
Redefining Roman Grand Strategy



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Abstract

Ancient historians have demonstrated that Edward Luttwak's *The Grand Strategy of the Roman Empire* does not accurately describe Roman grand strategy, and many conclude that there was no Roman imperial grand strategy. But the grand strategy of the Roman Empire can be studied as long as scholars ask questions that the available sources support. The field of strategic studies defines "grand strategy" as the allocation of a state's resources to meet its major objectives. Surviving sources regarding the patterns of troop movements in the Roman Empire show that emperors decided how to allocate resources empire-wide to meet objectives, and thus thought about grand-strategic issues even if they did not recognize the concept or engage in long-term planning.

THE study of grand strategy in the Roman Empire is as valid, important, and useful as the study of grand strategy in any modern state. Grand strategy is primarily concerned with a state's allocation of resources among various military and policy goals and is inextricably intertwined with politics, diplomacy, economics, and questions of peace and war. All large and complex states set objectives, establish priorities among them, and allocate resources to them, whether or not they develop or keep to long-range systematic plans. The Roman Empire was no exception to this general rule.

Roman emperors made decisions in a complex world where threats and opportunities frequently changed. They had to balance the need (or

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desire) to mobilize resources for military operations with the conscription and tax burden such mobilization placed upon their populations. Because they did not have unlimited resources, they also had to set priorities among regions, threats, and desired goals. To abandon or ignore the study of grand strategy in Rome would deprive the field of ancient history of an important set of tools and questions with which to understand the Roman Empire.

As a scholarly field, Roman grand strategy dates back only to the publication of Edward Luttwak's *The Grand Strategy of the Roman Empire* in 1976.¹ This book has largely framed subsequent discussions about Roman grand strategy, even though historians of the ancient world have demonstrated that Luttwak's paradigm is incorrect.

Military historians have treated Luttwak's work gently. In 1993, the *Journal of Military History* published Everett Wheeler's substantial essay which concluded that Luttwak's work had largely withstood misguided scholarly challenges.² Since then, ancient historians have continued to expose the problems of Luttwak's work. Although familiar to Roman historians, these critiques have not been treated comprehensively in any review that would make their conclusions accessible to a wider audience. As a result, Luttwak's work persists as the standard outside of the field of ancient history when it should not.

Ancient historians, in contrast, have rejected Luttwak's work. The current consensus in the field of Roman history, resulting from studies of frontiers and central administration, is that there was no Roman imperial grand strategy. Some assert that even to speak of it is an error.³

1. Edward Luttwak, *Grand Strategy of the Roman Empire from the First Century A.D. to the Third* (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976).

2. Everett Wheeler, "Methodological Limits and the Mirage of Roman Strategy," 2 parts, *Journal of Military History* 57 (1993): 7–41, 215–40. His essay primarily addresses C. R. Whittaker, *Frontiers of the Roman Empire: A Social and Economic Study* (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994); and Benjamin Isaac, *The Limits of Empire: The Roman Army in the East*, rev. ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992).

3. Wheeler, "Methodological Limits," offers a lonely but emphatic voice in supporting the inquiry. In an effort to defend the subject, he tends also to defend aspects of Luttwak's work that his critics have successfully undermined. His recommendations for further study are, therefore, less useful than his criticism of subsequent scholarship. Arther Ferrill's *Roman Imperial Grand Strategy*, Publications of the Association of Ancient Historians (Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, 1991), and "The Grand Strategy of the Roman Empire," in *Grand Strategies in War and Peace*, ed. Paul Kennedy (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1991), also support the inquiry, but accept Luttwak's schematization almost uncritically and contribute only a superficial survey of the resource issues. The most direct book-length criticism of studying Roman grand strategy is Isaac, *The Limits of Empire*, 372–418; on 374–77 and 407–8 he argues that the Romans lacked terminology for grand strategy and our conceptions are, therefore, anachronistic. (Wheeler, "Methodological

A significant part of the problem is definitional. Historians of Rome have tended to equate “grand strategy” with “systematic plan,” and this unfortunate equation has had baleful effects on this discussion.⁴

Classicists’ rejection of Luttwak’s framework and the difficulties of deducing grand strategy from frontier studies have left the field of imperial Roman grand strategy in disarray. The growing consensus rejecting the inquiry is, however, premature. Since the paradigm that had shaped the field from its outset has failed, it is time to look for a new one. Happily, the field of grand strategy in modern history offers a promising definition of the task, and the revitalization of an old set of data can provide a way forward.

This article reviews the weaknesses in Luttwak’s argument found by ancient historians. It explores how the maturing field of modern grand strategic studies defines “grand strategy.” It suggests which modern questions can generally be answered by the limited source material available to students of Roman history. Finally, it argues that fluctuating troop deployments, especially in times of crisis, can show that Roman emperors made grand strategic decisions, often consciously. The study of contingent troop deployments, furthermore, opens up a new range of questions for scholars of Roman grand strategy to investigate. The article aims to improve the ways ancient historians define grand strategy, reaffirm the value of studying Roman grand strategy, and raise new questions for both ancient historians and political scientists to consider.

The Debate about Luttwak

Any examination of the field of Roman grand strategic studies must begin with an evaluation of Luttwak’s work, despite its problems. Luttwak asserts that the Romans’ grand strategic goal “was to provide security for the civilization without prejudicing the vitality of its economic base and without compromising the stability of an evolving political order.”⁵ He argues that although the Romans did not conceive of “grand strategy” explicitly, they “nevertheless designed and built large and complex security systems that successfully integrated troop deployments, fixed defenses, road networks, and signaling links in a coherent

Limits,” 217–18, argues, against Isaac, that the Romans did have a terminology for strategy and some awareness and conception of activities that we would identify as components of grand strategy.) The arguments of Isaac and other critics will be treated in the body of this article.

4. For the equation, see, for example, C. R. Whittaker, “Where Are the Frontiers Now?” in *The Roman Army in the East*, ed. David L. Kennedy (Ann Arbor, Mich.: Journal of Roman Archaeology, supp. series 18, 1996), 25–42, especially 29–31.

5. Luttwak, *Grand Strategy*, 1.

whole.”⁶ He extrapolates the organization and purpose of these security systems—including “the force-structure of the army” and “border defenses”—largely from archaeological data.⁷ The narrative sources, especially Tacitus, also inform his general impression of imperial policy goals and military activities. He thus deduces the purposes of the grand strategic system from physical remains in combination with an impressionistic review of the narrative evidence.

Luttwak describes how the Roman “security system” functioned during three different phases of its development, deduces the purposes of each “system,” and evaluates whether each protected the empire efficiently and effectively. He claims that “Each system was intended to satisfy a distinct set of priorities, themselves the reflection of changing conceptions of empire: hegemonic expansionism for the first system; territorial security for the second; and finally, in diminished circumstances, sheer survival for the imperial power itself.”⁸ These evolving grand-strategic priorities contributed to the overall goal of security.

Luttwak concludes that the security system of the early Principate, from Augustus to Nero (31 B.C. to A.D. 68), best served the empire because it demonstrated “economy of force.”⁹ By this he means that the Julio-Claudians maintained an extremely efficient balance of direct and indirect control over the empire’s neighbors in order to secure its borders. Only twenty-eight legions (twenty-five after Varus’s disastrous defeat in Germany), supplemented by auxiliaries, protected the provinces in Augustus’s reign, a surprisingly small force for an empire that ran from Spain to Syria and Egypt.¹⁰ By preserving client states as

6. Ibid., 3. Luttwak gives away too much; see Wheeler, “Methodological Limits,” 20–21, on Latin terminology for strategy.

7. Luttwak, *Grand Strategy*, 4.

8. Ibid., 3.

9. Ibid., 13. “Principate” is the term by which Roman historians conventionally designate the period that runs from the reign of Augustus (beginning in 31 B.C.) to the third century.

