian *pr.* 4); ‘Rivers were accepted as borders between the Romans and another state’. (Elton 1996, p.4)

where it is no longer feasible to continue, and it could be argued that this problem could have been the reason why the boundaries of the Empire often stopped when they reached such natural boundaries.

In the case of rivers, the natural boundary also provides two methods of defence. Firstly, it makes it extremely difficult for enemy troops to enter the Empire in the first place. The two main ways in which an army could cross a river in this period of history were over a bridge – either via an existing one or by building a temporary structure durable enough to facilitate a crossing – or by swimming across (or walking if the river was shallow enough). The former method presents a difficulty in either case, as existing bridges are likely to be heavily guarded and building a bridge would attract the attention of the frontier defence forces and give them time to prepare for the barbarian incursion. Furthermore, there is the danger that the Roman forces could demolish the bridge whilst the barbarian army was trying to cross, sending the invaders plunging into the river. As for the method of swimming across, this might be feasible for lightly armoured troops but even so it would slow them down significantly, giving the Romans plenty of time to line up their troops on the other side and also to let off a hail of missile fire into the barbarians as they attempted to swim across.

The other advantage of having a river as a boundary is that if an enemy is being pushed back after making an incursion into the Empire, their ability to retreat is severely hindered by the fact that their only escape route involves swimming across a river. The devastating effects of such a situation can be seen in the particularly graphic description of the Battle of Strasbourg (357) provided to us by Ammianus.<sup>13</sup> A defeat on this scale would probably deter the barbarians from making another incursion for some time, if only because their numbers would be significantly reduced as a result.

A further reason why the frontiers might have stopped where they did is because the marginal cost of expanding them further was greater than the marginal benefit of pushing the frontiers forward. In other words, the cost associated with acquiring the additional territory (extra troops, more administration etc.) was greater than the benefits (e.g. resources, additional tax revenue) provided by it. Appian gives us two examples of this conscious de-

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<sup>13</sup>‘Of the Alamanni, however, 6,000 bodies were counted lying on the field, not to mention the masses of dead carried off by the river, whose number cannot be reckoned.’ Ammianus also spends some time describing how the barbarians attempted to flee over the river, although how much of this is based on what actually happened and to what extent the story is exaggerated for the benefit of the reader is open to question. (*AM* 16.12).

cision making, one which could describe the Empire in general<sup>14</sup> and another which describes the situation in Britain.<sup>15</sup> This reason would seem to be a plausible explanation for why the frontiers stopped where they did, as one of the core principles of economics is that in order to maximise profit you must produce up to the point where marginal cost equals margin revenue – in terms of the Empire this would mean continuously expanding until the additional cost of acquiring new territory was equal to the additional benefit gained from doing so.

## Changes to the fortifications and frontiers

Whilst I shall be focussing primarily on the changes to the frontier defences, the need for such measures was not limited to the boundaries of the Empire. Internal disorder, civil unrest and a general dissatisfaction with the people at the top of the Empire's hierarchy meant that 'the provinces of Italy, southern Gaul and Spain, peaceful for many centuries, were now potentially just as threatened as the Rhine and Danube frontiers.' (Southern & Dixon 2004, p.128). In other words, this was a widespread problem which was not just confined to the line between the Roman Empire and the rest of the world.

In terms of earlier fortifications, Oelmann (1952, p.81) provides us with a good description of the use of the frontier before the middle of the third century:

Its [the frontier's] main basis had formerly been the overwhelming striking power of the Roman army, and fortifications had been confined to purely military structures such as forts and signal-towers (only a few towns were fortified) and these fortifications themselves were relatively slight – earthen ramparts, fronted with timber or later with stone.

In other words, the frontier was scattered with a small number of fortifications, which existed primarily for military purposes, and probably with the intention of slowing an enemy down but not holding him up completely.

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<sup>14</sup>Possessing the best part of the earth and sea they [the emperors] have, on the whole, aimed to preserve their empire by the exercise of prudence, rather than to extend their sway indefinitely over poverty-stricken and profitless tribes of barbarians' (Appian *pr.* 7).

<sup>15</sup>'Crossing the Northern ocean to Britain, which is an island greater than a large continent, they have taken possession of the better and larger part, not caring for the remainder. Indeed, the part they do hold is not very profitable to them.' (Appian *pr.* 5)

During the third century, there was a marked change in how the Romans kept the frontiers of their empire in place<sup>16</sup> and the fortifications which were used to protect the Empire.<sup>17</sup> In the early Empire, the principle of so-called 'offensive defence' was adhered to, which generally involved the Roman army moving out beyond the frontiers to deal with any possible threats well before they could arrive at the frontier itself. With only a few exceptions, this strategy – generally proactive in its application – kept the barbarians at bay and ensured that the boundary was maintained as a largely unbroken line marking the edge of the Empire. However, towards the end of the third century, the design of fortifications,<sup>18</sup> as well as the techniques used to defend the frontiers, changed dramatically.

Although it is difficult to point to one particular event as marking a change in defensive strategy, several scholars have indicated various circumstances which they believe could be seen to be the starting point of this move to a different way of defending the Empire. Southern & Dixon (2004, p.128) suggest that 'the most telling sign that the winds of change had begun to blow was Aurelian's decision to build walls around the city of Rome.' This measure, undertaken by the emperor in 271, marked the end of centuries of Rome not needing to rely on such defensive measures to safeguard the security of the city and the citizens residing within it.

The construction of these walls around the city of Rome could be seen as a double-edged sword in terms of their social implications. On the one hand, their erection could bring a degree of reassurance to the residents that the Empire was doing everything possible to protect and safeguard the wellbeing of its citizens. It is possible that growing social concerns about a perceived threat – as opposed to actual military concerns over security – could have been the reason for the construction of the walls in the first place. On the other hand, the very fact that walls were suddenly required, when for centuries there had been no such fortifications around Rome, could have the potential to cause panic and alarm amongst the residents of the city.

In addition to the walls being built around Rome, it would appear to be the case that some of the changes to the fortifications took place as a result of civilians moving into areas which were previously used exclusively for military

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<sup>16</sup>'Till the middle of the third century, specifically until 259 or 260, there had been no significant change in the defensive system which had existed from the end of the first century.' (Oelmann 1952, p.80)

<sup>17</sup>'Roman methods of fortification in the north-western portions of the Empire change significantly during the second half of the third century'. (Patrikovits 1971, p.178)

<sup>18</sup>Within the scope of 'fortifications' I include any permanent defensive structures, such as forts, towers and walls.

purposes (often providing defensive fortifications and barracks for troops who were stationed nearby). Elton (1996, p.41) points out that ‘Roman forts were established, and around them grew civilian settlements (*canabae*), some of which developed into small towns.’ This displays a clear and growing overlap between the civilians and the soldiers, Elton also goes on to state that ‘in the vicinity there started to appear villas, either of Romans exploiting the supply of the army or local elites profiting from their relationship with the Romans.’ This would appear to suggest that there was a mutual benefit to both parties of having civilians and soldiers located in the same area.

A further change to the Roman fortifications in the third century was their placement relative to the surrounding terrain. In the early stages of the Empire, fortifications were often sited in wide and open areas of territory. This placement allowed the fortifications to dominate the surrounding area, since they could be seen from some distance away – presumably with the intention of sufficiently intimidating an enemy so as to discourage him from attacking in the first place.<sup>19</sup> This strategy of siting fortifications also offered the garrison a clear view over the surrounding territory, ensuring that any approaching enemy force would be spotted in sufficient time for the appropriate defensive measures to be taken. However, placing fortifications in wide, open terrain would leave them vulnerable to sieges, as it would not be beyond the capabilities of an enemy army to surround the fortification, cutting off its supply chain, and hope that the garrison would surrender after being denied access to fresh supplies for an extended period of time. As such, I would suggest that these fortifications were probably used as points from which troops could be deployed to counter approaching threats in the open plain – since fighting field battles with infantry was where the Roman army excelled – as opposed to serving as purely defensive structures which were situated with the sole purpose of being able to withstand a prolonged siege.

This change in the placement of fortifications might suggest that the Empire was entrenching itself in its current position and had abandoned any intention of expanding further afield. I would suggest that this may have been the case because having fortifications in open terrain allows the boundaries of the Empire to be expanded by simply pushing the troops held in the fortifications forward to control a slightly wider area of territory. On the other hand, switching to fortifications on higher ground (using natural boundaries to an extent) and with an emphasis on observation and defence might indicate a fixed barrier, with fortifications that were intended to be used as strongholds rather than simply forts from which troops would sally out to fight fixed

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<sup>19</sup>Southern & Dixon (2004, p.129)

battles on level ground.

The strengthening of many of the fortifications within the frontiers of the Empire could be seen as an attempt to frighten potential invaders by creating structures which were imposing enough to deter the barbarians before they made an attempt to cross the boundary of the Empire. However, if barbarians were as poor at siege warfare as some scholars would have us believe, this strengthening of the fortifications within the frontiers would seem like an extravagant waste of precious resources – why bother spending time, money and effort improving your defence structures when the existing ones are more than adequate? It is also worth considering the suggestion that most barbarian incursions into the Empire were simply raiding parties, whose aim was to rush in, grab some booty and get out before the Roman legions (who the barbarians would have been well advised to avoid) turned up. Generally speaking, especially in the middle of the third century, the barbarians were more of a nuisance than a serious threat to the security of the Empire. Instead, I would suggest that at least some of these changes to the fortifications came about for social and psychological reasons. If citizens living within and near the frontier were concerned about the number of barbarian incursions into their area of land, one possible way to provide a measure of reassurance to them would be to build fortifications that were so imposing that no one would expect the barbarians to be able to pull them down without being cut to pieces in the process. Although these additional measures might not dissuade the barbarians from continuing to send raiding parties into the Empire, the cost of implementing them could be justified if they provided sufficient reassurance to civilians that the army was there to protect them.

Another noteworthy change to frontier policy was the decision to allow certain barbarian tribes to cross the frontier and settle on territory within the Empire itself. Ammianus Marcellinus describes one such example, in which several barbarian tribes were granted permission<sup>20</sup> by the Emperor Valens (364-378) to cross the Danube and settle within the Empire. This offer of settlement would undoubtedly cause a degree of concern to the existing civilians who were already living in the area, for fear of how the barbarians would treat them and the possibility of being forced off the land which they currently lived

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<sup>20</sup>A detailed discussion of why this permission was granted is beyond the scope of this essay, but one possible reason could be the hope that the immigrant barbarians would eventually be Romanised and recruited into the army. Ammianus informs us that ‘the emperor’s entourage extolled in exaggerated terms the good fortune which unexpectedly presented him with a large body of troops’ and that ‘combined with his own troops they would give him an invincible army’ (*AM* 31.4).

on. Furthermore, these immigrations could sometimes go horribly wrong, as was the case in this example. The poor treatment of the barbarians at the hands of the Roman commanders, Lupicinus and Maximus, caused them to revolt and wreak a trail of destruction through the lands.<sup>21</sup> Such disastrous events would no doubt have had severe social consequences in two respects. Firstly, the deaths of the civilians killed during the barbarian revolt and the damage caused to their land would certainly have had a negative social impact. Secondly, the decision to allow the barbarians to cross in the first place and the poor way in which the situation was handled as it began to spiral out of control could have caused a loss of confidence in the army, and the emperor in particular, in the eyes of the civilian population.

Having examined some of the general changes to the fortifications and frontiers of the Roman Empire, I shall now move on to discuss one particular theory as to why and how the frontiers changed in the way they did.

## Luttwak and defence in depth

In his book, *The Grand Strategy of the Roman Empire*, Luttwak argues that the changes to the frontier defences came about as a result of the increased mobility and strength of Rome's enemies (primarily barbarians on the other side of the frontier boundaries), and that in such a situation 'the defense has, in principle, two alternatives open to it.' (Luttwak 1976, p.130). The first option, often described as a system of 'elastic defence', involves total reliance on mobile forces,<sup>22</sup> which can be dispatched to deal with any threats as and when they occur. Such a strategy robs the defence of the advantage of being able to hold a fortified defensive position with fewer men than the offensive forces, but this is offset, at least partially, by the fact that there is no longer a need for a significant number of defensive troops to be deployed in fixed positions in order to hold a particular piece of territory. However, this strategy is entirely dependent on the ability of the defensive forces to deploy troops to any position along the frontier which might be threatened.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>21</sup>'They spread devastation over the whole breadth of Thrace from the banks of the Danube to the range of Rhodope and the strait which separates the two great seas. Everything was involved in a foul orgy of rapine and slaughter, and frightful atrocities were inflicted on the bodies of free men.' (*AM* 31.8)

<sup>22</sup>Naturally, the mobility of the defensive forces must be at least as great as, and preferably greater than, the mobility of the offensive troops, otherwise it would be almost impossible for the defence to engage the enemy in combat.

<sup>23</sup>Whilst this might sound like an extremely difficult task at first glance, there would certainly be some areas that were particularly susceptible to attack and so it would not be

This is a serious gamble which, if miscalculated, could allow an enemy force to enter Roman territory and inflict a significant amount of damage to the property and people residing in the area before the defensive forces arrived to drive them back.

The other defensive strategy which Luttwak discusses is that of defence in depth.<sup>24</sup> Broadly speaking, this involves a system of strongholds along or within the frontier, defended by garrisons and backed up by mobile forces in the field. The basic premise is that the strongholds can hold up any offensive force for enough time to allow the mobile forces to reach the area and engage the enemy in combat. At some point the enemy will either realise that it is unable to destroy or avoid the stronghold and will retreat, or it will find itself trapped between a fortified garrison and a mobile defensive force. However, this strategy does allow barbarians to enter the Empire<sup>25</sup> and be dealt with somewhere within the frontier zone, rather than seeing them off before they cross the boundary. This could have social implications for anyone living within the frontier zone, as they will no doubt object to the army allowing barbarians to rampage across their land instead of stopping them at the boundary where they would not be able to cause any damage.

Luttwak's theory, however, has come in for some criticism from other scholars. In particular, Mann (1979, p.179) suggests that 'it is impossible to discover any general resort to a system of "defence in depth" traced down to the mid-fourth century', in his review of Luttwak's book.

Whilst Luttwak makes an interesting case for the policy of defence in depth and an overall grand strategy, I am not entirely convinced that the defence in depth concept has as much merit as Luttwak attributes to it. First of all, Luttwak himself admits that 'the adoption of a defense-in-depth strategy in the later third century was, however, neither total nor definitive' and that '*whenever this strategy showed signs of enduring success, it was promptly abandoned.*' (Luttwak 1976, p.132). I am also not convinced by his suggestion that there existed an overall 'grand strategy of the Roman Empire' from the first to the third century. From the start of the first century to the

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impossible to deploy mobile forces in such a way as to cover all the major positions from which threats could emerge.

<sup>24</sup>Mann (1979, p.180) disagrees with Luttwak here on defence in depth and elastic defence: 'It is equally difficult to agree with L. that Rome in his third stage developed a system of "defence-in-depth". A formal distinction between "elastic defence" and "defence in depth" seems equally difficult.'

<sup>25</sup>'Incursions would inevitably take place, and, unless very feeble, could no longer be prevented by interception on the frontier line itself, for its garrisons were thinned out.' (Luttwak 1976, p.132)

end of the third, there were over thirty emperors, and I find it difficult to see how they were all following any kind of unified grand strategy<sup>26</sup> – other than perhaps the general continuation of the expansion of the Empire. Mann (1979, p.179) also suggests that ‘to hail this [the imperial strategy of avoiding the consumption of Force by the manipulations of Power] as genius is surely to take a very short-term view’, and that ‘a *real* “grand strategy” for the empire should surely have prevented this [the disintegration of the western empire in the fifth century], rather than merely provide for the short-lived stability of the first and second centuries.’

Luttwak appears to undermine his own argument again when he states that ‘I have assumed throughout that fortified strongholds would *normally* be capable of sustained resistance against direct attack, given normal manning and provisioning’, before going on to claim that ‘this was not the case with the Roman forts of the first and second centuries, however.’ (Luttwak 1976, p.134). This contradiction continues when Luttwak goes on to claim that this was consistent with their role as bases for tactically offensive operations, even though the framework was of a defensive strategy for territorial defense.

As a final note to conclude this discussion on the changes to the fortifications and the defensive strategies used in the frontiers, there is the interesting question of whether the Romans ever believed in the existence of fixed boundaries to the Empire. Whittaker (1994, p.68) claims that ‘it is an extraordinary fact that no Roman geographical description or map tells us where the boundaries of empire actually lay or whether there were ever any marker stones.’ However, at the same time he does admit that we only possess a few pieces of evidence regarding marked border lines, so we should be wary of jumping to the conclusion that a lack of evidence implies that something cannot have existed.

## Conclusion

In this essay I have provided a detailed definition of how I think the word ‘frontier’ should be interpreted, together with an explanation of why I would suggest that frontiers should be treated as a different concept to boundaries. I have examined some of the possible reasons why the frontiers stopped where they did, followed by a discussion of the changes to the fortifications and

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<sup>26</sup>Mann (1979, p.179) points out the enormous variety of the frontiers of the Empire, which I would suggest is an example of why a ‘unified grand strategy’ might not be an appropriate description of the situation.

frontiers of the Roman Empire, including Luttwak's idea of a 'grand strategy'. In examining these changes, I have considered some of the social as well as military consequences, and the policy of allowing barbarian tribes to settle within the Empire. In summary, my final conclusions, based on what I have already discussed, are as follows. Firstly, a careful definition of a frontier (and its distinction from a boundary) needs to be made in any work which discusses this area in depth. Secondly, the frontiers of the Roman Empire may have stopped where they did for a number of reasons, most likely because of natural boundaries and economic reasons. Finally, whilst a significant number of changes were made to the fortifications and frontier defences, with causes and effects crossing social and military boundaries, I am not convinced by Luttwak's argument that there was a 'grand strategy' tying all of these changes together.

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