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Inherent Instability: Disproving Luttwak's Thesis of Defense in Depth

BY ADAM STILGOE

Adam is an English and History major who produced this piece for a History Colloquium his Senior year for Professor Ierardi. His enjoyment in writing this piece was drawn from the primary source documentation offered by Ammianus Marcellus.

This paper is chiefly designed to illustrate the fourth century Roman defense in depth model of border protection with regard to the Eastern part of the Roman empire. While several models of defense in depth with regard to the Roman Empire exist, I have chosen to utilize Edward Luttwak's book *The Grand Strategy of the Roman Empire* as representative of Eastern Roman defense in depth during Constantius' and Julian's reign from 353 to 363 C.E.¹ I have paid particular regard to fortifications and the use of artillery, as they are most often mentioned in Ammianus Marcellinus's surviving histories and other primary source documents and are integral pieces of an effective border defense. The second part of this essay is a critique of Luttwak's description of Roman border defense through the lens of primary source documents, as his thesis and the texts of ancient authors differ in several key points. In particular, Constantine's movement of troops from the borders to a mobile, standing army is misrepresented in Luttwak's work and needs to be corrected.

Luttwak's thesis on Roman border defenses offers two examples of standard Roman practice in the East, and elsewhere. The Western borders are a topic in their own right that will not be addressed in this paper. There were two kinds of defense available to the Roman emperors during the latter half of the fourth century: an elastic defense and a defense in depth.² An elastic defense had no fortified perimeter; instead the defense relied on mobile forces, comprised of both infantry and cavalry that could meet the offense head on, as long as the defense was at least as mobile as the offense.³ This strategy acquired the benefit of not needing to assign troops to hold fortifications, and therefore not needing to send troops stationed at peaceful borders elsewhere in case of a military emergency; conversely, it sacrificed the inherent advantages of defending a fortified, fixed position, although the defense could still defend territory that it knew relatively well.⁴

The defense in depth model is slightly more complex. It is based on “self contained strongholds with mobile forces either between or behind them,” whereby the mobile forces in reserve and the fortifications act in concert.⁵ If the strongholds could successfully withstand the offense without requiring assistance of the mobile reserve, if the mobile elements did not need the fortified areas to survive an encounter with the enemy, and if the invading army needed to destroy the fortified areas to continue, then it was a successful use of the defense in depth military method.⁶ Not only cities would be fortified; granaries, villas, towns, villages, and defensive positions all acquired fortifications in which townsfolk or whatever bands of soldiers were handy could defend themselves; food could also be stored in such enclosures and supply lines and roads could be protected through the use of this fortification system.⁷ Mention in a surviving document pertaining to Constantius’ actions regarding the supplying of forts and fortified towns in Syria is also made, stating that, “The cities of Syria you stocked with engines of war, garrisons, food supplies, and equipment of other kinds, considering that...you would...sufficiently protect the inhabitants.”⁸ An invading army would find its supply lines cut off by bands of roving soldiers that had taken shelter in fortified camps or towns and were now ravaging the army’s rear; if the army ceased moving towards the interior and attempted to deal with the city it lost valuable time, supplies, and men, in turn giving the mobile Roman army time to counterattack as it marched from its position somewhere along the Mediterranean, generally at or near Italy.⁹ The existence of extensive fortifications also allowed the mobile reserves to retreat behind high walls in the face of defeat, and for intelligence to be gathered about enemy movements from the rear.¹⁰

Because fortifications played such an important role in the defense of the Roman Empire their improvement became mandatory as time went on. After the end of the third century Roman forts began to take on characteristics

that made them distinct from their predecessors. First, forts began to be built on different sites; rather than attempting to merely look impressive, forts were constructed less for ease of travel (i.e. near roads) but instead for tactical dominance.¹¹ In particular, there was a concern for easily defensible terrain; forts were often placed on hills, or near areas that were otherwise easily defensible, with rivers being a chief commodity in fort building.¹² Forts also acquired different shapes; instead of the older rectangular shaped forts with a circular ditch defense, forts became irregularly shaped quadrilaterals or ovals, or squared, with the advantage becoming that of a shorter distance for soldiers to move about the top of the wall¹³. Walls were thickened, as were ditches, to keep battering rams and other siege engines away from the walls.¹⁴

Luttwak’s explanation for the sudden increased effectiveness of Roman fortifications goes against what he says is “sometimes suggested”¹⁵. He believes that fortifications were not improved because the armies threatening Rome suddenly developed better siege equipment, but were instead produced precisely because the armies threatening Rome had not produced such equipment at all.¹⁶ It should be noted that his primary interest is in the barbarian armies of the West, and reference is made to the Persian armies having advanced their siege making technology, although little more is said than that they had it.¹⁷