10. A full-strength imperial legion had between 5,000 and 6,000 men, so the Augustan legionary establishment fielded no fewer than 140,000 men and no more than 168,000 men if the legions were at approximately full strength. As the civil war legions were undermanned and many veterans settled, this is not necessarily the case. Tacitus assumes that there were an equal number of auxiliaries, so the total force under arms would not have exceeded 336,000 men in Augustus’s reign. This number increased only to thirty-three legions by Severus’s reign, at which point troop strength would have reached between 400,000 and 450,000. Susan P. Mattern, *Rome and the Enemy: Imperial Strategy in the Principate* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 82–84, reviews the literature about the size of the legions, the size of the Roman army, and the dates at which the number of legions increased; the estimate in Luttwak, *Grand Strategy*, 13, is now out of date. The units of the Roman army could not travel very quickly from one area to another, and so it would be inap-

allies around the frontiers, Luttwak argues, the Roman emperors efficiently secured their borders from potential foreign threats. Enemies would first encroach upon the territory of client kingdoms, which would repel them with their own armies if possible or with Roman assistance if necessary.¹¹

Between A.D. 68 and the death of Septimius Severus in 211, the Romans developed the second system to ensure “preclusive security.” They conquered and annexed territory until they reached a defensible external frontier. They fortified frontiers that did not have natural defenses (as well as some that did). They stationed their legionary forces in garrisons around the frontiers of the empire in order to protect what they had conquered from the low-intensity threats of barbarian tribes. The preclusive system used force less efficiently than the client state system, Luttwak argues. The Romans had to meet every threat with their own forces at their own expense instead of projecting power beyond their own territorial borders through allies. They had no strategic reserves, furthermore, with which to meet major threats should they appear.¹²

The Third Century Crisis (A.D. 235–85), in which nearly simultaneous major external threats to the empire emerged, triggered the collapse of the system of preclusive security and undermined the stability of the state. In response, however, the Romans developed the third system, “defense-in-depth,” characterized by a new distribution of forces and a new system of fortifications. The fortifications would impede invasions and channel them along specific, lightly defended routes. A mobile, central field army could then move as necessary to different parts of the empire to meet invaders within Roman territory. This approach freed the Romans from having to garrison their entire frontier line while enabling them to defeat their enemies.¹³

Luttwak explains the difference between the second- and third-century systems:

The general character of Roman defense-in-depth strategies was that of a “rearward” defense, as opposed to the “forward” defense characteristic of the earlier frontier strategy. In both, the enemy must ultimately be intercepted, but while forward defense demands that he be intercepted in advance of the frontier so that peaceful life may continue unimpaired within, rearward defense provides for his interception only inside imperial territory, his ravages being meanwhile contained by the point defenses of forts, towns, cities, and even individual farmhouses. The earlier system of preclusive security had

appropriate to compare these figures uncritically to the strengths of modern mechanized or force-projection armies.

11. Luttwak, *Grand Strategy*, 7–50.

12. *Ibid.*, 51–126.

13. *Ibid.*, 127–90.

been obviously superior in its benefits to society, but it was impossibly costly to maintain.¹⁴

Luttwak argues that the defense-in-depth strategy, although destabilizing to Roman civilization, retained greater elasticity in the face of multiple, high-intensity threats and thus preserved a greater economy of force than an increased Roman presence all along the frontiers.

Six major assumptions underlie Luttwak's analysis of all three strategic systems. The first two pertain to the state's goals, the next two to its frontiers, and the last two to the system's unitary quality. First, Luttwak assumes that Roman legionary deployments and fortifications met defensive objectives. Second, he assumes that the Roman Empire expanded in order to achieve defensible frontiers, whether "natural" or "scientific." Third, he assumes that the purposes of each frontier system can be deduced from the archaeological remains of the fortifications. Fourth, he assumes that the frontiers were fixed and identifiable. (This supposition underlies the previous three assumptions.) Fifth, he assumes that the Romans developed a single, cogent system of defense that was relatively uniform across the empire in a given period, regardless of the differences in terrain, level of civilization, or variety of threat in a province or a borderland. Sixth, he assumes that the strategic systems were relatively constant within the phases he identifies, and that they then evolved from one state to the next. He does not, therefore, evaluate the role that individual Roman emperors or the Roman Emperor as an institution played in creating or changing the strategic systems. Subsequent studies have shown that all of these assumptions are incorrect.

Goals

Since the appearance of Luttwak's work, scholars have examined whether Roman grand strategy during the Principate aimed at defense against foreign enemies, imperial expansion, the consolidation of imperial rule, or some combination of these. In the Roman state, it is difficult to separate these three goals. The dramatic extension of Roman rule that had characterized the late Republic continued aggressively under Augustus and the subsequent Julio-Claudian rulers, Tiberius aside. Luttwak argues that the emperors expanded primarily to stabilize borders and to prevent foreign threats. Susan Mattern agrees that deterrence and vengeance motivated some campaigns, but argues that Roman emperors after Tiberius also sought to conquer new lands and provinces in order to obtain glory for themselves and the state.¹⁵ The acquisition of Britain under Claudius and Domitian and Trajan's seizure of Dacia and

14. *Ibid.*, 136.

15. Mattern, *Rome and the Enemy*, 81–122 and 162–210.

Mesopotamia can be properly interpreted as wars of conquest, rather than as defensive or deterrent campaigns. Emperors also mobilized troops for some offensive campaigns that they failed either to wage or to win, such as Nero's Caspian venture or Domitian's German expedition.¹⁶ Septimius Severus's campaigns in Britain and in the East may also have aimed to expand the empire.¹⁷ The ideology of imperial expansion may have motivated emperors as much as the need to defend territory. Luttwak's thesis that the empire sought primarily to deter enemies during the Julio-Claudian period and to defend itself in the later Principate cannot be sustained without fundamental modifications.

Nor was the Roman army exclusively an instrument of foreign policy. Benjamin Isaac has argued that the Roman army in the East primarily functioned as a provincial garrison force tasked to prevent internal unrest.¹⁸ His evidence (often drawn from the Talmud) shows how the Romans consolidated their rule, and how banditry and resistance to Roman rule nevertheless continued even after the Jewish Revolt (A.D. 66–70) and the Bar Kochba rebellion (A.D. 132–34).¹⁹ Written sources, he argues, do not indicate that external threats (generated by Parthians or desert nomads) persistently challenged Roman rule in the East in the late first through the second century.²⁰ Because the Roman army often garrisoned cities as well as frontier fortifications for extended periods, he argues that its primary mission was internal occupation or pacification.²¹ Likewise, the widespread distribution of military inscriptions throughout a province demonstrates that the Roman army had internal responsibilities.²² In cities, the army assisted with tax collection and performed other civil administrative functions.²³ Veterans' colonies, which could not substitute for field units, helped to organize local government and elites.²⁴ Isaac argues that even the fortifications of the Later Roman Empire had purposes other than frontier defense.²⁵

16. *Ibid.*, 88–104.

17. A. R. Birley, "Septimius Severus, *propagator imperii*," in *Actes du IXe Congrès international d'études sur les frontières romaines*, ed. D. M. Pippidi (Bucharest: Editura Academiei, 1974), 297–99; D. Kennedy, "The Frontier Policy of Septimius Severus: New Evidence from Arabia," in *Roman Frontier Studies 1979*, ed. W. S. Hanson and L. J. F. Keppie (Oxford: B.A.R. International Series, 1980), 3:879–87, especially 885–86; A. R. Birley, *Septimius Severus: The African Emperor*, 2d ed. (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1988), 170–87.

18. Isaac, *The Limits of Empire*.

19. *Ibid.*, 54–100 and 101–60.

20. *Ibid.*, 19–53.

21. *Ibid.*, 101–60.

22. *Ibid.*

23. *Ibid.*, 269–310.

24. *Ibid.*, 311–32.

25. *Ibid.*, 161–268.

Whether or not internal pacification was the primary purpose of the Roman army, it certainly was an important one. Although Isaac sometimes generalizes from the rich evidence of a single province (namely, Judaea), his work seriously undermines Luttwak's assumption that the Roman army's sole purpose was the defense of the state by demonstrating that it also routinely engaged in the pacification, occupation, and civilian administration of provinces. Subsequent studies have reinforced this point.²⁶ The maintenance of internal order must be considered when studying Roman grand strategy. The relationship between pursuing external goals and internal stability (disrupted by rebellious inhabitants as well as potential imperial claimants) is far more important to imperial security than Luttwak's framework allows.

Frontiers

Luttwak's concept of preclusive security assumes that the Roman frontiers were clearly defined:

The limits of empire were by then [the time of Hadrian] demarcated very precisely, on the ground, so that all could tell exactly what was Roman and what was not. The established client states had been absorbed, and with several significant exceptions that illuminate the purpose of the rest, the land borders of the empire were guarded by defended perimeters that complemented the natural barriers of river and ocean. The invisible borders of imperial power had given way to the physical frontier defenses [in Britain, Germany, North Africa, and segments of the Danube].²⁷

Luttwak's conception of the second system of Roman grand strategy rests on this highly criticized statement. Luttwak describes the "tactics of forward defense" by which the Roman army, deployed along a border fortification system and in the interior, might sensibly respond to attacks on the well-delineated frontiers.²⁸

Scholars have challenged the way Luttwak uses the physical evidence of the frontiers to interpret the goals and execution of Roman grand strategy from the Flavian through the Antonine period (A. D. 69–192). Isaac strongly criticizes Luttwak's view that the frontiers at this time were fortified lines that the army would defend.²⁹ C. R. Whittaker has denied that military and political frontiers existed at all, arguing instead that the frontier was a cultural and economic zone, which

26. Fergus Millar, *The Roman Near East 31 B.C.–A.D. 337* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1993).

27. Luttwak, *Grand Strategy*, 60.

28. *Ibid.*, 55–80.

