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FEEDING THE FRONTIERS:
LOGISTICAL LIMITATIONS OF
ROMAN IMPERIALISM IN THE WEST

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Ancient History,
The University of Auckland, 2004
Abstract

This thesis is an examination of the importance of army supply in deciding the success and failure of the frontiers of the Roman Empire with particular emphasis on those frontiers in the Rhine-Danube provinces. It will look at logistics as the reason for the end of expansion of the Roman Empire and the frontiers forming where they did. It will also argue that the failure of logistics was a major factor in the collapse of those same frontier defences and the ultimate fall of the western part of the empire.

The need to feed and supply large numbers of troops and their dependents dictated where they could be based. Because of the impossibility of supplying the whole army with imported goods, the suitability of local land for food production was also paramount. The need to have reliable sources of supply locally was met by placing veterans on retirement in villae rusticae in frontier zones. This had the effect of controlling those local sources of supply and also satisfying the increasingly expensive needs of the army praemia militiae.

The increased warfare and periodic invasions from the reign of Marcus Aurelius especially on the upper Rhine and upper Danube made supply more difficult. The army placed an increasing number of beneficiarii consularis on important points on the transport network to control and direct the flow of army supplies.

The more frequent invasions across the frontiers from the third century caused greater dislocation to the agricultural infrastructure not only on the frontiers but deeper into the more settled and richer provinces. This destroyed the sources of local supply and also often the source of imported supply, forcing Roman armies to stay well inside the imperial boundaries more often than before. The loss of their logistic superiority spelt the loss of their military advantage, and the loss of empire.
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Preface

This thesis is primarily an examination of the Roman army supply system of northern Europe, but examples and evidence have been used from other areas, such as Egypt and the East. This is to draw parallels with the armies of Europe, but also to contrast the systems that prevailed in the different regions of the empire.

I have used the expression *limes* to refer to the works and military installations that exist east of the Rhine and north of the Danube, as well as in North Africa. I am aware that it carries connotations that not all agree with. I use it in a modern sense, appreciating that its Latin meaning is not its modern meaning, and also that it has implications about how a frontier might be seen by historians.


I have used my own translations of various works of the ancient authors.

All dates in this thesis are Common Era unless otherwise indicated.
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Abbreviations

AE  Année épigraphique
AHB  Ancient History Bulletin
AJA  American Journal of Archaeology
AJPh  American Journal of Philology
AncSoc  Ancient Society
ANRW  Aufstieg und Niedergang der römischen Welt
BAR  British Archaeological Reports
BGU  Berliner griechische Urkunden
BJ  Bonner Jahrbücher
CBFIR  Corpus der griechischen und lateinischen Beneficiarier-Inschriften der römischen Reiches
CIL  Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum
FIRA  Fontes Iuris Romani Anteiustiniani
G&R  Greece and Rome
ILS  Inscriptiones Latinae selectae
JRA  Journal of Roman Archaeology
JRMES  Journal of Roman Military Equipment Studies
JRS  Journal of Roman Studies
PBSR  Papers of the British School at Rome
PSI  Papiri greci e latini (Pubblicazione della societa Italiano)
RMR  Fink, R. O. (1971), Roman Military Records on Papyrus (Ann Arbor MI)
Röm. Mitt.  Mitteilungen des deutschen Archäologischen Instituts. Römische Abteilung
ZPE  Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik