

THE BOUNDARIES OF THE ROMAN EMPIRE

GÁBOR HORTI *

(Abstract) The border system of the Roman Empire has been studied for two centuries. The systematic and methodical research of the limes in the Hungarian kingdom has already started in the 19th century as well as in most of the Western European countries. The method of the research changed during the end of the last century, and a new approach has taken on in the past few years. Based on the successfully accumulated knowledge, sources and specialist literature today's researchers are trying to give us a fuller, more nuanced picture about the functioning of the limes considering new points of view in many questions.

The aim of my essay is to give an overall outline about the border system of the Roman Empire. I examine the borders from various aspects differing from those already accepted unsophisticated theories based on only military and topographical views. In my opinion the border systems were much more complex in their structure and functioning than we can currently assume.

How did these systems work? What was the purpose of the Romans when building the boundaries? How did the natural crossing processes run? In what level were these defense and border systems successful? I am trying to answer these and other questions in my study.

Keywords: Roman Empire, border system, border protection, boundary types, functioning of boundaries, Roman army, Roman civilians, trade, sources about Roman borders, archaeological remains of the Roman frontier defense.

THE OUTLINE OF THE ARTICLE:

- I. The development of the Roman boundaries
- II. The contemporary and present-day definition of the Roman boundaries
- III. Diplomacy, the first line of frontier defense – the foreign policy of the Roman Empire
- IV. Roman boundary types
 - a. Terrestrial man-made boundaries type 1 (defense alongside a wall or a rampart)
 - i. Hadrian's wall
 - ii. Antonine wall
 - iii. Germanic limes
 - b. Terrestrial man-made boundaries type 2 (defense alongside the limes-roads)
 - i. Lowland boundaries
 - ii. Desert boundaries
 - iii. Highland boundaries
 - c. Riverine boundaries
 - d. Coastal boundaries
- V. The functioning and purpose of the Roman limes
- VI. The evaluation of the Roman limes – Were they effective?

*

Introduction

Defining the boundaries of the Roman Empire is not easy because there are many circumstances which make the whereabouts of a borderline uncertain. Moreover, the Roman conception of boundaries is problematic for us, since Rome acquired large territories through diplomatic agreements with some peoples but in many cases left the local political leaders in their places. There is no reference to whether they thought of these states as parts of the Roman Empire or as independent ones. However, these questions only rise in the mind of modern-day people, for based on the sources, we can state that the Romans definitely knew

* The author: *Gábor Horti*, PhD student, University of Szeged, Department of Ancient History. He was awarded the *Lykeon Scholarship* of the South-East European Foundation in 2014.

where their boundaries were. Sources, such as the *Notitia Dignitatum*¹, can be revealing because the imperial recording noted whether the given establishments were located in Roman or in barbarian (“in barbarico”²) territory. Yet the question is still open for the researchers of the era because the determination of such obvious borderlines like Hadrian’s Wall can become problematic. The limes could have separated the Romans and the barbarians quite explicitly, but still we can find such Roman establishments on the northern side of the wall which were in usage well after the building of the wall.

So how can we define the Roman boundaries? Which sources can be helpful to us in determining the boundaries of the Roman Empire and their way of functioning? I am looking for the answer for these and other questions in my study and I would like to briefly describe the different types of Roman boundaries, their structure and operating principles. Furthermore, I write about their efficiency in short.

Methodological introduction

I do not go into detail on the characteristics of each border protecting establishment for reasons of space. However, I use a significant sum of sources and statistical data from the latest specialist literature and my own fact-finding as a basis of my statements. I believe the topic can be successfully understood and the mentioned questions answered by comparing the general structures and with the analysis of the available sources and archaeological remains.

...

VI. The evaluation of the Roman limes – Were they effective?

The evaluation of the Roman boundaries is not easy. If we take the functions mentioned above as the basis of the evaluation, we can say that the borderlines were effective in several aspects.

They met the separating function as they could have showed precisely the Roman territory, but still there are some exceptions. The establishments built on barbarian area definitely belong to the exceptions; however, the lines marking the boundaries of the Roman Empire can be determined.

There is no source about the regulation of the trade and civilian crossing therefore to answer the question we have to turn to the archaeological remains. The density of border posts and border walls doubtlessly made the unnoticed crossing, even just for one person, harder on the Roman borders. Control stations alongside of roads within the empire had appeared before the late imperial era making the crossing even harder. Patrols, towers and natural obstacles largely narrowed down and made trade and crossings controllable. In my belief it cannot be surely stated that the Roman border system had met the requirements of the issue, nonetheless it was suitable to do its duty.

It could have been an ideal basis for starting attacks. Due to the road-system built by the army fast concentration of troops was possible. In addition to this, it can also be thanked to the road-system that the concentrated armies had proper supply and reinforcements were secured.

Talking about the effectiveness of the border protection of the Roman Empire the word satisfactory might be the one we should use. The limes could not stand such extensive attacks like in the Marcomanni-Quasi-Sarmatian war in the 2nd century AD or from the invasive Germanic Alemanni in the crisis of the 3rd century. Smaller invasions possibly were stopped. We can infer it simply from the mere existence of these establishments on the border, since if they had no military value, the Romans most probably would have not built them or made significant efforts to improve them.

In conclusion, it can be agreed that the limes filled most of its purposes rather successfully. It controlled effectively the frontier traffic, the trade, gave a basis for the military actions near the border and gave protection from the smaller attacks through centuries.

Translated by Flóra Mikonya

© DKE 2014

<http://www.southeast-europe.org>

¹ The *Notitia Dignitatum* is the civil administrative register of the eastern and western parts of the late Roman Empire. Borhy 2003, VIII. We find the following example for the expression „in barbarico”: „Auxilia uigilum, contra Acinco, in barbarico.” Meaning that the contra Acinco fort is guarded by an auxiliary troop located in barbarian territory.

² The take in and the usage of the word barbarian goes back to the Greek times. The developed Greek civilization named those who did not speak their language with the derogative βάρβαρος term. In this study I use the word barbarian for the non-Roman people, territory and states without any degeneration.

Contact: [dke\[at\]southeast-europe.org](mailto:dke@southeast-europe.org)

Note: *Respected Researchers*, if you make a reference to this article or quote part of it, please send us an email at dke@southeast-europe.org to let us know that. *Please cite the article as follows:*

Gábor Horti: Basic The boundaries of the Roman Empire. (Translated by Flóra Mikonya) *International Relations Quarterly*, Vol. 5. No.2 (Summer 2014) 14 p. Thank you for your kind collaboration. *Editor-in-Chief*