29. Benjamin Isaac, "The Meaning of 'Limes' and 'Limitanei' in Ancient Sources," *Journal of Roman Studies* 78 (1988): 125–47.

stopped when it reached marginal lands. The frontier extended beyond direct Roman administrative and political control; fortifications do not mark the true boundaries of imperial power.³⁰ Other scholars, however, have demonstrated that there were sometimes mutually recognizable (if evolving) political and military frontiers, even when cultural or economic exchange extended beyond the boundary.³¹

Still others have studied different frontiers in greater detail to show their development over time and to isolate the unique features of each.³² The documentary finds from Vindolanda (in Roman Britain), from Egypt, and from Dura-Europos (the southernmost garrison of the Roman army on the Euphrates) have refined our assumptions that fortifications were exclusively defensive outposts.³³ They improve our understanding of the relationship between the Roman army and the regions it garrisoned, and suggest that the army performed internal security functions

30. Whittaker, *Frontiers of the Roman Empire*; see also Whittaker, "Where Are the Frontiers Now?" 25–42, which challenges the idea of grand strategy in the Roman Empire on other grounds. For a similar view of the African frontier, see Elizabeth W. B. Fentress, *Numidia and the Roman Army: Social, Military, and Economic Aspects of the Frontier Zone* (Oxford: B.A.R. International Series, 1979).

31. For example, personal negotiations between the Romans and the Parthians in the first century occurred on the Euphrates frontier. Millar, *The Roman Near East*, 29–30; this is in contrast with the view of the Euphrates as a notional frontier in Whittaker, "Where Are the Frontiers Now?" 34.

32. This line of scholarship was introduced by J. C. Mann, "The Frontiers of the Principate," *Aufstieg und Niedergang der römischen Welt* 2, no. 1 (1974): 508–33, who argued that failure of Roman expansion, along with local conditions and topography, determined the position of the frontiers. A review of all of the literature on the frontiers is impossible in a paper of this scope; the following are examples of notable studies of provinces: Stephen Mitchell, *Anatolia: Land, Men, and Gods in Asia Minor*, 2 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993); Géza Alföldy, *Noricum*, trans. Anthony Birley (London and Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1974); David J. Breeze and Brian Dobson, *Hadrian's Wall*, 3d ed. (London: Penguin, 1991, c. 1987); D. J. Mattingly, *Tripolitania* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994). For some typical and important archaeological surveys, see H. von Petrikovits, "Fortifications in the North-Western Roman Empire from the Third to the Fifth Centuries A.D.," *Journal of Roman Studies* 61 (1971): 178–218; H. Schönberger, "The Roman Frontier in Germany: An Archaeological Survey," *Journal of Roman Studies* 59 (1969): 144–97; and the essays in P. Freeman and D. Kennedy, *The Defense of the Roman and Byzantine East* (Oxford: B.A.R. International Series, 1986).

33. A. K. Bowmann and J. D. Thomas, *Vindolanda: The Latin Writing Tablets*, Britannia Monograph Series 4 (London: Society for the Promotion of Roman Studies, 1983); J. F. Gilliam, "The Roman Army in Dura," in C. B. Welles et al., *The Excavations at Dura-Europos: Final Report*, vol. 5, part 1, *The Parchments and Papyri* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1959); Robert O. Fink, ed., *Roman Military Records on Papyrus* (Cleveland, Ohio: Press of Case Western Reserve University, 1971); and H. I. Bell, V. Martin, E. G. Turner, and Denis van Berchem, trans. and eds., *The Abinnaeus Archive: Papers of a Roman Officer in the Reign of Constantius II* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1962).

more often than it actively defended the borders. It is not possible easily to discern a fortification's purpose from the physical remains without documentary evidence, let alone the purpose of an entire fortification system, which had functions beyond demarcating the frontier and defending the borders.³⁴

The frontiers of the Roman Empire were not always fixed and clear. The notion that the emperors could know precisely and at all times "what was Roman and what was not" oversimplifies the complex interactions that the Romans had with their neighbors. The surviving documentary and material evidence suggests that the Roman fortification systems on most frontiers were not functioning as a forward defense against incursions in the manner that Luttwak describes.

Impressive criticism has also undermined Luttwak's argument that the Romans attempted to reach "natural" or "scientific" frontiers. The Rhine, Danube, and Euphrates rivers could denote the boundaries of the Roman Empire physically and symbolically. Although the Roman Empire cohered to the shape that these river frontiers give, it was not always bordered by them. In Germany, for example, fortifications ran to the east of the Rhine. Trajan occupied the salient of Dacia beyond the Danube and also attempted to annex Mesopotamia, which lies beyond the Euphrates.

Luttwak has tried to prove that Rome's farthest positions, especially on its northwestern frontiers, were strategically superior to the river lines themselves, but this argument is not entirely persuasive. Were those frontiers "optimal regional perimeters, chosen not merely for their tactical and topographic convenience but also for strategic reasons in the broadest sense—in other words, 'scientific' frontiers," as Luttwak suggests?³⁵

J. C. Mann has argued that the Roman frontiers represent a failure of expansionist policy, and that Rome adopted many of its frontier positions not because they were optimal, but because they were tenable. The frontiers often represent the locations that the army held in a province when they abandoned their last campaign of conquest, as do the frontiers of the German provinces established by Domitian.³⁶

Mattern has argued that the Romans' geographical conception differs from ours so profoundly that borders that might look "natural" or "scientific" to us did not necessarily make sense according to their world-

34. See the suggestive attempts of Schönberger and von Petrikovits to describe the archaeology of the Rhine frontier; most scholarship, such as the studies in the previous note, integrates archaeology with epigraphic, numismatic, and narrative evidence.

35. Luttwak, *Grand Strategy*, 87.

36. Mann, "The Frontiers of the Principate," 508–33.

view.³⁷ The Roman knowledge of geography and cartographical methods in the Principate provided an image of the world fundamentally different from ours.³⁸ The geographer Strabo and the natural historian Pliny, for example, believed that the inhabited world was elliptical and surrounded by ocean. The elliptical image severely truncated the geographers' notion of the landmasses to their east and south, which they conceived of as roughly proportional in shape and size to Europe, albeit slightly smaller! They believed that the Caspian Sea led to the outer ocean, so that they identify no landmass corresponding with Russia. Sources could thus erroneously report that travelers from India had reached Germany by sailing around the outer ocean.³⁹

However humorous these notions seem, the distorted image of the world made the distance between Roman territory and the edge of the European landmass seem much smaller than it actually was. In such circumstances, Mattern argues, the attempted Roman expansions into Germany, and the more successful ones into Dacia, might indeed have been a push to achieve a "scientific" or "natural" frontier—not the one actually achieved, but the expected ocean slightly beyond the frontier.⁴⁰ What Luttwak sees as a rationalization of the Rhine-Danube frontier by the relocation of its fortifications eastward, may well have been a (failed) attempt to push the frontier toward the ocean, its final boundary.⁴¹

Another part of the problem was that the Romans, in many cases, could not have been pushing out to more "strategically sound" frontiers because they had little idea what the land looked like when they marched away from their borders. Roman cartography accompanied, rather than preceded, Roman expansion.⁴² Many Roman maps seem to have recorded travel distances between towns along Roman roads, and sometimes between major terrain features.⁴³ The Romans, therefore, occupied positions beyond their frontiers even though they had not necessarily fully reconnoitered them. Roman campaigns in Germany had

37. Mattern, *Rome and the Enemy*, 39–60.

38. O. A. W. Dilke, *Greek and Roman Maps* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1985); J. B. Harley and David Woodward, eds., *The History of Cartography*, vol. 1, *Cartography in Prehistoric, Ancient, and Medieval Europe* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 177–257.

39. Mattern, *Rome and the Enemy*, 39–60.

40. *Ibid.*, 60–61.

41. Luttwak, *Grand Strategy*, 92–96.

42. Mattern, *Rome and the Enemy*, 37–39.

43. *Ibid.*, 39; also Dilke, *Greek and Roman Maps*. On this point, I find Ronald Syme, "Military Geography at Rome," *Classical Antiquity* 7, no. 2 (October 1988): 227–51, especially 235–38, unconvincing. For an excellent facsimile of the Peutinger Table, a medieval copy of a Roman imperial road map, see *Die Peutingerische Tafel* (Stuttgart: F. A. Brockhaus Komm.-Gesch., Abt. Antiquarium, 1962). Dilke, *Greek and Roman Maps*, 112–29, comments on this map and its genre.

taken them to the Elbe, far beyond their permanent position on the Rhine. But the trans-Danubian frontier remained unexplored, as did the region beyond the Black Sea; fewer maps than one might expect described Mesopotamia.⁴⁴ A practical strategic sense might have guided the Romans' choice of position—defending frontiers that worked—but not an overall, abstract perception of their empire and its boundaries—certainly not in any way that is obvious to a modern observer.

A Unitary System?—The Emperor and the Evolution of Grand Strategy

Trenchant, pervasive criticism of Luttwak's approach emerges from Fergus Millar's *The Roman Near East*, which primarily discusses cultural diversity and political unity within one geographical area, not grand strategy.⁴⁵ Millar traces the development and spread of the Roman administration and military presence in the Near East (eventually including ancient Syria, Palestine, Arabia, and Mesopotamia; corresponding with portions of modern Syria, Iraq, and Jordan, and all of Lebanon and Israel) from Augustus to Constantine. In the course of that study, Millar destroys Luttwak's periodization, at least as it applies to the Roman Near East. Since Luttwak posits an empire-wide strategic system, that critique is damaging.

Millar illuminates many issues relevant to our considerations of grand strategy, although all of his conclusions pertain directly only to strategy in the Near East. First, there was no simple trend toward ruling alongside of or incorporating client states in the Principate. Instead, Roman direct and indirect rule alternated flexibly under Augustus and Tiberius as each treated various client kings differently.⁴⁶ Second, the Roman military presence increased gradually, and in response to different stimuli such as potential wars with Parthia and the Jewish Revolt. The Roman army in the East prior to the Jewish Revolt did not act as a garrison for the East, but rather as a consolidated force that could respond to potential instabilities.⁴⁷ The Roman state garrisoned the area more thoroughly after suppressing the revolt, fundamentally altering the nature of Roman direct rule. Our sources do not narrate this later period in the same degree of detail, but the epigraphic and archaeological records illustrate the gradual expansion of the Roman presence—including extensive road building—eastward from Cappadocia (eastern Anatolia) and southward from Syria and Judaea into Arabia and Jordan, beginning in the reign of Vespasian.⁴⁸

44. Mattern, *Rome and the Enemy*, 26–66.

45. Millar, *The Roman Near East*.

46. *Ibid.*, 38–56.

47. *Ibid.*, 56–70.

48. *Ibid.*, 70–90.

When the Roman Near East had reached what one might call “natural limits,” namely, the cultivable area from the Taurus Mountains to the northern Hejaz, bordered on the east by the Euphrates, emperors began wars of conquest to expand beyond them.⁴⁹ Trajan invaded Armenia and Mesopotamia, provoked by the Parthian crowning of an Armenian king (contrary to previous diplomatic arrangements by which the Romans crowned a Parthian nominee). Hadrian returned these new provinces to the Parthians. After he suppressed the Bar Kochba rebellion, he redistributed and relocated the legions of the East. He impressively consolidated Roman power in Syria, Judaea, and Arabia by building extensive road networks, conducting imperial tours of the provinces, and imposing the census and taxation on Arabia.⁵⁰ Lucius Verus’s Parthian campaign rekindled aggressive expansion beyond the Euphrates, and Septimius Severus’s conquests in that region resulted in a reorganization of the Eastern provinces and the establishment of permanent, small garrisons on the frontier.⁵¹ The Roman Empire projected its force all the way to the Tigris, and the garrison of Dura-Europus, the southernmost outpost of Roman direct rule on the Euphrates, survived until 256 or 257.⁵² In the period that Luttwak associates with “preclusive security,” the Roman army in the East engaged in consolidating internal control and aggressive outward expansion.

Contrary to Luttwak’s framework, no system of defense-in-depth governed the Romans’ response to Persian attacks in the 250s.⁵³ And only after the Third Century Crisis did they systematically fortify the Eastern frontier to achieve preclusive as well as internal security. The *strata Diocletiana*, a fortified road network, crossed the fringes of the desert (roughly from Damascus through Palmyra to the permanent garrison at Soura on the Euphrates). This line required substantial new construction, signaling the formal delineation of a border between civilization and steppe that had been only informally recognized before.⁵⁴

Millar’s work undermines many of Luttwak’s assumptions. It demonstrates the inefficiency of the client system, Luttwak’s first grand strategic system. It describes the consolidation of Roman rule from Vespasian onward, accompanied by the gradually expansionist and ultimately aggressive military activities on the frontiers, a period encompassed within Luttwak’s second phase of “preclusive security.” There were no

49. *Ibid.*, 90–99. This is not to say that these terrain and topographic features are necessarily “natural limits,” but that if the Romans sought such limits, these might have served.

50. *Ibid.*, 99–111.

51. *Ibid.*, 111–41.

52. *Ibid.*, 141–62.

53. *Ibid.*, 159–73.

54. *Ibid.*, 174–91.

“scientific” frontiers in this period, although there were recognized boundaries between Parthia and Rome before the latter’s conquest of Mesopotamia. It proves that the Romans did not consistently perceive Parthia as a threat, and that relations with Parthia rarely governed troop deployments and engagements in the Near East.⁵⁵ Millar shows the absence of a defense-in-depth in the Near East for most of the third century, which suffered immensely in the 220s, 250s, and 260s from Persian attacks. Fortifications and preclusive security measures emerged only in the late third century. He implicitly critiques not only the purposes of the frontier systems, but also Luttwak’s periodization. The emperors evidently conducted, as individuals and taken in series, an evolving policy toward the Near East, which sometimes changed during their reigns. This work thus undermines the assumptions underlying Luttwak’s thesis, elucidates different grand strategic goals and objectives of the emperors in the Near East, and describes the way troop deployments, fortifications, road constructions, and foreign relations functioned in the Near East differently from any of the grand strategic systems Luttwak identifies.

Luttwak performed an invaluable service to the field of Roman history by provoking an important and intriguing series of controversies. In the present state of these studies, however, it is clear that his fundamental assumptions, arguments, and conclusions cannot stand. However grand strategy in the Roman Empire worked, it did not work as Luttwak has described it.

Roman Grand Strategy Beyond Luttwak

Luttwak’s approach has, nevertheless, largely defined the ways in which Roman historians have conceived of grand strategy. Because his framework implicitly answers the question “Why did the Roman frontiers stop where they did?” the separate issues of frontier studies and grand strategy have become inextricably intertwined.⁵⁶ As a result, many scholars of Roman grand strategy have largely accepted the premise that if Roman grand strategy existed, it can be found in an examination of the frontiers. Those who argue against the existence of grand strategy in Roman times have likewise done so largely from frontier studies. Although Roman grand strategy and frontier policy cannot be disassociated, the two are not equivalent.

55. This agrees with Isaac, *Limits of Empire*, 19–53 and 161–218.

56. J. C. Mann’s publication of “The Frontiers of the Principate,” in 1974 and his review of Luttwak’s work, “Power, Force, and the Frontiers of Empire,” *Journal of Roman Studies* 69 (1979): 175–83, cemented this relationship; for a defense of the association, see Whittaker, “Where Are the Frontiers Now?” 31–39.

For one thing, the study of Roman frontier policy has, until very recently, focused almost exclusively on very small regions without making any effort to integrate those regions into areas of grand strategic significance. Scholars of Roman grand strategy ask primarily whether the consolidation of authority or the emergence of threats in a frontier zone determined how the Roman Empire allocated its resources. This question implicitly underlies many of the recent frontier and province studies, but it tends to result at best in strategic, not grand-strategic, histories of the empire.⁵⁷ Synthesizing these studies would produce an overall picture of Roman frontiers and their diversity, but would not reveal whether links existed among the frontiers. Because these studies also tend to minimize the importance of central decision-making, they do not consider the relationship between events on different frontiers. Balancing competing interests in different theaters is one of the core elements of grand strategy for a state such as Rome, as I shall argue. Approaches that focus on individual sectors of the periphery typically cannot, therefore, produce a thorough understanding of Roman grand strategy.

Those studies that examine the policies and activities of the emperors themselves try to identify or disprove the existence of long-term plans and an integrated military system.⁵⁸ Such ancient historians assume that grand strategy and long-term planning are equivalent, based upon Luttwak's assertions that the Roman emperors developed their frontier "systems" purposefully. Because the Roman state did not apparently have a formal body that made imperial security decisions, and because records of such decision-making do not survive, it is very difficult to prove that the emperors or their advisors engaged in consistent or systematic planning. And the evidence from the narrative sources, combined with the archaeological record, suggests that *ad hoc* security arrangements far outnumber instances of systematic long-term planning, which occurred mainly (but not exclusively) at major turning points such as the reigns of Augustus (31 B.C.–A.D. 14) and Diocletian (A.D. 284–305).⁵⁹

57. Including the more synthetic and strategically relevant works, such as Isaac's *Limits of Empire* and Millar's *The Roman Near East*.

58. As in Fergus Millar, "Emperors, Frontiers, and Foreign Relations 31 B.C.–A.D. 378," *Britannia* 13 (1982): 1–23; Millar, *The Roman Near East*; and Matern, *Rome and the Enemy*.

59. For the issue of ad hoc responses (and also goal-driven responses), see Millar, "Emperors, Frontiers, and Foreign Relations"; and David Potter, "Emperors, Their Borders and Their Neighbours: The Scope of Imperial *Mandata*," in Kennedy, *The Roman Army in the East*, 49–66. Potter argues that Julio-Claudian emperors had sufficiently defined their policy goals along most frontiers that they limited their subordinates' opportunistic expansion or provocation of potential enemies.

The result of these studies has been a growing conviction in the field that the study of “grand strategy” in the Roman Empire is anachronistic and inappropriate, that the entire project must be abandoned. This conclusion is far too extreme, however, and would end an inquiry that, pursued on the basis of a more developed understanding of grand strategy, promises valuable insights and greater comprehension of the Roman Empire as a whole than even the sum of frontier studies can offer. The problem lies, in large part, in the fact that definitions and concepts in the field of Roman grand strategic studies have not kept pace with the increasing sophistication of their counterparts in the field of modern grand strategy.

Understanding Grand Strategy

The parameters of the field of modern grand strategic studies are still emerging. Many scholars and practitioners still incorporate the study of grand strategy into that of strategy. American military doctrine does not recognize a distinction between the terms “national strategy,” “national security strategy,” and “grand strategy,” and it, too, tends to conflate strategy and grand strategy.⁶⁰ Few works specifically address the concept of grand strategy, clarification of which, for the most part, must be teased out of treatises written on other subjects.⁶¹ Yet consensus seems to be growing about what grand strategy is and how one can study it.

The most useful definition of grand strategy is the most general and all-encompassing: Grand strategy is the use of all of the state’s resources to achieve all of the state’s major security objectives. It is one of the most important aspects of security studies. Paul Kennedy has written, “The crux of grand strategy lies . . . in *policy*, that is, in the capacity of the nation’s leaders to bring together all of the elements, both military and nonmilitary, for the preservation and enhancement of the nation’s long-term (that is, in wartime and peacetime) best interests.”⁶² Grand strategy thus involves the setting of a state’s objectives and of priorities among those objectives, allocating resources among them, and choosing the best policy instruments to pursue them.⁶³

60. See <http://www.dtic.mil/doctrine/jel/doddict/index.html> for doctrinal definitions; accessed 5 February 2005.

61. B. H. Liddell Hart, *Strategy*, 2d rev. ed. (New York: Praeger, 1967), directly addresses the subject, as does Paul Kennedy, “Grand Strategy in War and Peace: Toward a Broader Definition,” in Kennedy, *Grand Strategies in War and Peace*.

62. Kennedy, “Grand Strategy in War and Peace,” 5. By “elements,” I think he means “resources and policy instruments.”

63. International relations theorists have also adopted a similar definition. See, recently, Robert J. Art, *A Grand Strategy for America* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2003), 1–2, though the book emphasizes the use of military power, rather than other instruments, to achieve objectives.

Many scholars of modern grand strategy accordingly assess the relationship between a state's objectives and the means that it has to pursue them.⁶⁴ By what process has the state's leadership defined its interests and assessed its resources?⁶⁵ How do a state's available resources compare to its potential resources? Have policy makers identified means sufficient to achieve the state's objectives? If not, should policy makers have used different resources or revised the state's objectives?⁶⁶ Would mobilizing resources further have generated negative economic, social, and political consequences?⁶⁷ The grand strategic art involves reconciling military expenditure with other interests of the state.⁶⁸

Grand strategic studies also explore the intentions and actions of decision makers. How well have leaders evaluated other states' objectives and capabilities when establishing their own state's goals and means to attain them?⁶⁹ Do policy makers' grand strategic conceptions differ from their actions?⁷⁰ In order to address these complex issues, it is necessary to know a state's objectives, the actual and potential resources available to it, and the military and nonmilitary instruments at its disposal, at any given time.

64. This is a theme that runs through many of the articles in Peter Paret, ed., *Makers of Modern Strategy from Machiavelli to the Nuclear Age* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1986), although they treat these issues as components of strategy.

65. See Geoffrey Parker, *The Grand Strategy of Philip II* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1998).

66. See Donald Kagan and Frederick W. Kagan, *While America Sleeps: Military Weakness, Self-Delusion, and the Threat to Peace Today* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000). The idea of "balancing means and ends" is one of the guiding principles behind the Strategy and Policy course at the United States Naval War College, Newport, Rhode Island, which focuses on issues of grand strategy; see United States Naval War College, "Strategy and Policy: The Course Concept," an introduction by Professor George Baer, August 2001 (unpublished syllabus).

67. See John Lewis Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment: A Critical Appraisal of Post-War American National Security Policy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992); John Barber and Mark Harrison, *The Soviet Home Front, 1941–1945: A Social and Economic History of the USSR in World War II* (London and New York: Longman, 1991); Maurice Matloff, "The Ninety Division Gamble," in *Command Decisions*, ed. Kent Roberts Greenfield (Washington: U.S. Army Center of Military History, 1990), 365–82; Roland G. Ruppenthal, "Logistics and the Broad Front Strategy," in Greenfield, *Command Decisions*, 419–28.

68. See Paul Kennedy, *The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers: Economic Change and Military Conflict from 1500–2000* (New York: Random House, 1987).

69. See John Lewis Gaddis, *We Now Know: Rethinking Cold War History* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997); Williamson Murray and Allan Millet, eds., *Calculations: Net Assessment and the Coming of World War II* (New York: Free Press, 1992).

70. See Gaddis, *Strategies of Containment*.

Evaluations of modern grand strategy presuppose that the state's objectives are knowable, but identifying them often involves the interpretation of complex evidence. They can frequently be deduced (if they are not explicitly stated) from decision makers' correspondence or memoranda, from minutes of official meetings, or from records of informal discussions amongst policy makers. The executive's instructions to diplomats can also clarify a state's interests and objectives, as can the correspondence between diplomats and their chiefs recording the reactions of their own state to foreign diplomatic activity. A commander in chief's intent as stated in written or (when known) oral orders can illuminate the same issue. The public presentations of the executive to a legislature can also be helpful. Knowledge of how a state's particular political system worked in a given time period should inform judgments about contradictory evidence. Although this type of research about a state's objectives involves a great degree of interpretation, it necessarily relies on the direct evidence of what policy makers said and wrote. It is interesting to note that where the evidence for the leader's grand strategic aims is not directly stated or seems contradictory or unclear, controversies swirl even in modern times. A classic example is the question of Napoleon's overall grand strategy, which some historians describe as inherently passive while others believe it aimed at world domination.⁷¹

The Problem of Sources for Roman Grand Strategy

The Roman Empire poses an unusual (although not entirely unique) problem in the study of grand strategy. 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. Nor are those goals so obvious that scholars can assume that they know them even without direct evidence, as the debate over Luttwak's formulation demonstrates.

Such documentary evidence probably existed in Roman times. We know that the emperors issued formal instructions to governors of provinces, and that these governors corresponded with the emperors about matters that we would classify as foreign, diplomatic, and military policy, sometimes before they made decisions about how to respond to

71. See David Chandler, *The Campaigns of Napoleon* (New York: Macmillan, 1966), among others, for the former view, and for the latter, Paul Schroeder, *The Transformation of European Politics, 1763–1848* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), or, more trenchantly, his "Napoleon's Foreign Policy: A Criminal Enterprise," *Journal of Military History* 54 (April 1990): 147–62.

an emerging situation.⁷² We know that emperors corresponded with foreign kings and their envoys, although only scattered records of this survive, reproduced by our narrative sources.⁷³ Imperial correspondence was voluminous, but the only extant collections (besides scattered public inscriptions and the rescripts in law codes) are Pliny's limited, if fascinating, correspondence with Trajan; the letters of Marcus Aurelius and his tutor Fronto; and some letters of the Emperor Julian.⁷⁴ We know that some emperors made some decisions of state with the assistance of their *consilium*. In the early Principate, this informal body of advisors might typically include the personal friends or freedmen of the emperor; in the later Principate, it included his friends and several formally appointed officials.⁷⁵ This structure evolved into a formal body called the *consistorium* in the Late Empire, comprised largely of appointed officials.⁷⁶ We do not know whether either body kept minutes. We do know from the historian Cassius Dio, who was having difficulty doing his research, that imperial foreign policy and military decisions were kept secret.⁷⁷

The emperors occasionally made public or private pronouncements of policy, such as the extant *Res gestae* of Augustus and his lost memorandum to Tiberius listing the resources of the state described by Tacitus.⁷⁸ Whether other emperors generated similar public or private documents we do not know. The Senate in the early Principate retained

72. For the sources of information about the decision-making process, see Millar, "Emperors, Frontiers, and Foreign Relations," to which the following discussion is highly indebted; see also Potter, "Emperors, Their Borders, and Their Neighbours," 49–66.

73. Fergus Millar, "Government and Diplomacy in the Roman Empire during the First Three Centuries," *International History Review* 10 (1988): 345–77.

74. For English translations of these letters, see Pliny, *Letters of the Younger Pliny*, trans. Betty Radice (New York: Penguin Books, 1963, 1969), Book 10; Marcus Cornelius Fronto, *The Correspondence of Marcus Cornelius Fronto with Marcus Aurelius Antoninus, Lucius Verus, Antoninus Pius, and Various Friends*, ed. and trans. C. R. Haines, 2 vols. (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press; London: W. Heinemann, 1928–29); Julian, *The Words of the Emperor Julian*, trans. Wilmer Cave Wright, Loeb Classical Library edition, 3 vols. (New York: Macmillan, 1930).

