

# Maintaining the Frontier: An Analysis of Roman Fortifications and the Frontier of the Eastern Roman Empire in the Fourth Century C.E.

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## ***Abstract***

Although a fair amount of material exists on the matter, many scholars still strive to find an accurate conclusion regarding the primary function of the frontier fortifications in the Eastern Roman Empire. Some of these conclusions differ from each other as a result of different disciplines in history, notably military and economic histories. This paper aims to observe some of the arguments posed by scholars regarding the *limes*, more specifically the frontier fortifications in the Eastern Roman Empire in the fourth century CE and their supposed relation to a defense-in-depth strategy. In addition to undermining the argument revolving around the Romans employing a defense-in-depth strategy in the east, this paper suggests that the primary function of the frontier fortifications was to secure the frontier from both external and internal threats. As a result, maintaining and securing the border from both kinds of threats was the main function of the *limes* fortifications.

As long as a state expands its borders, it creates the need to spend resources in order to protect them. This idea holds true for the Roman Empire. Even after the divide of the Eastern and Western halves of the Empire at the turn of the fourth century CE, protecting the frontier from various threats remained clear. Particularly in the Eastern Roman Empire, more political stability was visible, but an increasing amount of external forces was placing pressure on the eastern frontier. These external forces included various nomadic tribes and a growing Neo-Persian Empire. The acquisition of the eastern provinces in the Middle East date back to Trajan's conquests two centuries earlier. During this period, the emperor Trajan went farther east than any other emperor and conquered and annexed portions of the Parthian Empire near the Tigris and Euphrates rivers. Although Trajan's motives remain debatable, his conquests in the east established the need to protect the Roman frontier.

Many questions exist pertaining to the fortifications that dot along the *limes* in the Eastern Roman Empire. One question in particular remains unclear and will be answered throughout the course of this paper. What was

the primary function of the fortifications along the *limes* in the Eastern Roman Empire during the fourth century CE?

The fourth century, after all, is an interesting period for examining the Roman frontier. The Empire at this time experienced a split between east and west and both halves underwent consistent bombardment from external and internal threats. Additionally, the east dealt with a growing imperial power, the Neo-Persian Empire, and also saw a period of continuity and longevity unlike its western counterpart, which fell to barbarian forces in the fifth century. The east also benefited from an increase in trade and commerce from the Silk Road that brought economic diversity and prosperity to the Eastern Roman Empire. All of these factors shed light on the significance of the *limes* and fortifications in the east since they both influenced and were influenced by the phenomena described above. That being said, the primary function of the fortifications along the *limes* of the Eastern Roman Empire in the fourth century CE was to secure the frontier from both internal and external threats. As a result, this idea does not suggest that these fortifications served to defend against impending enemies solely, but rather, focused on protecting the citizenry and economic interests of the empire by means of ensuring the security of the frontier region in the east.

### ***Historiography***

The study of the Roman frontier is often complicated. To that end, the aim of this historiography section is to act as a short bibliographical essay that demonstrates the major scholarly works that have been done and the issues that have arisen for the study of the Roman frontier in the east. Additionally, this section hopes to provide a shadow of doubt for areas that remain understudied and illuminate questions that need to be addressed.

The idea of a frontier, a major concept revolving around the fortifications in the east, deserves attention. The following ideas are assumed in regards to the Roman frontier. First of all, the frontier needs to be viewed as a frontier zone instead of a boundary line.<sup>1</sup> This suggests that viewing the fringes of the empire as having a concrete border is inaccurate because it creates the notion of an "us" and "them." As a result, the second concept is that a "frontier zone unites and integrates those who are culturally diverse" unlike a frontier line which separates and differentiates.<sup>2</sup> Since the former is assumed, it appears valid that the eastern frontier integrated a variety of cultures. Lastly, the final assumption is the Romans attempted to Romanize or assimilate those individuals who were integrated into the empire or living along the frontier.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Hugh Elton, *Frontiers of the Roman Empire*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996), 5.

<sup>2</sup> C. R. Whittaker, *Frontiers of the Roman Empire: a social and economic study* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1994), 72-73.

<sup>3</sup> Stephen Dyson, *The Creation of the Roman Frontier*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985), 5.

This concept appears legitimate considering that it was easier to assimilate individuals in the frontier than bring in people from other locations.<sup>4</sup> Although studies of the Roman frontier are certainly more complex, they still play a significant role in terms of how they influence one's perception of frontier fortifications.

In addition to understanding the ideology behind the frontier, a brief synopsis of the term *limes* deserves some attention. Defining the term *limes* is problematic in that it held a different meaning among individuals in the Roman Empire, as well as meaning something different across different time periods and locations.<sup>5</sup> Isaac states that the traditional view of the *limes* by scholars is as follows: "[The *limes* are] fortifications linked by roads along a fixed boundary."<sup>6</sup> Additionally, source material from the period suggests that the term in the fourth century CE simply referred to the *limes* as frontier districts.<sup>7</sup> For the most part, however, the term *limes* in this article will be defined as a system of road networks along the frontier that are accompanied by fortifications.

