# BABEŞ-BOLYAI UNIVERSITY THE FACULTY OF HISTORY AND PHILOSOPHY

# THE FRONTIER DYNAMICS OF THE ROMAN EMPIRE IN THE AGE OF THE PRINCIPATE

- Ph.D. thesis abstract –

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#### **KEY WORDS**

border, limes, Latin authors, the Roman Empire, provinces, military roads, the Early Principate, military aspects, fortifications, territory, control, economic relations, enemies, geographical features, Hadrian's Wall, german provinces, defence strategy, frontier dynamics.

#### SYNTHESIS OF THE MAIN PARTS OF THE THESIS

#### INTRODUCTION

The present paper represents the result of five years of research within the framework of the doctoral studies offered by the Doctoral School "Istorie. Civilizație. Cultură" ("History. Civilization. Culture") of the Faculty of History and Philosophy, Babeş-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca, under the guidance of university professor Ioan Piso.

Entitled "The frontier dynamics of the Roman Empire during the Principate", our research aims to map out new directions in the understanding and in-depth analysis of the Roman frontiers.

The goal of the present PhD thesis is to present a new perspective concerning the Roman borders during the early Principate. We will refer to the Roman period of the  $1^{st}$  and  $2^{nd}$  centuries AD, starting from the end of emperor Augustus' reign (14 AD) to the reign of the last emperor of the Nerva-Antonine dynasty, Commodus (180 – 192 AD).

The paper is structured in four main chapters, each comprising several subchapters, depending on the themes which are treated. It also comprises the introductory part, the conclusions, maps and the bibliography.

The research method that we used includes the discussing of the essential frontier related concepts. Therefore, we defined such concepts as: *limes, fines, Imperium sine fine* etc. We aimed for the comprehension of the discussed concepts and of their roles within the Roman Empire's frontier dynamics.

The Roman borders experienced a vast development during the first two centuries of our era. During emperor Hadrian's rule (117-138 AD) the Empire's boundaries were marked visibly on the land: in Britannia by Hadrian's wall; in Africa by the fortification system known as *Fossatum Africae* and in the province Germannia: *Agri Decumates*. Comprehending the Roman borders cannot be attained without the knowledge of the frontier dynamics of the Roman provinces. Which means that the specificity of the regional frontier system must be understood by integrating it in the general frontier system of the Empire.

From this perspective, we have deemed it important to present the three major frontiers of the Empire: Hadrian's wall *Fossatum Africae* and *Agri Decumates*. Of course, this approach is but a starting point for the study and the fathoming of other Roman border areas.

In the end, we presented the frontier dynamics of the Dacia province. Their integration in the general dynamics of the Roman Empire frontier system helped us understand the importance of studying the Roman borders from a broad perspective rather than a specific, regional one.

At this phase of the research concerning the Roman frontier dynamics, we can only make a synthesis, which will stand as a starting point for future investigations.

The paper comprises four chapters, with the following structure:

#### II. TIME-LINE OF THE INVESTIGATIONS

In this chapter we presented the historiography of the Roman frontiers. As early as the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the research of the Roman *limes* has been one of utmost concern to the scientists, providing over the 20<sup>th</sup> century extraordinary results from the whole of Europe.

The most consistent approaches and as yet the only surveys of the concept of *limes* and of its territorial expression are to be found in the article by E. Fabricius published in RE (Limes, RE 25, 1926, col. 572-671, on the danubian provinces col. 634-650) and in

the more recent contribution by G. Forni (Limes, E. De Ruggiero (ed.), Dizionario epigrafico di antichità romana IV, Roma, 1958-1962, p. 1074-1280).

Among the prestigious researchers of the Roman frontiers we mention: Whittaker C. R. – Frontiers of the Roman Empire (A Social and Economic Study), 1994; Whittaker C. R Rome and its frontiers: The dynamics of empire 2004; Luttwack E., The grand strategy of the Roman Empire from the first century A. D. to the third, 1979; D. Baatz, Der Romische Limes, Berlin, 2000; S. L. Dyson, The Creation of The Roman Frontier, U. S. A., 1985; Elton H., Frontiers of The Roman Empire, London 1996 etc. The works of these authors have been a landmark in the elaboration of the present thesis.

We have as well considered necessary to outline the historiography of the *limes* of Dacia. On this subject, the studies, articles and monographs of professor N. Gudea (Gudea et alii 1972; Gudea 1979; Gudea 1989; Gudea 1996; Gudea 1997a; Gudea 1997b; Gudea 1997c; Gudea 2000; Gudea 2003 etc.), consecrated both to the castra in Dacia Porolissensis and to the observation and signalling towers on the North-Western *limes* of Dacia, are of primary importance, elucidating all the aspects of the concept of *limes*.

We can therefore conclude that on the basis of the narrative sources there can be drawn new perspectives on the frontier dynamics of the Roman Empire. Further information about the frontier dynamics of the regions situated at the border still remain to be revealed by future archaeological researches.

#### III. THE CONCEPT OF FRONTIER DURING THE EARLY PRINCIPATE

The third part of the paper is dedicated to the concept of frontier during the Early Principate. In the first part of the chapter, we analysed the writings of the Latin authors (T. Livius, Caesar, Tacitus, Cassius Dio, Ammianus Marcellinus). Thus we tried to define the frontier as it arises from the writings of these authors.

The analysis of the works of the Latin authors reveals beyond doubt the fact that the ancient populations had a territory over which they had the conscience of ownership. The situation was different for the territories belonging to the Roman Empire. In this instance,

the ancient sources confirm the existence of the concept of delimited territory. In his fragments about the Roman Empire during emperor Nero, Tacitus stipulates that beyond the boundaries of the Roman territory there was peace. Caesar writes abut the danger of bellicose tribes settling in the vicinity of the Roman territory, deprived of natural geographical defences. It also appears certain that for the Romans the concept of territory integrated the *de iure* quality.

Therefore, if we follow strictly the Latin authors' sources, the frontier means both the natural landmarks bordering the territory belonging to a community and the area owned by the community.

We also analysed in this chapter the interpretations given to the concept of frontier of the Roman Empire.

The dictionaries define the Latin term *limes* as: boundary between two fields, fortified border, or even more generally as road, way, path. The *limes* was in the beginning, during the late Roman Republic, a *way* that marked the limit of the allotments on the land. Later, *limes* got to mean the roads along which the Roman troops advanced into the enemy territory, precisely a fortified military road.

During the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> centuries by *limes* we ought to understand the marked frontiers of the imperial Rome. However, by *limes* we have referred to a strategic defence conception. In order to designate the ensemble of the aspects related to the Roman frontiers, the term 'frontier' should be more appropriate. That way, the term 'frontier' implies all the aspects of the Roman frontier system: economic aspects, military aspects, fortifications, tactical and strategic aspects etc.

Unlike *limes*, the term *fines* rather refers to the internal limits, thus excluding the military power of Rome.

The notion of *imperium sine fine* helps us understand the way in which the Romans conceived the limits of their imperial space. This *imperium sine fine* concept has remained as the central stereotype of a good emperor, proclaimed on coins and by inscriptions and mentioned in the documents. In fact, *imperium sine fine* did not mean for the Roman emperors the unlimited rule of the world, but rather the unlimited right to rule the world.

The modern researchers provide different perspectives on the Roman imperial frontiers. The most complete approaches of the concept of *limes* belong to E. Fabricius (Limes, RE 25, 1926, col. 572-671) and to G. Forni (Limes, E. De Ruggiero (ed.), Dizionario epigrafico di antichità romana IV, Roma, 1958-1962, p. 1074-1280).