Another chief component of the defense of Roman fortifications is that of artillery. Artillery was no longer part of a Roman legion’s auxiliary forces but was instead placed in fortified areas to help with defense.¹⁸ Luttwak suggests that with the formation of wider ditches came the use of artillery to keep attackers away from the walls; with the attacking army stranded on the wrong side of the ditch ballistae and catapults could rain fire down upon them at will.¹⁹ Artillery, according to Luttwak’s model, was designed to “hold the attackers in an outer zone that could be covered by overlapping missile fire” and “could not be sharply angled, [and] their fire could not be

directed down at attackers close to the walls.”²⁰

The final component of Luttwak’s thesis that needs to be addressed is his depiction of Constantine’s removal of provincial garrisons to supply a mobile Roman field army that could come to the rescue of embattled garrisons in the East. “It is apparent,” he states, “that reductions made in the provincial forces that guarded the frontiers in order to strengthen the central field armies...must inevitably have downgraded the day-to-day security of the common people.”²¹ Luttwak draws this conclusion that “Diocletian... created or expanded the *sacer comitatus*..., replacing the improvised field forces of their predecessors with standing field armies and creating the dual structure of static border troops...and field forces...that characterized the army of the late empire”, and that Constantine merely refined this method of defense.²² He goes on to say that the stationing of the *II Parthica* near Rome and the three Severan legions being commanded by the equestrian class made the foundation of this new “central field army” less of a military construction and more of a political one.²³ This force was substantially increased by Constantine’s time, with 23,000 men out of up to 30,000 being ready for active campaigning, leaving only seven thousand for border defense.²⁴ Constantine increased the size of the field army, but as there were no new resources for the empire to draw from, it seems likely that these troops were taken from provincial garrisons.²⁵ This leads Luttwak to the aforementioned conclusion that the safety of the empire was drastically reduced because of troops being moved from fortifications in the defense in depth model to stations within a mobile field army used primarily to keep the emperor in power and only secondarily as a military tool, a move for which Luttwak feels Constantine is “rightly criticized”²⁶. By the time of Constantius, with which this paper is primarily concerned, the defense in depth was so deep that only Italy could rightly claim to be held, and then only because the mobile reserve was deployed there; everything else was a network of fortifications designed to slow down the enemy

while the mobile reserve, mainly cavalry, could march to meet them.²⁷

During the invasions of Shapur II Ammianus Mercellinus recorded the military movements on the Eastern front at the time, with particular regard to several fortified cities and towns and the devastating effect Shapur’s army had upon them. These descriptions of events also detail how well the defense in depth model worked at the time. The first town in his path was Singara, “abundantly fortified with soldiers and with all necessities”, a fact which seems to contradict the idea of garrisons being fatally weakened by the formation of a larger mobile reserve, at least in the minds of the Roman intelligentsia.²⁸ Upon the sighting of Shapur’s army, the defenders retreat inside Singara, but strangely “full of courage ran to the various towers and battlements and got together stones and engines of war.”²⁹ In order for a defense in depth model to be successful, the attacker needs to deal with a fortification, buying time for the mobile army to counterattack. Yet it seems strange that Shapur II, fresh out of Persia with an enormous army, should attack the first heavily defended fortified town he sees, especially one defended valiantly by “townsmen.”³⁰ The casualties were heavy on both sides. The town housed two of the smaller legions of the time, the First Flavian and the First Parthian, yet “the greater part of the army was in camp guarding Nisibis, which was a very long distance off...[and] all the surrounding country was dried up from lack of water.”³¹ This implies three things. Firstly, should Shapur II have left the defenders of Singara behind him, it is unlikely that he would have to fear an attack in his rear, as it was guarded by a desolate wasteland where no water was to be found, thus eliminating one major advantage of the defense in depth model. Secondly, if the greater part of the Roman army was at Nisibis, in light of the defense in depth model it makes little sense for Shapur II to waste such a significant part of his manpower taking a city that, as has been said, posed little threat to his rear, while a much larger and more dangerous force was still in front of him. Finally,

the Roman fortifications seem to have had little effect upon the Persian military. Ammianus claims that the Persian ram's effectiveness was largely due to its "penetrating the joints of the new laid stones, which were still moist and therefore weak" where the city had been breached previously.³² But the first breach of the walls occurred in 348 C.E., and Shapur II's invasion was twelve years later; it seems unlikely, then, that the walls would still be so freshly made that a ram would have such an easy time of bringing them down.³³ This lends credence to the idea that Shapur II's army had siege equipment that Roman fortifications couldn't handle, either because the fortifications were faulty themselves or the Persians had developed siege equipment superior to them, a theory that will be explored later following several other primary source documents.