75. For the decision-making process and bodies, see Millar, "Emperors, Frontiers, and Foreign Relations"; and Fergus Millar, *The Emperor in the Roman World* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press; London: Duckworth, 1977).

76. For the *consistorium*, see A. H. M. Jones, *The Later Roman Empire 284–602* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell and University of Oklahoma Press, 1964, 3 vols.; paperback reprint, 2 vols., Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986, 1992), 1:333–41. The Roman administration did not have any formal position that would correspond to a modern foreign minister or secretary of state.

77. Cassius Dio 53.19; Millar, "Emperors, Frontiers, and Foreign Relations," 2.

78. P. A. Brunt and J. M. Moore, eds. and trans., *Res gestae divi Augusti. The Achievements of the Divine Augustus* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1967); Tacitus *Annals* 1.11.

some role in the evaluation of foreign embassies, which Tacitus mentions, but the records (and even outcomes) of these discussions do not survive.⁷⁹ We cannot know to what extent all of these documents, had they survived, would have clearly illuminated the objectives of the Roman state. We cannot assume that because such documents existed, the state engaged in formal processes of developing what we would call grand strategy—consciously determining long-term goals and objectives, assessing its own resources, and assessing the enemy. We can know that without them, we cannot simply or reliably deduce the state's long-term goals or the specific process (if any) by which they were formulated.⁸⁰

What exists instead is an eclectic mix of indirect evidence about the Roman state, including narrative histories, epigraphy (inscriptions), documentary records on papyrus and wooden tablets, and archaeological remains, most of which survived based not on the source's importance, but on the process of its transmission, preservation, and discovery. These sources are incredibly informative. The narrative histories (such as those by Tacitus, Josephus, Cassius Dio, and Ammianus Marcellinus) preserve valuable information about diplomacy, decision making, and waging war.⁸¹ Texts such as Pliny the Elder's *Natural History* and Strabo's *Geography* record incidental information that can shed light on events in particular places. Biographies of emperors also survive (such as those of Suetonius and the less-reliable, anonymous *Scriptores Historiae Augustae*), though these tend to record more details about character and habits than about policy. The epigraphic and documentary evidence from papyri and wooden tablets often shows where a particular unit of the Roman army was stationed at a given time.⁸² Archaeology has revealed the remains of the empire's road network and

79. Millar, "Emperors, Frontiers, and Foreign Relations," 4–5.

80. For the issue of the Romans' awareness of strategy, see below.

81. In addition to those major narratives for the Roman imperial period, there are the lesser or incomplete narratives of Velleius Paterculus, Herodian, Zosimus, and Orosius; the ecclesiastical histories of, for example, Eusebius, Sozomen, and Socrates; and numerous other minor narratives, epitomes, and fragments. None of the narrative histories were written by authors with any direct role in the imperial grand strategy-making process. Each author has his own bias, so his interpretations of motives for any imperial decision must be treated critically, tested first on the basis of the facts that he himself provides. Ammianus Marcellinus, an aide-de-camp to the Roman field commander Ursicinus, may have had an adjutant's eye-view of policy making, but if so, it adds less than we might hope to his conception of strategy than it does to his perception of court politics; see N. J. E. Austin, *Ammianus on Warfare: An Investigation into Ammianus' Military Knowledge* (Brussels: Latomus, 1979); John Matthews, *The Roman Empire of Ammianus* (London: Duckworth, 1989), 8–32.

82. Four outstanding collections of Roman military documents from various frontiers are Bowman and Thomas, *Vindolanda: The Latin Writing Tablets*; Fink, *Roman Military Records on Papyrus*; Bell et al., *The Abinnaeus Archive*; and Gilliam, "The Roman Army in Dura."

fortifications. It also illuminates the dispersion of Roman culture within and beyond the recognized political boundaries of the state, and the nature of the material cultures outside the Roman borders.

Of these sources, the narrative histories, biographies, and letters best record the broad scope of decision makers' activities and describe the environment in which policy was formulated. The epigraphic and archaeological data pertain to specific people, military units, or places, often outside of the central decision-making apparatus. There are only a handful of collections of documentary evidence that come directly from the highest echelons of imperial administration (rather than scattered findings or local archives). These include the Roman law codes and the *Notitia Dignitatum*, the state register of civil and military officials (and the military and administrative units under their control) that dates from some time between A.D. 395 and 423.⁸³

Literary and artistic sources can supplement this material. Panegyrics, speeches to honor emperors on formal occasions, provide us with an emperor's "official policy line." Like modern propaganda or official statements, these speeches often do not reveal the true rationale behind the decisions or actions of the emperor, and the factual information they provide is not always accurate. They do, however, illuminate the ideology of empire, especially in the late period. Panegyrics often contain incidental information by which to glimpse the policies of the emperor. It is possible to understand the emperor's public image by supplementing these panegyrics with the official art and coinage of an emperor's reign.⁸⁴

From the standpoint of grand strategy, the most important point is that the surviving sources inform us less directly about decision makers'

83. The third-century codes must be reconstructed by modern scholars, although the fifth-century Theodosian Code and sixth-century Codex Justinianus survive. Clyde Pharr, ed., *The Theodosian Code and Novels, and Sirmondian Constitutions* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1952); for its method of construction, see John Matthews, *Laying Down the Law: A Study of the Theodosian Code* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2000); P. Krueger, ed., *Codex Justinianus* (Berlin: Weidmann, 1895); S. P. Scott, ed. and trans., *The Civil Law*, 7 vols. (Cincinnati: Central Trust Company, 1932); O. Seeck, ed., *Notitia Dignitatum* (Berlin: Weidmann, 1876); for the date of the *Notitia*, see Jones, *The Later Roman Empire, 284–602*, 2: Appendix 1.

84. For the late empire, see Sabine MacCormack, *Art and Ceremony in Late Antiquity* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981); Michael McCormick, *Eternal Victory: Triumphal Rulership in Late Antiquity, Byzantium, and the Early Medieval West* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1986); Peter Heather and David Moncur, trans. and eds., *Politics, Philosophy and Empire in the Fourth Century: Select Orations of Themistius* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2001); C. E. V. Nixon and Barbara Saylor Rodgers, eds. and trans., *In Praise of Later Roman Empires: The Panegyrici Latini* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994).

goals and plans than about the military means that the Roman state had at its disposal and how they were used. Roman emperors' goals and objectives, long-range plans, statements of priorities, and justifications for specific decisions allocating particular resources often elude us. We cannot proceed as scholars of modern states do. The study of Roman grand strategy requires a different approach, which nevertheless illuminates the defining issues of that field.

A Different Approach to Roman Imperial Grand Strategy

We can focus our research on resource allocation. The epigraphic, archaeological, and narrative records combined show, with a high degree of resolution, what military units the emperors had and where they were deployed. Narrative sources and inscriptions allow us to interpret how these forces were used. We can trace major troop movements over time. There is no doubt that we have enough information to speak authoritatively about the allocation of the military resources of the state, a vital component of grand strategy. A study of the allocation of military resources, furthermore, can help to illustrate the emperors' *de facto* priorities, if not their abstract goals. It can reveal their perceptions of changing threats. It can even clarify how, generally, they set out to ensure the security and, sometimes, expansion, of their state.

The study of Roman legionary dispositions is hardly new. Emil Ritterling's essay on the legion was published nearly a century ago and remains the most important study of the movement of Roman armies over time.⁸⁵ Ritterling links the transfer of legions to major campaigns (whether deliberate wars of conquest or responses to revolts, incursions, and potential threats). He also intertwines the movement of legions with changes in provincial organization. His work reveals the continuity of legionary deployments. It is often used to show the gradual eastward shift of the Roman legions during the Principate, and thus the evolving prioritization of military concerns in the East. This implicitly supports the very goal of the proposed methodology, recognizing *de facto* shifts in imperial priorities from the changing distribution of troops. The study also permits us to see what disrupts the established distributions, an issue less commonly addressed.

This approach holds a great deal of promise in the context of the modern study of grand strategy. The examination of troop movements allows us, for instance, to consider whether legions in a given province could handle problems that arose there or whether they had to rely on

85. E. Ritterling, "Legio," in *Realencyclopädie für Antike und Christendom* 12 (Hb. 23–24), ed. A. Pauly, G. Wissowa, and W. Kroll (Stuttgart: J. B. Metzlersche, 1924–25), cols. 1186–1837.

reinforcements from other provinces.⁸⁶ This question is important because it hints at the adequacy of the overall Roman military establishment and the accuracy of the Romans' understanding of the internal and external threats they faced. It can also help to answer the question raised by Isaac and others about whether (and when) legionary establishments were intended to meet primarily internal or external threats.

Local legionary establishments largely handled the challenges they faced during Tiberius's reign. Provincial armies put down local military unrest in Gaul, Thrace, and Judaea; exceptionally, Tacfarinas's rebellion in Africa required the temporary dispatch of one legion from a distant province (Pannonia).⁸⁷ Military emergencies in other reigns, however, frequently drew legions from neighboring or distant provinces. For example, under Augustus, legions from the East reinforced the Illyrian army fighting under Tiberius's command in A.D. 7.⁸⁸ Empire-wide legionary movements occurred frequently during Nero's reign. One legion from Moesia reinforced the Syrian legions sometime before A.D. 57, to support Corbulo's campaigns against Parthian influence in Armenia, as did another from the same province around the year 62.⁸⁹ Yet another legion, this time from Pannonia, joined them by the spring of 63.⁹⁰

The divergent paths of Tiberius's and Nero's policies raise questions about how the emperor determined the size of a province's armed forces. Did he attempt to maintain enough military forces in an area to respond locally to potential crises (whether domestic unrest or foreign invasions)? Or did he maintain only enough forces in an area to carry out routine missions, intending to move legions to regions as emergencies necessitated? Whatever the emperors' intentions, these decisions had important consequences for the stability and security of the empire.

Tiberius and Vespasian were the most successful of the emperors in localizing crises, though the latter maintained a different distribution of legions and reinforced provincial military activity with vexillations of nearby legions.⁹¹ (Vexillations were detachments of legions operating independently of their parent unit.) But different goals and methods may have prompted their success. Tiberius's grand strategic posture has generally been regarded as defensive, apart from the early campaigns of Germanicus.⁹² In contrast, Vespasian adopted an aggressive posture on most

86. *Ibid.*, 1242–43, 1259, 1272.

87. *Ibid.*, 1242.

88. *Ibid.*, 1235.

89. *Ibid.*, 1254–55, Legion IV Scythica and the V Macedonica.

90. *Ibid.*, 1256, the XV Apollinaris.

91. *Ibid.*, 1273.

92. Tacitus *Annals* 1.11; 2.26; 4.32; 6.32; Suetonius *Tiberius* 37.4; Mattern, *Rome and the Enemy*, 90–91.

frontiers, including Britain, the lower Rhine, Moesia, and Commagene.⁹³ One wonders if the routine, localized conquests of Vespasian (in contrast to the major expeditions of his Julio-Claudian predecessors) helped to diminish the frequency of defensive emergencies and thus minimize the inter-provincial troop movements. Was the empire more successful when it adopted a tactical, operational, or strategic offensive or defensive posture? Did different types of threats condition that posture? Did individual emperors decide to maintain a consistent posture empire-wide, regardless of threats?

Withdrawal of troops from a province to meet contingencies elsewhere in the empire could destabilize its security.⁹⁴ Emperors, therefore, frequently tried to shift units from even further afield to the depleted garrisons in order to maintain a constant presence. Nero transferred one legion from Dalmatia to Moesia to prevent denuding the Lower Danube when he sent legions from there to Corbulo in the East.⁹⁵ A legion from Spain (X Gemina) temporarily occupied Carnuntum, the vacated Pannonian camp of the Parthian-bound XV Apollinaris.⁹⁶ The Moesian force was apparently still too weak to carry out its missions, however, and sometime after the Parthian settlement in 66—in or by spring 68—Nero transferred the III Gallica from Syria to Moesia to reinforce it.⁹⁷ The domino effect of reinforcements for Nero's Parthian campaign affected the West very little—it removed one legion from Spain, but did not otherwise change the distribution of troops there. Local forces ably quelled serious unrest in Britain, Gaul, and Spain.⁹⁸ Likewise, in A.D. 45, Claudius transferred a legion (the XIII Gemina) from Germany to Pannonia to replace another (the VIII Augusta) as it left the latter province and moved to threatened Moesia.⁹⁹

Similar successive reinforcements occurred when emperors launched major offensive expeditions. Trajan thus transferred the XIV Gemina to Vindobona (modern Vienna) to replace the XIII Gemina as it deployed to the Dacian War.¹⁰⁰ The larger scale of his troop transfers in support of the mobilization for the Parthian War, however, destabilized the provinces to their rear. Trajan redeployed many legions and vexillations from the East and the Danube to secure the new provinces in Armenia, Mesopotamia, and Assyria, but, by depleting the regular garrisons in the rear, facilitated the outbreak and spread of a Jewish rebellion from

93. Ritterling, "Legio," 1272–73.

94. *Ibid.*, 1255.

95. *Ibid.*, 1255; the VII Claudia Pia Fidelis replaced the IV Scythica.

96. *Ibid.*, 1256.

97. *Ibid.*, 1258.

98. *Ibid.*, 1259.

99. *Ibid.*, 1250–51.

100. *Ibid.*, 1281.

Mesopotamia through Egypt and Cyrene.¹⁰¹ Several western provinces were also destabilized in part as a result of Trajan's legionary shifts.¹⁰²

Patterns emerge from this evidence and illuminate central themes in the study of Roman grand strategy. The successive replacement of units shows that some emperors made a calculated decision that specific areas always needed a garrison of a certain size, whereas others could be reduced to meet emergencies. This, in turn, may show that they judged certain provinces to be more internally stable or less externally threatened than others. The unrest that followed Trajan's troop movements during the Parthian War, on the other hand, emphasizes how tightly interconnected were even the distant provinces of the Roman Empire with those on the frontier.

This examination of the patterns of legionary movements also highlights another problem with Luttwak's interpretation of Roman grand strategic history. The elasticity of the imperial responses to external challenges did not result from the physical location of legions and the design of frontier fortifications. When elasticity existed at all, it resulted instead from the emperor's ability to move legions to locations that needed them without destabilizing other areas. The flow of legions across the empire in the Principate, therefore, shows both the flexibility inherent in the legionary structure and its limits. The size of a province's legionary force partially determined its stability, as did a wide variety of independent factors, including internal politics and foreign threats. Since those factors changed over time independently of the legionary deployments, the elasticity of any particular legionary distribution was likely to be transitory.¹⁰³

Did emperors think that their system was flexible or fragile? Answers to this question can emerge, in part, from their preparations for major offensive operations. Did they consider large-scale wars of conquest so

101. *Ibid.*, 1285–86.

102. *Ibid.*, 1286.

103. The creation of the central field army in the late empire, is, in part, a different, institutionalized solution to a problem that earlier emperors resolved by transferring units, and grand strategists can speculate about whether such a field army would have improved response to contingencies in the Principate. In any case, the concentration of major field armies under the command of emperors for defensive purposes rather than conquest, such as those of Marcus Aurelius and Lucius Verus, signifies a departure from the earlier system of piecemeal legionary transfers to meet contingencies and deliberate concentration of legions, often through transfer, to permit conquest. Centralized military institutions are not necessarily more effective. A central field army may respond more slowly at first, but provide more power in the intermediate term. On the other hand, the efficacy of this setup can only be evaluated in the context of the ability of the provincial garrisons to handle their tasks. Centralization is not successful if the provinces are so denuded that they are constantly threatened, and the central field army is always responding to successive crises.

important that they did not care whether these occasionally triggered or exacerbated problems elsewhere? Or did they make arrangements to prevent such outbreaks?

Emperors prepared for conquest in a number of different ways. Sometimes, local legions engaged in conquest without reinforcement, as did those accompanying Germanicus's relatively spontaneous campaign across the Rhine in A.D. 16–18.¹⁰⁴ Usually, however, a major troop concentration preceded such a war, and some emperors even raised new legions.¹⁰⁵ Caligula thus concentrated many legions from diverse provinces to support his campaign in Germany, including legions from Spain and Illyricum, and a vexillation from Egypt, in addition to the eight legions from the Rhine.¹⁰⁶ He raised two new legions which also participated.¹⁰⁷ Likewise, Nero raised a new legion in 66, and he soon began to concentrate legions and vexillations from the West (Britain, Germany, Illyricum, and Africa) in Alexandria for an expedition to the south or east.¹⁰⁸ Domitian raised a new legion for his German campaign.¹⁰⁹ Trajan raised two, either to replace two legions lost under Domitian or to support a Dacian War (or both).¹¹⁰

Raising new legions before beginning a major expedition did not prevent emperors from also concentrating legions from multiple provinces (often distant from the base of operations). They may have raised them to garrison new provinces, rather than to win the war.¹¹¹ Yet the newly raised and temporarily concentrated legions did not always meet the needs of conquest, as the failure of the German campaigns shows. And Nero's massive troop concentrations from the West (while the legions of the East faced the Jewish revolt), partially precipitated the crisis that would end his reign.¹¹² Some emperors, therefore, either misjudged the stability of the provinces they were denuding of troops or cared more for their wars of conquest than for maintaining that stability.

Other grand strategic patterns emerge from studying how emperors redistributed legions at the end of a campaign. Often, transferred legions returned from defensive campaigns to their original provinces: thus Tiberius returned the IX Hispania to Pannonia after it had fought Tacfarinas; after Corbulo's campaign in the East, Nero returned a legion

104. Tacitus *Annals* 1.49 ff.

105. J. C. Mann, "The Raising of New Legions During the Principate," *Hermes: Zeitschrift für klassische Philologie* 91, no. 4 (October 1963): 483–89.

106. Ritterling, "Legio," 1248.

107. *Ibid.*, 1245–48, the XV and the XXII Primigenia.

108. *Ibid.*, 1259–60; the new legion is the I Italia.

109. *Ibid.*, 1276, the I Flavia, soon known as Minervia.

110. *Ibid.*, 1277–78, 1280–81.

111. Mann, "Raising of New Legions," 31.

112. Ritterling, "Legio," 1260.

from Syria to Moesia (albeit the III Gallica, rather than the IV Scythica, its previous occupant).¹¹³ Yet even after offensive expeditions, many legions returned to their home provinces, as did the bulk of Claudius's expeditionary force to Britain and the I Minervia after Trajan's Dacian War. In both cases, however, some of the expeditionary force remained to garrison new territory, resulting in a permanent shift.¹¹⁴

Scholars have often noted how constant the number of legions remained, hovering between twenty-five and thirty-three at its extremes, and at twenty-nine or thirty during most reigns.¹¹⁵ The size of provincial armies remained similarly consistent in the period from Tiberius to Domitian: seven or eight legions along the Rhine frontier (which Domitian reorganized into the Upper and Lower German provinces); three or four in Britain (from its acquisition by Claudius); one in Africa; two in Egypt; one or two in Spain; about seven on the Danube (distributed differently among the evolving component provinces of Illyricum, Dalmatia, Pannonia, and Moesia); and four to six in the evolving component provinces of the East (Syria, Cappadocia, and Judaea). The units garrisoning certain provinces sometimes remained for the entire Principate; in other cases, the number remained constant but the units changed.¹¹⁶

We have already discussed temporary changes in a province's garrison to meet contingencies. Over time, the distribution did shift permanently. The incorporation of newly conquered provinces obviously required the reallocation of legions, often from long-pacified to newer provinces. The acquisition of Britain permanently reduced the garrison of Spain to one legion. The acquisition of Judaea permanently increased the garrison in the East by one legion; after temporary shifts, the acquisition of Arabia ultimately reduced the garrison of Egypt to a single legion.¹¹⁷ Trajan reorganized the conquered territories of the East into the provinces of Armenia Major, Mesopotamia, and Assyria, each of which required a substantial garrison—at least two or three legions apiece—which could have been provided by moving some legions from the region eastward, transferring units from West to East, or by raising new legions. In fact, four Danube legions remained in the new territory until Hadrian abandoned Roman claims to the lands beyond the Tigris and Euphrates.¹¹⁸

113. *Ibid.*, 1243, 1258; Ritterling speculates that the latter movement occurred either for political reasons (to separate the legions that Corbulo had commanded) or for convenience, as the III Gallica had the shortest line of march back to Moesia. See Tacitus *Annals* 4.23 for the return of IX Hispania even before the war was over.

114. Ritterling, "Legio," 1249–50, 1283–84, 1364–65.

115. *Ibid.*, 1362–66.

116. *Ibid.*

117. *Ibid.*

118. *Ibid.*, 1284–85.

At the beginning of Hadrian's reign, the Roman Empire had temporarily exceeded the size that its legionary establishment could protect. Hadrian did not expand the force, but rather contracted the empire. Perhaps he did not think that the Roman state could sustain more than thirty legions. That the emperors saw a practical cap on the size of the army can inform our consideration of Roman manpower policies and economic conditions, both of which might have persuaded Hadrian that he should relinquish his conquests rather than raise and pay for more troops. Otherwise, he might have thought that he could not raise new legions quickly enough to secure the new provinces without compromising the others. The generally defensive posture of his reign is compatible with both explanations, though most scholars recognize the likelihood that available funds limited the size of the legionary establishment.¹¹⁹

Redistribution of troops also occurred to meet changing threats, as the transfer of forces from the Rhine to the Danube during Domitian's reign demonstrates. After concentrating troops for his aggressive German War in 83, Domitian began to shift legions from Britain and the Rhine to the Danube frontier, which the Dacians and Sarmatians were attacking. Nine legions remained in Dalmatia, Pannonia, and Moesia at the end of his reign; two others were lost there (the V *Alaudae* and the XXI *Rapax*).¹²⁰ To facilitate this permanent redeployment, he divided Moesia into two provinces (in A.D. 85 or 86) and reorganized the Rhine frontier into two provinces (in A.D. 90).¹²¹ This suggests that Domitian envisioned a permanent change of policy on the Rhine, abandoning aggressive expansion there. Three legions, not four, garrisoned Britain thereafter, and by the beginning of Trajan's reign, four legions, not eight, garrisoned the Germanies.¹²² The permanent build-up on the Danube continued in Trajan's reign, as did a temporary concentration for the Dacian Wars.¹²³ After his success there, Trajan maintained the three legions in Lower Moesia, two in Upper Moesia, at least two in Dacia, and four in the now divided Pannonian provinces.¹²⁴ The Danube region now had eleven or twelve legions; the Rhine, only four (whereas previously each had seven or eight).¹²⁵ Though Trajan transferred four Danube

119. See Mattern, *Rome and the Enemy*, 126ff.

120. Ritterling, "Legio," 1277–78.

121. *Ibid.*, 1277; for the dates of provincial creation and division, see the map "Provinces and Frontiers of the Empire to 106 AD," in Tim Cornell and John Matthews, *Atlas of the Roman World* (New York: Checkmark Books, 1982), 107.

122. Ritterling, "Legio," 1364–65.

123. *Ibid.*, 1280–81.

124. *Ibid.*, 1283, 1364–65.

125. *Ibid.*, 1364–66.

legions to the East to support the creation of the new provinces, Hadrian returned them, thus restoring the Danube's strong complement.¹²⁶

It is not possible, of course, to answer all of the questions about Roman grand strategy simply by exploring the movement of Roman troops. Even this cursory examination of the simplest level of troop movement (focusing on legions rather than on the more complex question of the movement of sub-legionary units), nevertheless shows that the patterns that emerge from those troop movements offer a great deal of insight into the perceptions, intentions, and priorities of Roman emperors.¹²⁷

The study of legionary transfers shows above all the synergistic relationship among the empire's frontiers. The legions in a province could not always handle problems without reinforcement. When a province's complement needed assistance, it created potential military problems in other regions. The emperors faced the fundamental grand strategic problem of balancing risk and opportunity across the entire empire. Attempts to do so as efficiently as possible (with what Luttwak might call "economy of force") meant that the emperors had a relatively small margin of error. Increasing threats intensified the problem, as did provincial mismanagement, economic crisis, and demographic shifts. A threat that could at other times be met by troop transfer and the temporary denuding of provinces became a crisis in such circumstances, even in the Principate.

Conclusion

The Roman emperors over time developed various methods and institutions to meet threats and seize opportunities without endangering provincial security. Transferring entire legions to problem spots is one such method. Others are familiar to scholars of the Roman army: the development of expeditionary armies (to concentrate legions from multiple provinces for conquest); the detachment of vexillations from legions (so that some of the unit could remain in garrison with its infrastructure); the increasing use of auxiliaries; the permanent garrisoning of troops along fortified frontiers; and finally the development of standing, central, mobile field armies. These institutional developments within the Roman army are connected to the study of grand strategy, for they arose from emperors' attempts to solve grand strategic problems and influenced the way emperors could respond to them.

126. *Ibid.*, 1284–85, 1364–66.

127. For the auxiliaries, which this study must ultimately incorporate, see John Spaul, *Cohors 2: The Evidence for and a Short History of the Auxiliary Infantry Units of the Imperial Roman Army* (Oxford: B.A.R. International Series, 2000).

Luttwak conceives of these institutional changes as a series of systems designed to defend the empire. The changes are better studied, however, as various responses to the same problem, namely, how to allocate limited military resources so that the emperor could liberate sufficient combat power to act either offensively or defensively in a given area or areas without compromising the security of the rest of his state.

The patterns of troop movements also show clearly that imperial decision-making about grand strategic issues occurred even without visible long-term planning. Emperors restored distributions even after intervening events such as wars, rebellions, and imperial successions had disturbed them. Enduring structural factors, such as the sustainable size of the military establishment, surely produced some of the consistency of legionary distribution. But the evolution of that distribution demonstrates that emperors made conscious decisions about how to distribute their forces. Emperors worried about the stability or security of provinces when they conducted major operations. The successive replacement of legions moving off to war shows that emperors thought about how their activities on one frontier (in crisis or for conquest) affected the whole empire. Emperors made decisions about how to allocate resources to meet objectives empire-wide, and thus definitely thought about grand-strategic issues.

The grand strategy of the Roman Empire can be studied as long as we ask questions that the available sources support. To say that the Roman Empire had no grand strategy because it had no long-term plan is to define the concept incorrectly and condemn the field of grand strategy for all time—virtually no modern states have adhered to plans for periods lasting more than a few decades at a time, periods that historians of Rome will rarely consider “long-term.” The contingent realities of foreign policy often overwhelm the stated goals of modern countries, or at least, strongly condition their response to crisis. Roman emperors set priorities among objectives and allocated resources among them, and thus made grand strategic decisions.