One explanation for these fortifications assumes that the Eastern Roman Empire employed a defense-in-depth strategy in order to protect the empire.<sup>8</sup> The concept separated the *limes* into an inner and outer *limes* system in which the outer *limes* was further east and near the edge of the frontier while the inner *limes* was closer to the Mediterranean Sea and major settlements. The theory of defense-in-depth proposed that the fortifications enforced this strategy by using the outer *limes* as the first line of defense against an external threat. Coincidentally, external forces would have to go through the inner *limes* once it penetrated the outer *limes*. The theory of defense-in-depth typically assumed the notion that the outer *limes* would delay the encroachment of external forces long enough for auxiliary legions to come along and eradicate the threat. This method of defense was defended by Edward Luttwak in his book "Grand Strategy of the Roman Empire" in which he proposes that a defense-in-depth strategy was employed by the Romans in order to protect the eastern frontier.<sup>9</sup> Further discussion and arguments regarding this concept are mentioned in more detail later on.

Scholars agree that these fortifications were not intended to act as "a military barrier against nomadic tribes."<sup>10</sup> Rather, nomadic populations

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<sup>4</sup> Dyson, *The Creation of the Roman Frontier*, 5.

<sup>5</sup> Benjamin Isaac, "The Meaning of the Terms Limes and Limitanei," *The Journal of Roman Studies* 78, (1988), 125-135.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 125.

<sup>7</sup> Isaac, "The Meaning of the Term Limes and Limitanei," 132-135.

<sup>8</sup> Edward Luttwak, *The Grand Strategy of the Roman Empire from the first century A.D. to the third*, (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1979), 130-190.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> S. Thomas Parker, *Romans and Saracens: A History of the Arabian Frontier*, (Philadelphia: American Schools of Oriental Research, 1986), 9.

frequently ventured past the frontier and entered Roman territory. There are many reasons for nomadic populations to cross the border. Many foreign nomads crossed the frontier and became integrated into the army. Ammianus Marcellinus, a Roman general, wrote an extensive account of his military experience in the Roman Empire. Many of his chapters include excerpts of Saracen forces that became integrated into the Roman military. In one example, Marcellinus describes a scene where an integrated Saracen-Roman soldier attempted to fight Germanic tribesmen,

A body of Saracens...being more suited for sallies and skirmishes than for pitched battles, had been lately introduced into the city; and, as soon as they saw the barbarian host, they sallied out boldly from the city to attack it. There was a stubborn fight for some time; and at last both armies parted on equal terms. But a strange and unprecedented incident gave the final advantage to the eastern warriors; for one of them with long hair, naked-with the exception of a covering round his waist-shouting a hoarse and melancholy cry, drew his dagger and plunged into the middle of the Gothic host, and after he had slain an enemy, put his lips to his throat, and sucked his blood. The barbarians were terrified at this marcellous prodigy, and from that time forth, when they proceeded on any enterprise, displayed none of their former and usual ferocity, but advanced with hesitating steps.<sup>11</sup>

Other individuals crossed the frontier for economic reasons. In terms of the Middle/Near East during the fourth century CE, many goods traveled across the silk roads and were brought into the Empire. As a result, this caused a lot of foreigners to come into the Empire to trade and demonstrates that the Empire did not intend to keep the borders closed to outsiders.<sup>12</sup>

Several scholars have proposed ideas regarding the function of the fortifications along the frontier. Mayerson suggests that a military border could not contain raiders since it is not practical to think that the Romans could stop an enemy who frequently lived and moved freely within the frontier itself.<sup>13</sup> As a result, he proposes that the main purpose for the fortifications was

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<sup>11</sup> Due to the limited availability of primary source material, the works of Ammianus Marcellinus will be the main primary source for this paper. Although other sources exist on the matter, many of them remain to be translated into other languages. Ammianus Marcellinus, *The Roman history of Ammianus Marcellinus, during the reign of the emperors Constantius, Julian, Jovianus, Valentinian, and Valens*, trans. C.D. Yonge, (London: G. Bell, 1902), 622.

<sup>12</sup> Benjamin Isaac, "Bandits in Judaea and Arabia," in *The Near East under Roman Rule*, (New York: Brill, 1998), 144.

<sup>13</sup> Philip Mayerson, "The Saracens and the Limes," *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research* 262, (1986), 39.

to establish protection for surrounding settlements and, more importantly, the *limes* or frontier road systems that interconnected these settlements.

In addition to the research by Mayerson, C. R. Whittaker takes the idea further by proposing that the fortifications assisted in protecting the *limes* road system by providing troops for caravan escorts.<sup>14</sup> Therefore, the Arabian frontier was not intended to be a defensive system that defended and stopped impeding forces, but rather assisted caravans and protected the economic interests of the empire from bandits. This approach is clearly economic, but it also offers insight on other ideas regarding a militaristic approach to understanding the *limes* fortifications. Benjamin Isaac, like Whittaker, uses the road system to establish the purpose of the fortifications and suggested that protecting the roads remained important. By securing the roads, the Roman Empire protected the frontier by means of internal security since observing the road implies that internal threats are being recognized before they moved into other population centers deep within the frontier.<sup>15</sup>

Moving forward, a few important questions to ponder are: why might the Roman Empire spend resources protecting the frontier? What exactly is there to protect in the eastern frontier? A quick geographical survey is needed to fully understand the significance for finding the purpose these fortifications served. In terms of the fourth century CE, one sees a major increase in settlements, both urban and rural, in the Negev region.<sup>16</sup> What remains more interesting, however, is that "during no other period was the Negev so densely occupied and populated."<sup>17</sup> With this in mind, major population and agricultural growth show the need for fortifications in order to protect the regions, these settlements, and their populations. An argument could be made, however, that since the fortifications were built along the frontier prior to the increase in settlements and populations in the region, they served a different function. It is important to remember that the fortifications could serve different functions over the course of time; to that end, it remains probable that the function of the fortifications likely reflected the changes occurring in the region. As a result, geographical information allows for a deeper understanding of the frontier region and its relation to the fortifications.

Equally important, but even more complex, are the troops stationed at or near these fortifications in terms of understanding the significance of frontier fortifications. Often referred to as the *limitanei*, or border troops, scholars debate who they are and what their relation to the fortifications might be. In terms of studying the Roman frontiers, the *limitanei* are relevant since they were positioned along the frontier with the intent of protecting it. In many

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<sup>14</sup> Whittaker, *Frontiers of the Roman Empire*, 51-53.

<sup>15</sup> Benjamin Isaac, *The Limits of Empire: The Roman Army in the East*, (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1990), 3, 99-101.

<sup>16</sup> Rehav Rubin, "Settlement and Agriculture on an Ancient Desert Frontier," *Geographical Review* 81, no. 2 (1991), 197.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

ways, the *limitanei* are often regarded as part-time peasant soldiers who worked their fields and fought along the borders in order to protect their own, as well as the Empire's, interests.<sup>18</sup> Scholars suggest that the *limitanei* were not professional soldiers, but were supervised by the Roman government and given elementary training in order to respond to threats along the frontier.<sup>19</sup> Additionally, another idea suggests the *limitanei* were actually professional soldiers under the command of a *dux limitis* (frontier commander), which suggests that the *limitanei* were responsible for protecting multiple provinces and were not always confined to the borders of the Empire.<sup>20</sup> Although a finite definition does not exist for the *limitanei*, one thing remains clear; they were designed for protecting the frontier in some way and they had an initiative to do so. Their existence and their relation to the fortifications seems to suggest that the empire was protecting the frontier from a threat of some kind.

Lastly, the historiography section of this article would be incomplete without a brief synopsis of the contemporary Arab population that inhabited the region during the fourth century CE. Unfortunately, current work related to the fortifications in the Arabian frontier lacks proper acknowledgment of Saracen society outside of the Roman frontiers. This is surprising considering that the Saracen nomadic peoples play a significant role in terms of their relationship to the Eastern Roman frontier. In terms of the societal set-up of the Saracens, they mostly lived in a nomadic and tribal society, a direct contrast to the sedentary settlements of the Romans in the frontier.<sup>21</sup> Due to this system, many tribes likely differed from each other; however, some tribes were used as political tools both by the Romans and Neo-Persian Empire.<sup>22</sup> In times of conflict, tribes offered themselves as military allies in an attempt to gain wealth from their neighboring empires. Two notable clans include the Jafrids of Ghassan and the Nasrids of Lakhm who established courts within the Neo-Persian and Roman Empires and organized for military action against the opponents of their allegiant empires.<sup>23</sup> As a result, the tribes certainly placed pressure on the frontier of the Roman Empire

Additionally, the nomadic nature of the population also suggests that Saracen populations traversed into the Roman frontier in order to satisfy their pastoral needs. As mentioned earlier, many Saracen nomads often integrated themselves into the Roman frontier often becoming members of the border troops used to protect the eastern frontier and other frontier regions as well.

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<sup>18</sup> Edward Luttwak, 171.

<sup>19</sup> Isaac, *The Limits of Empire: The Roman Army in the East*, 208.

<sup>20</sup> Isaac, "Bandits in Judea and Arabia," 459.

<sup>21</sup> Robert G. Hoyland, *Arabia and the Arabs: from the Bronze Age to the coming of Islam*, (London: Routledge, 2001), 113-117.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid*, 116-117.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid*.

### ***Defense-in-Depth***

Although many issues and arguments exist concerning the theories behind the purpose of Roman frontier fortifications in the east, one particular concept that remains problematic is the affiliation of the fortifications with a defense-in-depth strategy. As stated above, the purpose of the defense-in-depth strategy attempted to slow impeding forces from penetrating the frontier.<sup>24</sup> Many issues persist, however, in terms of seeing the fortifications as fulfilling this function.

First of all, this theory assumes that these fortifications were mainly used against external threats, which remains problematic when considering that the Romans faced an opposition from within as well. Banditry was a reality for frontier settlements; the bandits were often Saracen nomads who crossed into the frontier zone.<sup>25</sup> As a result, the existence of Saracen nomadic threats within the confines of the frontier demonstrate an issue with the defense-in-depth strategy because the "outer" *limes* was intended to be the first contact that ultimately held the responsibility of delaying the enemy so reinforcements could arrive. Even if the fortifications could respond to bandits in the settlements of the frontier, it is likely that the bandits could outmaneuver Roman reinforcements. Marcillenus describes Saracen bandits as "ranging up and down the country, if ever they found anything, [they] plundered in a moment" and "carry it off with rapid swoop."<sup>26</sup> If Marcillenus accurately depicts the speed in which Saracen bandits operate, then a defense-in-depth strategy seems difficult to implement since a combination of requesting troop reinforcements, reinforcement preparation, and the time it takes reinforcements to get to their destination appears to be a long process.