- J. C. Mann has theorized exceptionally the military frontier complex and its structures during the Principate, highlighting especially its role of total control (political, economic, commercial). He remarked the view according to which the system of *limes* was based on the speed of mobilization of the troops in a certain point (the speed being ensured by the signals received from the observation system, by the roads ensuring the circulation and by the mobilization of the military units).
- C. R. Whittaker analysed the Roman frontier from an economic, social and military point of view. Whittaker made the first systematic attempt of reuniting the study of the Roman frontiers and of the Roman imperial politics with that of the frontier economics and of the Roman society. In fact, Whittaker delivers a social and economic study of the Roman frontiers. He does not regard the Roman frontiers as strategically demarcated lines, but as frontier regions where the Romans had stopped the expansion for lack of resources. He emphasizes the importance of the economic element for the conquest of new territories, considering that the existence of an agriculture in order to sustain the Roman army was necessary.

E. Luttwak developed his own theory concerning the Roman frontiers. He considers that there existed a *Grand Strategy* of Rome, by means of which the frontiers evolved. He also maintains that the Roman frontiers evolved from indefinite zones of dynamic expansion during the 1<sup>st</sup> century AD, to stable, scientific defence lines, using the rivers as well as artificial barriers during the 2<sup>nd</sup> century.

Researcher H. Elton considers that the Roman frontier comprises several aspects: military, economic, political, social, ethnic, religious and linguistic. His view is that the Roman frontier was not a simple line or zone delimiting the imperial territories. The concept of frontier integrates several border zones: military, economic, social, ethnic, linguistic and religious.

- B. Isaac considers that for the Romans the frontier did not have any importance as a territory, representing only a source of revenues. Isaac's ideas revolve mainly around the frontier system in the eastern part of the Roman Empire.
- P. Wells states that the Roman frontiers, as well as those of other complex societies, were important regions of interaction. He adds that the empires were dependent on the goods acquired by the commercial exchanges with the populations situated beyond their borders.

In the last part of this chapter, we made a presentation of the Roman frontier system in the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> centuries. At the end of emperor Augustus' rule (14 AD), the territories controlled by the Roman Empire comprised: the coastal lands of the Mediterranean Basin; the whole Iberian Peninsula; continental Europe; Anatolia and the Bosporan Kingdom. In the 1<sup>st</sup> century AD the Roman borders weren't stable and were often modified. There were some natural borders, mentioned by the works of the Latin authors. The large rivers (the Rhine, the Danube and the Euphrates) were accepted as limits of the Roman power. In this century, the frontier had the meaning of an access road ensuring the safety of the imperial territories.

After the epoch of conquests and maximum expansion of the Roman Empire under the rule of Trajan, starting with the rule of emperor Hadrian, there occurs a relapse to the principles of foreign politics postulated by Augustus: preventing the expansion of the borders and consolidating the Empire within its exiting boundaries. During the 2<sup>nd</sup> century, the Roman frontiers were marked visibly on the land. Where there were no natural landmarks, Rome built artificial barriers. Such fixed defensive structures were built: in Britannia – Hadrian's wall; in Germany – a rampart system with trench and palisade; in Africa – the system of fortifications known under the name of *Fossatum Africae*.

#### IV. THE FRONTIER DYNAMICS OF THE ROMAN EMPIRE

This chapter is consecrated to the frontier dynamics of the Roman Empire. The research method involved the presentation of the *limes* in Britannia, the frontier system known as *Fossatum Africae* and the border dynamics of the province Germannia.

Emperor Claudius (41-54 AD) turned Britain into a Roman province. In the frontier dynamics of the province of Britannia several phases can be discerned: during the rule of emperor Vespasian (69-79 AD) new territories were annexed to Britannia: the Welsh peninsula, northern England and southern Scotland; Britannia undergoes significant transformations due to the efforts of governor Gnaeus Iulius Agricola. Agricola had realized the potential of the isthmus Forth-Clyde and ordered that the frontier of the Roman province be established there, by the placing of the Roman garrisons on the isthmus; the Stanegate system has been interpreted as the solution offered by emperor Trajan (98 – 117) to the frontier in Britannia. The Forth-Clyde isthmus was abandoned and the next possible line was Tyne-Solway; emperor Hadrian (117 – 138) made the decision of building in Britannia a wall that would mark the limit of the Roman authority. According to Hadrian's biographer, his aim was to separate the Romans from the barbarians; Hadrian's successor, emperor Antoninus Pius, decided for the abandoning of Hadrian's wall. He ordered the building of a new wall along the isthmus Forth-Clyde. The abandoning of Antoninus' wall in the years 160 brought the army back on Hadrian's wall.

