

**THE ROMAN DEFENSE STRATEGY ON THE DANUBE LIMES IN LATE ANTIQUITY,  
ACCORDING TO HISTORICAL SOURCES OF ANTIQUITY**

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**Abstract:** *The paper will focus first on the situation on the Roman frontiers after the rule of Diocletian until the death of Theodosius. They will note the measures of the Roman authorities to deal with the increased pressure on the Danube border of the Empire. It will be traced entirely to the ancient authors how to change the location of the Roman legions guarding the border, and the reasons for changing their location. Finally, conclusions will be drawn on the results of Roman countermeasures against barbarian invasions through the Danube limes.*

**Keywords:** *Danube Lime, Late Romanic Empire, Barbarian invasions, Balkan Peninsula.*

**Rezumat:** *Lucrarea are în prim plan situația frontierelor romane după domnia lui Diocletian și până la moartea lui Theodosius. Ea menționează măsurile autorităților romane pentru a face față presiunii crescute asupra frontierei dunărene a Imperiului. Pe baza autorilor antici se urmărește mișcarea legiunilor romane de la frontieră și motivele schimbărilor. În final se vor forma concluzii pe baza rezultatelor contra-măsurilor romane împotriva atacurilor barbare prin limesul dunărean.*

**Cuvinte-cheie:** *limesul dunărean, Imperiul Roman târziu, invazii barbare, Peninsula Balcanică.*

The evolution of the Roman military in the Late Antiquity parallels the political, economical, and social changes that occurred in the Empire during this period. In the early fourth century A.D., the Roman military was a public institution, a force of soldiers and sailors recruited, trained, supplied, and paid by the Roman state through a large and expensive bureaucracy. The Empire in the fourth century and in the early fifth centuries was a 'non-militarized' society. That is, a society in which there is a well-defined distinction between "soldier" and "civilian". All of this was also true of the Roman military of the Principate (27 B.C. - A.D. 235), but much had changed since (синсе) the time of Augustus, Trajan, and Hadrian. The armies of late antiquity were no longer the well-disciplined infantry legions of the first centuries B.C. That military had 'died' during the political and military chaos (кеос) of the Third Century Crisis (A.D. 235-284).<sup>1</sup>

Although, there was some continuity especially in military terminology, the armies of the Late Roman Empire were organized, recruited, deployed, trained, and armed differently from

those of the Principate. From the reign of Constantine (306-337), the Roman army was organized into two groups with distinct functions, which, according to some historians, were elements of an overall defense-in-depth strategy.

Frontier troops (limitanei) were stationed in a system of fortifications along the borders, while mobile field forces (comitatenses) were billeted in the cities and towns of regions deemed most vulnerable to attack. The frontier troops were designed to deal with and discourage low intensity threats, such as raiding across the border, and to impede the progress of major incursions to allow sufficient time for the mobile field forces to respond and intercept invaders within Roman territory. Frontier and field forces included both infantry and cavalry contingents that were organized into units and characterized by specified специфайд ranks with defined command structures that culminated, at least in theory, in the emperor.<sup>2</sup>

Cavalry, which in the late Republic and early Empire had been supplied, for the most part, by foreign allies (auxiliaries), was now fully

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<sup>1</sup> Elton, H. *Frontiers of the Roman Empire*. London, 1996, p. 45.

<sup>2</sup> Gudea, N. *The Defensive System of Roman Dacia*. – *Britannia*, 10, 1979, 63.

integrated into the Roman military; its importance and prestige grew during the fifth and sixth centuries, in part because of the need for greater strategic and tactical mobility that horses provided, and, in part, because of encounters with nomadic horsed people such as the Huns. Rome's armies were complemented by a standing navy, with fleets based in ports along the frontier's rivers (most notably the Danube and Rhine) and in the port cities of Italy.

### The First Line of Defense - The Limes

Limes was a border defense or delimiting system that marked the boundaries of the Roman Empire. The Latin noun *limes*, in plural - *limites*. The word *limes* was utilized by Latin writers to denote a marked or fortified frontier. This sense has been adapted and extended by modern historians concerned with the frontiers of the Roman Empire: e.g. Hadrian's Wall in the north of England is sometimes styled the Limes Britannicus, the frontier of the Roman province of Arabia facing the desert is called the Limes Arabicus, and so forth.

It would be a misunderstanding that there ever was one limes system of defense. There was a difference between the solid limes of Britain ("Hadrian's Wall"), and the more open system of forts in Syria. Still, there are some similarities.

The grand strategy of the empire was, in extreme defensive. The Sahara, Euphrates, Danube, and Rhine were natural frontiers, and it was exceptional when the Romans launched new campaigns of conquest. If territory was added, it was to shorten the frontier, or to improve a vulnerable part of the frontier. The exception that proves the rule is Trajan's conquest of Dacia.

The basic principle of defense was deterrence: wherever the enemy attacked, he would always find a professional, heavily armed Roman force that often outnumbered him. Except for the desert frontier, the limes usually consisted of a clear line where the enemy had to stay away from (e.g., Hadrian's Wall or the river Danube).<sup>3</sup>

However, sometimes the line was attacked. The soldiers in the watchtowers signaled the

invasion to the nearby forts. The watchtowers themselves were lost, but the invaders would immediately have to face with Roman forces from nearby forts.

Almost always, this was sufficient to deal with the situation. If the attackers were able to reach and loot a city, they would be massacred on their way home. The final act of every attempt to attack the empire was Roman retaliation against the native population.

A combination of force and diplomacy was used to control the border.

The Danube Limes was not a solid wall defending the Empire's frontier. Rather it was a series of fortified cities, small forts and watchtowers. The Limes was porous with assorted invading Slavs, Huns or Avars pouring through on raids dedicated to looting or conquest. In theory the Roman / Byzantine strong points would slow down invaders allowing for troops stationed close by to push the enemy back over the border.

### The Danube Limes

The frontier of the Roman Empire, from the Danube to the Black Sea, played a crucial role in making and breaking emperors and protecting Roman society along its course.

Along the Danube from Bavaria to the Black Sea there is a frontier system with fortresses and fortes built by the Roman army such as Carnuntum (Austria), Aquincum (Budapest, Hungary), Cappidava, Viminacium (near Belgrade, Serbia) or Novae (Svistov, Bulgaria). Together with hundreds of watchtowers and large urban settlements they are part of an impressive military machine.

The river itself was the most dominant element of the frontier system, used as a demarcation line against the Barbarian world to the north and as a fortified transport corridor.

The forts, situated mostly on the right side of the river, acted as check-points to control traffic in and out of the empire. Their ruins, above and below ground, visible or non-visible, are often in remarkable shape and well integrated in the landscape.

The final structuring of the Danube Limes continued for the most part of the I century BC. The start of the process of its creation begins with the triumphs of Mark Litzinii Kras, governor of the province of Macedonia, against

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<sup>3</sup> Luttwak, E. The Grand Strategy of the Roman Empire from the First century AD to the Third. Baltimore, 1976, p. 33.

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the bastarns 28-27 BC. During these trips, the Roman troops reached the lower reaches on the Danube, where they create two fortified areas with centers, the future cities of Eskus and Ratsiaria. In the period of 86 to 89, Emperor Domitian divided the province of Moesia of Upper Moesia and Lower Mussia. In the year 103 Emperor Mark Ullpius Trajan divided the province of Pannonia in Upper Pannonia and Lower Pannonia. In 107 years after the The Dacian defeat of Trajan forms the Dacia province north of the Danube. It exists until 272, when Emperor Aurelian drew the province's population south of the river and again returns the Roman border along the Danube.<sup>4</sup>

Initially, eight legions were located there. The conquest of the Dacians by Emperor Mark Ullpius Traian increases the total length of the limes and further complicates its defense. In the II century on the Danube limes have already dislocated 10 legions, and in the middle of the century their number has grown to 12. By comparison, the number of legions located in the Ephratite Limes and in Egypt, which appears a strategic part of it ranges from 6 to 8, only in exceptional cases during wartime increases to 10 or more.

This large number of defense troops proves the very important importance of the Danube Limes for the control and protection of the Roman Empire. This trend is a function of the strategic importance of the Danube Limes for the survival of the Empire. Legions, located along the Danube River, strategically defend the most important and neuralgic point for defense of the empire. They are responsible for the defense of the Balkan Peninsula and the Straits, which is in fact the connection between the West and the East of the State. Located in center of imperial defense infrastructure, they may, if necessary, as quickly as possible to the legions protecting the Rhine or the Euphrates. At the same time through the area they defended crosses the strategic military route via Militaris, also known as via Diagonalis, which allows the legions from the Rhine to be transferred as quickly as possible Ephrat Limes and back.<sup>5</sup>

The information arriving at us from the antiquity

referring to the Danube limes has a certain fragmentation. The ancient authors mention (somewhat logically) the role and importance of limes only when it does or does not serve its purpose - to protect the Roman border.

This is a list of ancient authors who, in their historiographical writings, mention the Danube limes and the military conflicts that occur in its range.

#### ANCIENT SOURCES:

1. **Cassius Dio** or **Dio Cassius**. In his "Roman history," Dion Cassius reports on the establishment of the Limes on the Danube after the successful war against the Dacians. In the book LXVIII he describes in detail the resistance of Dacian king Detsebal against Emperor Trajan and the use of the Danube as a defensive barrier against the Romans. It is described the construction of perhaps the first bridge over the river - a work of Rome - which was used by Trajan to successfully transfer the legions through the Danube.

2. **History of the Roman Emperors (Historia Augusta)** covers the biographies of Roman emperors, heroes, usurpers, and contenders, from Adrian to Numerian, that is, from 117 to 284. The editors of this story are six: Elie Spartan, Julius Capitolin, Vulcatian Galician and Trebelli Polion, who worked during the days of Diocletian, Elie Lampridius and Flavius Vospisk, who worked during the days of Constantine Chlor and Konstantin I. In this work with collective authorship, one can clearly see how civil wars lead to this limes (not only the Danube) weakening its protective functions and even ceasing to fulfill its basic functions - to defend Pax Romana.

3. **Lactantius**. In his famous work *De mortibus persecutorum* ("For the death of persecutors"), he confirms the thesis that it was the wars between the contenders for the imperial throne Maximian and Licinius to bring troops out of limes to participate in civil wars.

4. **Sext Aurelius Viktor** was born in Africa, probably at the beginning of the 4th century. His book *Liber de Caesaribus* is a continuation of the history of Titus Livius and exhibits the events of Emperor Augustus to Emperor Constantine II (360). In it, among others, information is given about the history of Thrace and the Danube limes in the III and IV A.D.

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<sup>4</sup> Elton, H. *Frontiers of the Roman ...* p. 78.

<sup>5</sup> For more information Wilkes, J. *Roman Legions and their Fortresses in the Danube Lands (First to Third Centuries)*. – In: Brewer, R. (ed.). *Roman Fortresses and their Legions*. London-Cardiff, 2000.

5. Under the title **Panegyrici Latini**, a collection of 12 commendable speeches has come to us about different emperors: from Trajan to Theodosius I. The authorship of the speeches is very controversial. Some authors know: Mamertin, Pacat, Ewmeni, Naxari, but for them the data is scarce. The abovementioned authors, in their commendations about the various emperors during the 3-4 centuries, refer to the actions of the Lords' leaders. though exaggerated, their actions show that border protection remains an important activity for Roman rulers.

6. **Rufin**. Presbyter and church writer in the 4th century, Rufin has left considerable literary heritage mainly from translated literature. He was born between 340 and 345 in Concordia, near the town of Aquileia in northern Italy. In Rufin's works, there is an increasing pressure from the Gothic tribes on the Danube Limes and the difficulties encountered by Rome in protecting its river border.

7. **Public Herrenius Dexip** is the most remarkable Greek historian from the second half of the 3rd century AD. From the scant evidence of his life, he saw that he played an important role in the public life of his hometown of Athens during the time of Emperors Valerian, Gallien, Claudius II and Aurelian, between 253 and 275. It is assumed that he was born about 210 years old. In Athens, Dexipus was a priest and occupied various prominent positions. In recent years, management of Emperor Gallien, probably in 267, Dexip repulsed the assault of the German tribal Heruli against Athens with a hasty army of 2,000. His most famous works are "Chronicle" and "Skitika". His testimonies are proof of the failure of "the defense system in depth", because barbarians undisturbed reach all the way to Athens, where they are repelled by the city army and not by the regular army.

8. The Roman historian **Eutropius**, whose life we know very little, lived in the 4th century. He died after 370. He held important administrative positions. Only a small historical work is preserved from his works "Brief history of the founding of Rome". It presents a brief account of all Roman history from the founding of Rome to the death of Emperor Yovian (364). His work describes the abandonment of the Dacian province conquered by Trajan by Emperor Gallien. The Danube becomes a natural boundary of the Empire.

9. **Zosim** has written a historical piece of books, under the title "A New Story", in which he intended to expose the history of Roman Emperors from the time of August to his own days. He managed to bring his exposition to 410. Zosim describes in detail the Gothic invasions of the Balkan Peninsula and the struggles of the Roman Emperors, Decius, Claudius II, Constantine I and Licinius, to repel the barbarians. At the same time, Zosim also tells about the attempts of some of the emperors to attract the barbarian tribes as mercenaries in their armies.

10. **Rufii Fest**. In 369 a brief account of the most important facts of Roman history, dedicated to Emperor Valente, was drawn up. The manuscripts as his author point to Rufius Fest, who seems to have held important posts in the Roman administration at Valente. The most important moments of Fest's work are information about the creation of two new profiles called Down and Upper Dacia, which should create the illusion that the old Dacia province continues to exist even though it was abandoned to Gallien. He also reports that border troops of the Danube Limes were taken by Caesar Maximian to fight on the Persian border, which shows the deficiency of troops in the Empire.

11. **Eusebius** is believed to be the author of the excerpt describing the siege of Salonika by the Goths. The author of this excerpt to us has not reached any other evidence than that reported by Evagrius, namely that he wrote a "History", where he exposed the events from the time of August to the death of an imp. Karr in 283. In view of this, it can be concluded that Eusebius would have lived during Emperor Diocletian, meaning between 284 and 305.

12. **Ammianus Marcellinus** is the most significant Roman historian after Tacitus. He was born in Antioch about 330 years ago and came from a prominent Greek family. He was still young in the army, where he was one of Ursicin's closest conceiences, Constance II's famous commander. At Julian, he took part in his march against the Alamans and later against the Persians. After Julian's death (363), he returned to his hometown, and soon after 378 he moved to Rome. He is believed to have died at 400. In book thirty-one, Amian exposed Roman history from the reign of Emperor Nerva (96) as far as the Tacitus Stories, until the death of Valente (378). However, only the

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second part of the work is preserved, XIV to n. XXXI, in which the Amian Contemporary Events from 353 to 378 are told. Marcellin's accounts of the Danube Limes are especially valuable because he talks about the events that took place on the border as direct witnesses or learning from direct eyewitnesses. He is the author who points out without hesitation the cause of the collapse of the Roman defense system - the civil wars and that Valent allows the numerous Gothic tribes to cross the Danube limes without resistance from the Romans.