Ultimately, one needs to consider the amount of time it takes for an auxiliary legion to respond to frontier fortifications as reinforcements. Many legions established themselves within cities. Major urban centers in the East including the cities of Bostra, Gerasa, Philadelphia, Petra, and Aila, contained detachments of soldiers.<sup>27</sup> With this in mind, one sees that sending reinforcements to assist fortifications is logistically unsound. Let's consider the distance of the city of Madaba to the nearest known fortification of Jiza (figure 1). The site at Jiza is thought to have contained a combination of a large reservoir and a fortification of Roman origin.<sup>28</sup> The settlement of Madaba is approximately 25-30 kilometers from the Jiza site, which is assuming a direct path between settlements. No road remains, however, to determine if the two sites are connected. This is problematic since a road connecting the sites would lessen the time it would take for reinforcements to move between each

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<sup>24</sup> Luttwak, *Grand Strategy of the Roman Empire*, 130-190.

<sup>25</sup> Isaac, *The Limits of Empire*, 91-99.

<sup>26</sup> Ammianus Marcellinus, 11.

<sup>27</sup> Glen W. Bowersock, "Limes Arabicus," *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology* 80, (1976), 222.

<sup>28</sup> Parker, *Romans and Saracens*, 41.

location. There is also the issue of elevation in this region. Jiza sits at about 681 meters above sea level while the elevation of Madaba is lower by a 100 meters.<sup>29</sup> The difference in elevation and the lack of a road suggests that the process of providing reinforcements between settlements and fortifications is implausible because the time it would take for a fortification to receive a message to a city with a garrison, combined with the amount of time it would take for the garrisons to equip themselves and travel to Jiza would be extensive. As a result, bandits could continue to plunder the frontier quicker than the Romans could provide reinforcements. Therefore, the employment of a defense-in-depth strategy appears unlikely for the frontier regions of the Eastern Roman Empire.

Alternatively, Parker argues that the fortification at Jiza was intended to protect the reservoir and the city of Madaba itself.<sup>30</sup> This argument assumes that the fortification of Jiza was intended to reinforce the inhabitants of the city of Madaba. To a certain extent, however, this is not an example of the Roman Empire employing a defense-in-depth strategy. First of all, a defense-in-depth strategy implies that a fortification along the frontier held the responsibility of delaying enemy forces from further entering the fringes of the empire. Auxiliary troop reinforcements would then respond to the threat as mentioned earlier. To that end, a defense-in-depth strategy does not match the function of the fortifications according to Parker's point. Rather, he determines that the function of the fortification, or at least more specifically the fortification at Jiza, served as a point in which the garrisons at Jiza came to reinforce the settlement at Madaba, not the other way around.

There is some legitimacy to Parker's point, which helps to prove that a defense-in-depth strategy is less plausible. First of all, an examination of the forces at Jiza within the *Notitia Dignitatum* (Or. 37.16), shows that the garrison stationed there primarily consisted of cavalry units.<sup>31</sup> With this in mind, it makes sense that the site at Jiza contains a large water reservoir. Due to Jiza's location in modern day Jordan, the desert topography required the construction of canals and reservoirs in order to preserve water. Unlike camels, horses require more water over a shorter period of time; therefore, the presence of the reservoir supports the notion that cavalry units were stationed there since horses in desert climates require a greater amount of water. The presence of the cavalry, however, tells a great deal about the function of the fortification at Jiza. Cavalry units themselves are not tactically useful defensively. Their mobility allows them to be more useful as reinforcements than as defensive units. Additionally, if we note the location and topography of the fortification in comparison to the city, one sees that the city is downhill

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<sup>29</sup> Parker, *Romans and Saracens*, 41.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid

<sup>31</sup> This particular interpretation of the *Notitia Dignitatum*, Or. 37.16 comes from S. T. Parker. For more on his interpretation of this section of the *Notitia Dignitatum*, see S. Thomas Parker, 41.

from the fortification which suggests that the fortification supplied reinforcements to the city (and not the other way around as a defense-in-depth idea would suggest) since it would be more strategically sound to have reinforcements come downhill to preserve time and energy. As a result, it makes sense that the cavalry acted as auxiliary reinforcements as opposed to serving the function of delaying enemy incursions along the frontier.

Indeed a defense-in-depth defense does not make sense in light of cities reinforcing the frontier fortifications and vice versa; however, what about fortifications reinforcing other fortifications? Applying a defense-in-depth strategy to Roman frontier policy is inaccurate even when viewing the *limes* fortification system as a complex network of reinforcement stations. If we consider the distance between fortifications, we see that many fortifications are over a day's march away for auxiliary troops. It is important to remember as well that if reinforcements are needed to aid in another fortification, other fortifications need to be notified in some way. This means that the distance between each location needs to be doubled to accommodate the distance it would take for the fortification to be notified as well as account for the distance that it would take for the reinforcements to get to their destination. If we examine the location of some fortifications on the far eastern portion of the frontier, more specifically the site of Imtan, whose closest sites are Jebel Druz and Azroq respectively, we see that troops would have to travel considerable distances in order to provide reinforcements. More attention will be given to the latter site of Azroq since it is connected to Imtan by road (figure 1). Parker speculates that the garrison could have held a small auxiliary force.<sup>32</sup> This means that the forces likely contained a mixture of both cavalry and foot soldiers. Since a legion of troops only marches as fast as their slowest unit, this needs to be taken into account in considering the legitimacy of whether the fortifications functioned as providing reinforcements for other fortifications who were delaying the march of enemy incursions. As a result, a defense-in-depth strategy appears less legitimate since the distance between sites would take an excessive amount of time.

Additionally, one major component of Luttwak's idea of defense-in-depth assumes the Roman Empire practiced and utilized long-term planning or "grand strategy."<sup>33</sup> "Grand strategy" is often defined as the "allocation of a state's resources to meet its major objectives."<sup>34</sup> Kagan argues, however, that this does not accurately describe Roman frontier policy simply because the empire did not recognize the concept of long-term planning even though objectives at the state level were being accomplished.<sup>35</sup> With this in mind,

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<sup>32</sup> Parker, *Romans and Saracens*, 20.