Fossatum Africae has been identified as extending over 750 kilometers along the peaks of Sahara in modern Algeria. It is considered that Africa's frontier region had the role of controlling and fluidizing the movement of the populations, being by no means a barrier against them. Fossatum Africae is part of the frontier politics initiated by emperor Hadrian for the whole Empire.

T. Mommsen considers that the large frontier systems (Hadrian's Wall in Britannia, Fossatum Africae, the *limes* of Germannia Superior, the Raetia wall etc.) built by the Romans did not serve to the complete blocking of enemy invasion. These frontiers were to dominate the roads situated beyond the artificial frontiers, but for the rest their goal was to deter the uncontrolled crossing of the borders. The main goal of the Roman army

bulding Hadrian's wall was to control the movement of populations and to separate the barbarians from the Romans. Another objective was the restricting and, if possible, the preventing of raids and low intensity threats. We can comprehend *Fossatum Africae* as a demarcation of the authority of the Roman frontiers in the desert. Thus, the frontier zone of Africa represented a measure of control and fluidizing of the movement of the population. The goal of the *limes* of Germannia Superior was to block the crossing of the border through other points than those marked by the Romans. On the north-western sector of Dacia Porolissensis, N. Gudea confirmed the fact that the possibilities of crossing the border had been minutely controlled, the traffic being directed according to the intentions of the Romans. The principle on which the functionality of the *limes* was based was the possibility to ensure the rapid concentration of troops in any point that was menaced or attacked. This possibility was ensured by means of the road network.

#### V. THE FRONTIER DYNAMICS OF THE DACIA PROVINCE

The fifth chapter, entitled "The frontier dynamics of the Dacia province", contains seven subchapters, in which we present the most important ideas related to the frontiers of Roman Dacia.

The Roman conquest of Dacia, in the year 106, ended a process that had started more than two centuries before. The establishment of the new province followed its due course, already known from the other territories of the Empire.

Under the rule of Trajan, the Dacia province comprised the greater part of Transylvania (except for the south-eastern corner), Banat (entirely or most of it) and western Oltenia. Whether the western part of Banat belonged to Dacia is still a matter of controversy. The territories attached to Moesia Inferior (as a consequence of the first Dacian war – the east of Oltenia and the south-east of Transylvania) continued to remain under the authority of the governer of this province.

Generally, the *limes* of Dacia was constituted under Trajan. It marked the limits of the province, but the governor's authority could extend beyond it. The organization of Dacia's defence system was realized in close relation to the geographical traits.

Because of the characteristics of the territory, the *limes* of Dacia presents peculiarities which distinguish its aspect from what has generally been acknowledged as *limes*. The hallmark of Dacia's *limes* appears especially in the Transylvanian plateau, where classical elements were placed in a new context, due to the characteristics of the land. The main elements of the *limes*, the castra, are here situated in the interior, in front of the mountain passes or on observation points, so that any possibility of penetration be blocked. The towers were placed especially in front of the castra, on heights, but also sometimes between castra. However, Dacia's *limes* doesn't provide new or unknown elements. It integrates the classical elements in a new context.

The main consequence of the 117-118 crisis of the lower Danube region was the reorganizing of the territories of Dacia and Moesia Inferior situated north of the Danube river. Hadrian relinquished southern Moldova and most of Muntenia, which had belonged to the province Moesia Inferior during the rule of Trajan. Hadrian created within Dacia three territorial districts: Dacia Superior, Dacia Inferior and Dacia Porolissensis. The creation of Dacia Porolissensis in north-western Dacia Traiana set a power center for the observation of the Iazyiges and other peoples living north-west of Dacia (Free Dacians, Burs, Vandals later). Dacia Superior, which formed the rest of Dacia Traiana, also had a western border with the Iazyiges, while Dacia Inferior, in the south-eastern part of the roman territory, had to withstand, among others, the potential menaces on the part of the Roxolani.