13. **Isidore Young from Seville**, was born in Cartagena (Spain) in 560. In 601 he became Bishop of Sevilla and died in 636. Of his numerous works for us are important his "History of the Goths, the Vandals and the Swords", complemented by the so-called "Spanish sequel", written in the 8th century by an unknown author afterwards. Isidore follows the path of the Barbarian tribe to the limbs and their (often successful) attempts to overcome it.

14. **Jordanes** is a 6th-century Ostrogothic historian who lived in Moesia. His book, later called "Getica" / *De origine actibusque Getarum* - About the origins and deeds of the Goths (Goths), written around 551 and based on the lost history of Cassiodorus, is a major source for the Early History of the Goths. The maternal line comes from the genus of King Theodorich. In his work, he sets forth the Gothic story in detail, starting from a description of their native island - Skandza Island (presumably due to the sound resemblance that it is today's Scandinavia). Then he describes their resettlements to the Black Sea and their defeat. It also describes the creation of the Ostrogothic Kingdom in Italy. He also gives valuable insights on the Slavs.

15. **Evnapius** - a poet and historian - was born in Sardis about 345 years ago. He spent most of his life in his hometown and died at 420. Two essays are known from Evnapius: *The Life of the Sophists*, preserved in full, and "Historical Remembrance" in 14 books, to which we belong only sampling. Evnapius describes how the population of Moesia gradually replaces its ethnic composition and how the barbarians displace the indigenous peoples and settle in the lands between the Danube and the Balkan Mountains.

16. **Claudius Claudian** is the last significant representative of ancient poetry. He wrote both

in Greek and in Latin. The latest information about his life is up to 404 years. We owe it to him the interesting fact that a former Roman legion - the *Greutungi* - made up of barbarian soldiers and formed along the Danube, deserts the ranks of the Roman army and ravages Minor Asia.

17. **Malh** was a Byzantine historian in the late 5th century, probably from Philadelphia in the Roman province of Arabia. He writes in Ancient Greek the history "Byzantiaka" for the time of Emperor Constantine I the Great to 473- 480, from which only fragments are preserved. Malh described the period of total disorganization of the Roman defense system along the Danube, and the withdrawal of the Roman defensive lines around Constantinople and the abandonment of the Barbarian invaders in the Balkans.

18. **Prisk Panianski** (also known as Prisk Thracian) is a late Byzantine sophist and historian who lived in the 5th century. In 448 he accompanied Maximin, Ambassador of Theodosius II to Attila's court. Later, he made trips to Rome, Damascus and Alexandria, accompanying Byzantine official visits. During the reign of Marcian (450-457) he took part in missions in Arabia and Egypt. Prisk was the author of historical work (Byzantine history), probably covering the period of Attila's coming to Zeno's (433-474). Prisk describes the Huns' hegemony over the Eastern Roman Empire and the lack of sympathetic force in its rulers. Interesting is his statement that the Danube continues to play the role of a psychological boundary between the Roman and Barbarian worlds. This is evidenced by the fact that the ambassadors of Rome are welcomed on the banks of the great river and from there are escorted to Attila. At that time the limes did not perform defensive functions and the barbarians passed it without problems.

19. **Publius Flavius VEGETIUS Renatus**, *De re militari* (383-450). Most influential handbook on warfare and military organization throughout the Middle Ages. Vegetius produced a summa on Roman warfare by culling earlier Roman sources for what they have to say about training, recruitment, strategy, tactics, siege warfare. The purpose of the manual was, literally, to reform the Roman army by returning it to what it had once been: a highly disciplined and drilled professional

force. Point: military victory comes from training and drill; the best armies are those with integrated tactical arms.

20. **Notitia dignitatum et administrationum omnium tam civilium quam militarium in partibus Orientis et Occidentis** – Administrative list of Roman civilian and military officials in the east and the west in the early fifth century. From the titles of military

officials we can reconstruct a rough idea of the size and disposition of Late Roman forces. Extremely detailed descriptions of military units, the rank of their commanders, and the location of military units allow for important conclusions to be drawn on the strategy of late Roman generals to protect the Danube limes.

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