<sup>33</sup> Edward Luttwak, *The Grand Strategy of the Roman Empire from the first century A.D. to the third*, (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1979), 130-190.

<sup>34</sup> Kimberly Kagan, "Redefining Roman Grand Strategy," *The Journal of Military History* 70, no. 2 (2006), 333.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 333-362.

there is no definitive proof that the fortifications served a defense-in-depth function since this concept requires long-term strategic thinking.

Another issue with the defense-in-depth theory stems from the assumption that enemy adversaries would attack fortifications directly, or at the very least, the surrounding area. Realistically, however, the majority of Saracen forces are not equipped to deal with a siege against a Roman fortification.<sup>36</sup> A siege of a Roman fortification, although small, would still require siege equipment, which the Saracens did not have.<sup>37</sup> Additionally, the siege would require a lot of time and other resources, such as food, in order to maintain the siege. Realistically, however, Saracen forces were not equipped for sieges, mostly due to their pastoral and tribal lifestyle. This mode of living often kept them mobile and forced them to move wherever their livestock would go. With this in mind, a lack of sedentary lifestyle means everything is transported; therefore a surplus of food or resources needed to maintain a siege is not logistically probable.

To that end, it does not make strategic sense for Saracen nomads to attack, take, or control Roman fortifications because they would serve no purpose for the Saracens due to their pastoral lifestyles. Although occasionally, one sees Saracen nomads taking their flocks to reservoirs at certain sites, the Saracens do not have a reason to attack the fortifications directly. With this in mind, a defense-in-depth strategy is less plausible. One of the major assumptions of the Romans employing a defense-in-depth strategy is the garrison's task to delay external threats until reinforcements arrive.<sup>38</sup> If the Saracens do not have a reason to attack the fortifications, then a defense-in-depth strategy seems less believable since the strategy assumes that there is an external force to be stopped.

This does not suggest that Saracen nomads were not a threat to the frontier altogether. Many Saracen nomads partook in banditry, although this statement should not be viewed as an overarching statement for the entire nomadic population. The Saracens, as mentioned above, had an interesting relationship with the Romans, and were often integrated into the Roman military to fight against external threats.<sup>39</sup> In terms of the Saracen bandits, however, they had more intentions to invade small settlements and often raided the countryside.<sup>40</sup> Therefore, the main Saracen bandit threat in the Eastern frontier had no intention of attacking frontier fortifications directly, but had a higher motivation to raid Roman developments deeper in the frontier past the fortifications. The trouble for the troops, in that regard, was not with

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<sup>36</sup> Hoyland, *Arabia and the Arabs* 229-247.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>38</sup> Luttwak, *The Grand Strategy of the Roman Empire*, 134.

<sup>39</sup> See Ammianus Marcellinus, 622. for description of Saracen forces defending Roman garrisons against Germanic tribes.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*

the Saracen population, but banditry in general.<sup>41</sup> A defense-in-depth strategy does not make sense because there is no threat of an enemy incursion attacking fortifications in the *Arabia Petraea* during this period. Therefore, a long-term strategy network consisting of troop reinforcements from other fortifications seems unlikely.

Lastly, some evidence suggests that the fortifications had individual functions as well which complicates a defense-in-depth argument.<sup>42</sup> According to Bowersock, "no province of the Roman Empire had so great a diversity of geographical and climatic features as Arabia."<sup>43</sup> The diversity in the topography and climate suggests that different needs for the fortifications may have been possible. Additionally, the fortification structures themselves also demonstrate unique traits between themselves, which leads one to believe that individual fortifications functioned differently from each other. After all, some fortifications consisted of watchtowers while others did not.<sup>44</sup> The differences between the fortifications makes it difficult to support an overarching strategy such as defense-in-depth since various functions can be attributed to each fortification.

Overall, purporting that the Romans used defense-in-depth as their overarching grand strategy is difficult to prove in itself.

"Many questions scholars ask about grand strategy, namely, the appropriateness of goals, the relationship between ends and means, and the gap between conception and execution are not answerable for most of the history of the Roman Empire because the documentary evidence with which to determine the goals of the Roman state does not survive."<sup>45</sup>

Since no evidence exists concerning Roman grand strategy, proposing universal concepts such as a defense-in-depth strategy are difficult to prove since it implies the notion that the empire was employing an overarching strategy in which to protect the economic interests of the eastern frontier.<sup>46</sup>

In all, the use of a defense-in-depth strategy seems difficult to prove in light of various counterpoints. The threats coming from within the frontier, the inability of other fortifications and cities in being able to supply reinforcements for the area in need, the tactically inaccurate assumption that enemy Saracen nomads and bandits would interact directly with the fortifications help disprove the theory. Additionally, the potential for different

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<sup>41</sup> Isaac, "Bandits in Judea and Arabia," 125.

<sup>42</sup> On fortifications serving individual functions see Greg Fisher, "A New Perspective on Rome's Desert Frontier," *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research* 336, (2004), 54.

<sup>43</sup> Glen Bowersock, *Roman Arabia*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1983), 5.

<sup>44</sup> For example see Figure 9 in Benjamin Isaac, *Limits of Empire*, 196.