Half a century after Hadrian's administrative reorganization, this strategic conception needed as well to be modified. Under these circumstances, emperor Marcus Aurelius decides to unify the threee provinces (Dacia Superior, Dacia Inferior and Dacia Porolissensis) under the authority of a general governor. At the same time, there can be observed a change in the name of the provinces: Dacia Superior becomes Dacia Apulensis, while Dacia Inferior is renamed Dacia Malvensis; Dacia Porolissensis keeps its former name and its territorial expanse. The three Dacian provinces also shared the defense of the *limes*: Dacia Porolissensis had the northern part of the western sector, the whole northern sector and the northern part of the eastern sector. Dacia Apulensis had the rest of the Western and Eastern sectors. Dacia Malvensis had the south-eastern sector.

All along the existence of Roman Dacia, the dynamics of the nearby barbarian world were to determine a series of changes.

The studies of economic history, based on the qualitative analysis of the Roman imports in the barbarian world, appreciate that the Empire's commercial relations with the barbarians represented in fact a constituent of the Roman system of political-diplomatic relations used towards the barbarians on the limes.

#### VI. CONCLUSIONS

In the present thesis we tried to make a presentation of the frontier dynamics of the Roman Empire during the Early Principate. We can positively state that the Roman frontiers evolved during the first two centuries of the Roman history - AD. To this purpose, we considered relevant to present the Roman frontiers in Britannia, Africa and Dacia.

The study of the Roman frontiers holds particular importance, for several reasons: the delimitated frontiers of the Roman Empire were essential for the stability and the economic development of the area inside the Roman Empire; without an adequate dependability of the property and of the civil life, it wouldn't have been possible to have an economic growth generating surplus and thus supporting the cities. In other words, there wouldn't have existed extensive urbanization, nor the simultaneous policy of romanization. The study of the frontiers is also necessary as long as the frontiers were the means by which the Roman ideas and artifacts diffused outside the Roman world.

The frontier dynamics of the Roman Empire have several characteristics: the policy of the Roman emperors, which was based on creating an *imperium sine fine;* the political crises; the great wars; the separation between barbarians and Romans; the incursions of the barbaric populations (the tendencies and the tactics of the enemies located beyond the frontiers; the prevention of low intensity menaces); the separation of the masses of barbarians; the Roman control over the movement of populations; the marking of the Roman authority in certain regions; the economic development of the regions inside the Roman Empire; the geographical conditions; the presence of certain types of materials in

the frontier regions (stone, wood, earth etc.); the supplying of the Roman army from the zones situated in the vicinity of the frontiers.

Eventually, we have to mention that the type of analysis proposed by this PhD thesis through the study, debate and thorough comprehension of the Roman frontiers leads to new lines of scientific research.

The final of the present thesis comprises a series of annexes, indispensable for the thorough understanding of the presented concepts and, of course, the bibliography.

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AMP - Acta Musei Porolissensis, Zalău.

Analele Banatului – Analele Banatului, Timişoara.

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**AÉ** – Année épigraphique, Paris.

**ATS** – Acta Terrae Septemcastrensis, Sibiu.

**Apulum -** Apulum. Buletinul Muzeului Regional, Alba Iulia.

CIL - Corpus Inscriptiorum Latinarum, Berlin

**EN** - Ephemeris Napocensis, Cluj-Napoca.

IDR – Inscripțiile Daciei Romane (Inscriptiones Daciae Romanae), I-III/4, București; III/5, Paris.

**IDRE** - Petolescu C., C., Inscriptions de la Dacie romaine. Inscriptiones externes concernant l'histoire de la Dacie (I-er – III-e siecles). I-II, Bucureşti, 1996-1999.

IMCD - In memoriam Constantini Daicoviciu, Cluj, 1974

Re – Realencyclopädie der classichen Altertumswissenschaft (Paully - Wissowa), Stuttgard.

JRGZM - Jahrbuch des Romisch-Germanischen Zentralmuzeum zu Mainz, Mainz

**RMD -** Margaret M. Roxan, Roman Militaty Diplomas 1954-1977, London, 1978 (diplomele 1-78)

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