<sup>45</sup> Kagan, "Redefining Roman Grand Strategy," 350.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 350-354.

functions within fortifications, and the lack of primary source evidence to prove the existence of grand strategies, such as defense-in-depth, are all arguments that debunk the defense-in-depth strategy as suitable for understanding the primary function of the frontier fortifications in the Eastern Roman frontier.

### **Frontier Fortifications: Primary Function and Analysis**

Now that the defense-in-depth strategy has been disregarded as an inaccurate representation of the primary function of the frontier fortifications in the Eastern Roman Empire, other ideas need to be brought into consideration. It remains clear that the fortifications serve a function to protect the frontier from some sort of adversary. The adversary confronting the Roman frontier consisted of both external and internal threats. The empire underwent consistent bombardment from external enemies in all frontier regions of the empire, but most notably one of the largest external threats to the Eastern Roman frontier was the growing Neo-Persian Empire. Additionally, bandits also posed a threat to the economic and social well-being of the frontier of the Roman Empire.<sup>47</sup> To that end, the primary function of the fortifications along the *limes* system in the fourth century CE was to secure the frontier from both internal and external threats. By doing so, the empire could focus on protecting the citizenry and economic interests of the empire by ensuring the security of the frontier region in the east.

One of the major opponents of the Eastern Roman Empire during the fourth century was the Sassanid Persians. These individuals should be treated differently from the Saracen nomads who interacted with the Romans farther south. Ammianus describes the individuals in the Persian province of Parthia as "fierce and warlike, and they are so fond of war and battle that he who is slain in battle is accounted the happiest of men, while those who die a natural death are reproached as degenerate and cowardly."<sup>48</sup> Naturally, this quotation should be taken lightly considering Marcillenus is a Roman soldier himself and has undoubtedly formulated a bias towards Rome's enemies; however, this statement remains important for this discussion. For the most part, it shows the Neo-Persians as enemies of the Roman state. As long as the empire sustains enemies, it creates a need to protect its borders. In essence, this accounts for the need to have frontier fortifications in the Empire. Conflict between the Neo-Persian Empire was a reality along the frontier of the Eastern Roman Empire. The fortifications along the *limes* system could, therefore, be used to secure the frontier by means of protecting the frontier from the external threat of the Neo-Persian Empire.

The Neo-Persians and Roman empires also employed the help of allies in the Arabian Peninsula during times of conflict. Many of these allies came from specific tribes that partnered with the Roman and Persian state and

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<sup>47</sup> Isaac, *The Limits of Empire*, 91-99.

<sup>48</sup> Ammianus Marcillenus, 338.

often fought other tribes.<sup>49</sup> Saracen tribes usually integrated themselves into the customs of the empire they were supporting.<sup>50</sup> For the most part, the imperial states often bought the support of their allies since many tribes saw the opportunity to find a profit.<sup>51</sup> With that being said, one sees that external threats of the Eastern Roman Empire stretch farther south below the Sassanid Persian Empire. One of the more notable Arab tribe that was loyal to the Persian Empire was the Lakhmids.<sup>52</sup> This suggests that Rome's external enemies included Saracen tribes as well. Marcillenus often describes Saracen adversaries as follows, "never desirable to have either for friends or enemies."<sup>53</sup> This quote summarizes both the Saracens as being both allies and enemies to Marcillenus despite distrusting them as a people. It is clear Marcellinus is referring to Saracen integration by claiming the Saracens are undesirable as friends. Nonetheless, by stating that the Saracens are not desirable as enemies demonstrates that Marcellinus sees the Saracens as enemies who endanger the eastern frontier.

This brings into question the use of the fortifications along the frontier of the Eastern Roman Empire. By the time of the fourth century CE, the Roman Empire in the east begins experiencing a greater amount of pressure along the frontier. The Neo-Persian Empire is expanding westward towards the frontier which puts increased pressure on nomadic people who are being pushed westward towards the frontier as a result. To that end, the major concern was not to prevent Saracen nomads from crossing the border.<sup>54</sup> As a matter of fact, it was not difficult for nomads to cross into the frontier and for the most part, no evidence suggests that there was always trouble with the nomads.<sup>55</sup> This means that the primary function of the frontier fortifications, in terms of dealing with external threats, was not to stop "barbaric" forces from coming within the Empire altogether. Rather, the function of the frontier fortifications was to recognize threats along the frontier that may have endangered the social and economic wellbeing of the Empire. In some cases, attempting to stop forces from coming into the Empire was the primary function; however, many cities contained walls and garrisons of their own that could protect against external threats.<sup>56</sup> When discussing the province of Arabia, Marcillenus proves invaluable in terms of his description of the frontier fortifications. "[The province of Arabia is] studded with strong forts and castles, which the watchful solicitude of its ancient inhabitants has erected

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<sup>49</sup> Hoyland, *Arabia and the Arabs* 116-117.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 239.

<sup>53</sup> Ammianus Marcillenus, 11.

<sup>54</sup> Isaac, "Bandits in Judaea and Arabia," 144.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 125-136.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, 136.

in suitable defiles, in order to repress the inroads of the neighboring nations."<sup>57</sup> Primarily, Marcellinus is pointing out the importance of the fortifications by acting as the "watchful solicitude." In many regards, this helps support the notion that the primary function of the fortifications was to ensure the security of the frontier. By acting as a "watchful solicitude" the fortifications helped ensure the security of the frontier by observing the *limes* frontier road network for any potential external threats from crossing into the confines of the empire.

The fortifications equally served the function of maintaining internal security as well. If we consider the nomadic nature of Saracen bandit raiders, then the fortifications clearly aimed to secure the frontier internally from such threats. One question to consider, however, is why bandit incursions appeared to be an issue for the Romans in the East. In other words, why might the Roman Near East be more susceptible to bandit raids than other parts of the Empire? Quite simply, the answer may be due to regional economies. The Eastern Roman Empire sits directly on the Silk Road which was continuing to flourish as a result of the resurgence of the Neo-Persian Empire. This ultimately helped re-establish stronger trade connections with Rome and other East Asian societies. As a result of this continued flux of trade, Roman roads witnessed countless merchants and caravans. For this reason, banditry seems plausible as an internal issue within the Eastern Roman Empire. The existence of traders along the Roman *limes* likely attracted bandits to the area since raiding traders allowed them to gain access to booty. As a result, the Roman Empire needed to employ protection in order to counter potential bandit incursions. To that end, Fisher makes a point when he claims that the fortifications along the frontier served the purpose of internal policing, protection against banditry, and control of roads.<sup>58</sup> In other words, the function of the frontier fortifications also protected the Empire from internal threats that jeopardized the Empire's economic interests.

The issue of banditry along the frontier of the Eastern Roman Empire was not a new phenomenon during the fourth century. Rather, the Eastern Roman frontier underwent consistent problems with banditry throughout its occupation of the Near East. Biblically speaking, evidence shows that many individuals, other than just merchants and traders, were victim to banditry throughout the area.<sup>59</sup> Emphasis should be placed on the road network as well, since many of these biblical examples seem to draw from incidents that occurred along the Roman network of roads.<sup>60</sup> Therefore, it seems that the bandits were operating along the road and targeting anyone that they came across. In essence, the bandits described here appear to act similarly to how we might perceive a highwayman to act. Although instead of imposing tolls on

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<sup>57</sup> Ammianus Marcellinus, 29.

<sup>58</sup> Fisher, "A New Perspective on Rome's Desert Frontier," 54.

<sup>59</sup> For more specific examples regarding biblical stories concerning banditry, see Benjamin Isaac, "The Limits of Empire," 91-101.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

individuals along the network, the bandits likely camped along the road and preyed on unsuspecting travelers in order to obtain the booty needed to sustain their livelihoods. With this in mind, it seems clear that the Roman Empire would employ a strategy that would protect the roads of the frontier from such issues. This strategy likely resembles a theory proposed by Benjamin Isaac in which frontier fortifications focused more on internal police duties and less on foreign defense.<sup>61</sup> For this reason, the fortifications assisted this strategy of internal policing of roads by supplying troops to protect the frontier from bandit threats. As a result, it makes sense when one sees the garrison of troops move from fortifications and cities to the roads in the southern provinces which suggests a heavier emphasis on internal policing and protecting the economic interests of the empire.<sup>62</sup>

Additionally, a closer look at the fortifications themselves also helps conclude that the fortifications served a function of maintaining internal security. Careful treatment of the "fortification" needs special attention. The fortifications that dot along the frontier regions of the Empire differ widely from each other, even serving more specific functions than their counterparts.<sup>63</sup> In some cases the fortifications referred to throughout this article actually refer to watchtowers. If we observe some of the sites along the *limes*, one sees that many fortifications rest along the road, but do not seem to be near any settlements. These sites often bore watchtowers in which the fortification could surveil the road for any internal threats. One example includes Tsafit Tower (Figure 2). The figure shows a tower built on top of a hill overlooking a road. Since banditry seemed to occur frequently along the *limes*, it is plausible to assume that the tower was used to look out for internal threats along the frontier roads. Additionally, its location on top of a hill allowed for a greater line of sight to spot enemies in the vicinity. To that end, the fortifications served a function of maintaining internal security, by positioning watchtowers along the *limes* the Eastern Roman Empire could maintain internal security of its frontier by surveilling and policing for any potential internal threats that jeopardized its economic interests there.

The body of evidence suggest that the fortifications along the *limes* system appear to serve the function of both securing and maintaining the frontier of the Eastern Roman Empire by means of protecting it from both internal and external threats. As a result, the Empire could secure its economic interests there since many internal and external threats tended to interrupt commercial trade and political and societal security. Perhaps this idea allowed the Eastern Roman Empire to maintain control of its southeastern frontier for the following millenia unlike the west which continued to suffer from impeding barbarian forces. Many factors, however, likely contributed to the

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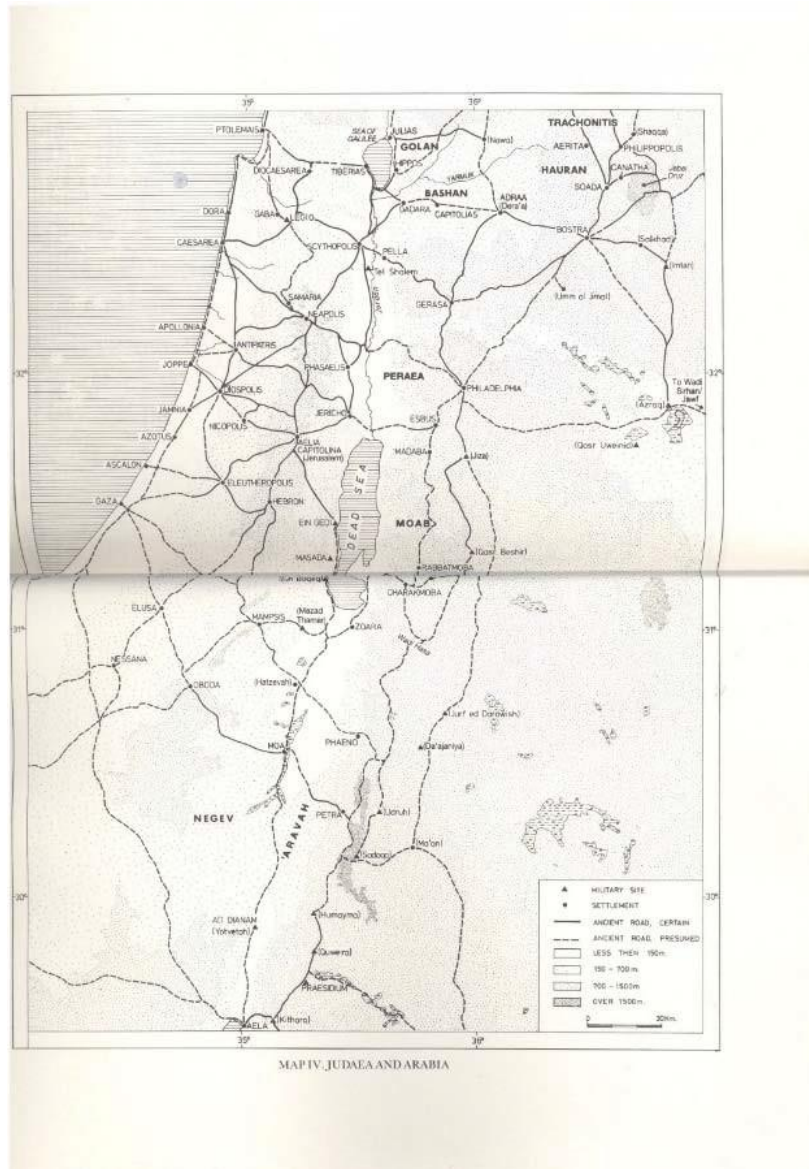
<sup>61</sup> Benjamin Isaac, "Bandits in Judea and Arabia," 152.

<sup>62</sup> On the movement of troops see Benjamin Isaac, "Bandits in Judaea and Arabia," 136.

<sup>63</sup> Fisher, "A New Perspective on Rome's Desert Frontier," 54.

Eastern Roman Empire's ability to maintain its southeastern frontier. Nonetheless, the impact of the fortifications along the frontier remains significant for understanding the *limes* and Roman frontier defense.

Figure 1<sup>64</sup>



<sup>64</sup> Image taken from Benjamin Isaac, *Limits of Empire*, 500-501.

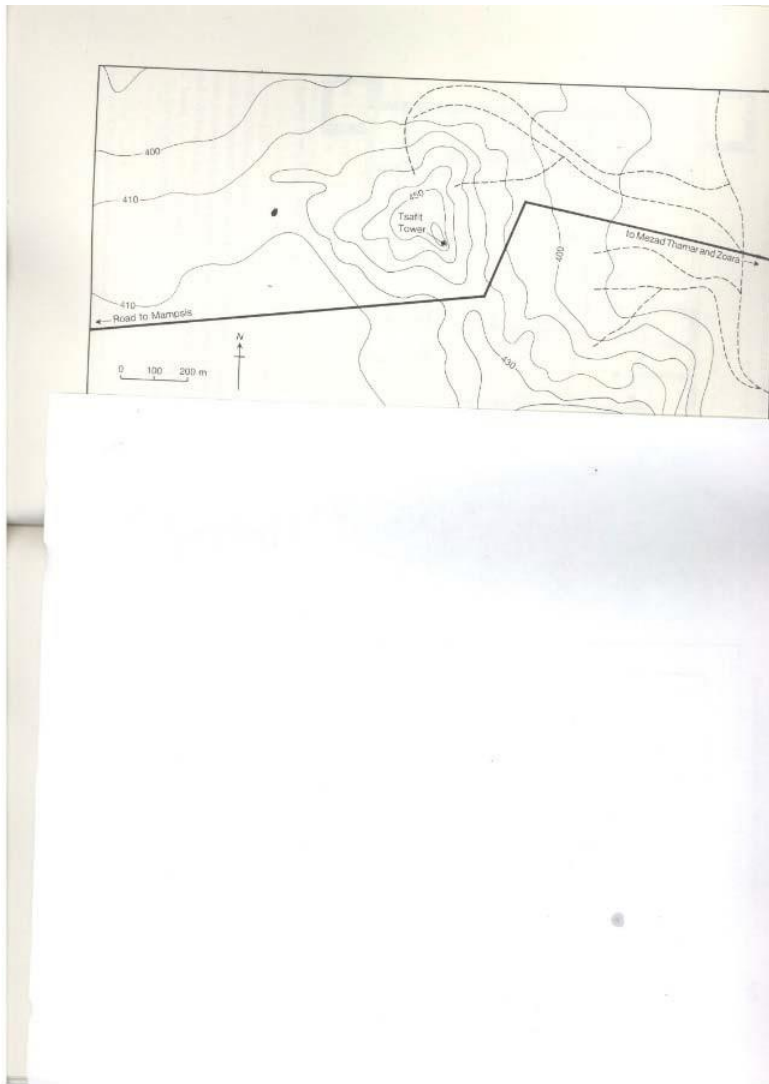


Figure 2<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> Image taken from Benjamin Isaac, *Limits of Empire*, 196.