The next city to be attacked was Bezabde, a "very strong fortress" that was situated on a relatively large hill and next to the banks of the Tigris river.³⁴ This fort had a wide trench and a double wall where it was most vulnerable to assault by enemy siege engines and infantry.³⁵ Bezabde was equipped with artillery as well, in lieu of its importance as a military fortification.³⁶ The Persians do not seem to have been deterred by the ditches, as their archers were able to move close enough to the fortress to rain arrows down on the defenders as they prepared to repulse the attackers.³⁷ However, despite the close proximity of the archers, the defending artillery wreaked havoc among the attacking forces regardless of their positioning, even driving off siege engines perilously close to the walls.³⁸ This goes against Luttwak's thesis that artillery was only useful when the enemy was on the other side of the ditch or ditches surrounding the fort, and instead was effective against the enemy no matter where they were. Again the Persians succeed in taking Bezabde through the use of a ram, and again Ammianus mentions extenuating circumstances, with a Christian priest supposedly conveying to Shapur II information concerning where the walls were weakest.³⁹ Though he claims to have

his doubts, Ammianus doesn't specifically deny this rumor.⁴⁰ lending further suspicion of the effectiveness of Roman fortifications and the superiority of Persian siege engines. The ditches and double wall seem to have had little to no effect, and the Persian army, though doubtless exhausted from the long journey from Singara and anxious about the closing winter season⁴¹ seems to have had little trouble rampaging unchecked through Roman territory; no mention of harassment tactics concerning the Persian supply lines is made, and the mobile Roman army is conspicuously absent from the proceedings. In the East, then, the Roman defense in depth model seems so far to be a failure.

With the death of Constantius Julian took the throne and in 363 C.E. invaded Persia with the mobile field army, only a few years since Shapur II's invasion of Roman territory in Mesopotamia. He assembled the army and "hastened to invade the enemy's country, outstripping the report of his coming."⁴² Upon the Roman army's arrival in Assyria they confronted the Persian fortress of Anatha, captured it through the Persian's surrender, and burned it to the ground immediately afterwards.⁴³ This tactic is repeated several times, with several abandoned forts and a major fortress, Pirisabora, all being captured and burned to the ground, and their populace taken away as slaves.⁴⁴ Maiozamalcha is also captured and destroyed⁴⁵, and the capturing and burning of fortifications and cities continues until Julian is defeated at Ctesiphon.⁴⁶ The *Chronicon Ps.-Dionysianum* says that, "Julian descended into Persia and devastated the entire region from Nisibus as far as Ctesiphon in Bet Aramaye. He took a large number of captives from there."⁴⁷ Eutropius also mentions that "Several towns and fortresses of the Persians he induced to surrender, and some he took by storm... [He laid] waste to Assyria."⁴⁸ Julian's army and methods of attack were remembered in several places, then, as being incredibly destructive and thorough; nothing of any military or civilian value, it seems, was left intact.

At this point Julian and his army were deep inside Persian territory. The role of Luttwak's mobile reserve army in the defense in depth model plays little part here. Instead of a reactionary tool designed to repel invaders and to secure the embattled frontier zone, the mobile reserve instead takes the fight to the Persians, assaulting towns, cities, and forts with equal vigor in an effort to literally wipe out areas of possible resistance. Soldiers and townsfolk are slaughtered or taken prisoner and sent west, and the forts themselves, rather than being saved for Roman use, are destroyed, to be used by neither side. Luttwak's statement that Constantine is "rightly criticized" for weakening border defenses seems amiss in light of Ammianus' histories. The townsfolk of Bezabde, Singara, and other perimeter fortresses seem to have been able defenders, taking a heavy toll on Shapur II's army, and the defense in depth model seems to clash with the preferred method of Persian warfare. Rather than ignoring the fortified towns and smaller fortresses in his path, Shapur systematically destroys all of them, just as the Romans did when Julian invaded several years later. As Blockley puts it, Constantine's adoption of a major mobile reserve is not to be criticized but instead should be seen as "an instrument of a policy that was militarily and politically aggressive" his strategy that of "a harder counterstrike into enemy territory as a prelude to a settlement."⁴⁹ Julian obviously used the same basic strategy of destroying enemy assets in Persia to assure compliance with Roman wishes, though the outcome was not entirely favorable to the Romans in the end.⁵⁰

Luttwak's thesis, then, with regard to the East, is not fundamentally sound. Shapur II and Persia's armies in general cannot be said to have found Roman fortifications intimidating, even when they were heavily improved, as in Bezabde. Likewise artillery, though only used in defensive emplacements, was not restricted to keeping the attackers beyond the defensive ditch found at many Roman fortifications, but instead could and did fire upon attackers and siege equipment very close to the walls. The mobile reserve was not mobile enough to support defense in depth in the East. Shapur II invaded, sacked two cities, and nearly had time to annihilate a third, while Constantius mustered his troops. While a defense in depth model attributes success to an attacker having to annihilate fortifications, the Roman defense of Mesopotamia during Shapur II's invasion can hardly be called successful. Likewise it seems fortifications behind Shapur II's lines had very little effect in terms of defensive strategy, as Ammianus' works seem to suggest. And most importantly, the criticism of the mobile field army being increased at the diminishment of the border defenses seems to be entirely unfounded when the army itself is regarded not merely as a military tool but also as a political and diplomatic one. While Luttwak's thesis has many strong points, its overall defense brings to mind the rotted walls of Singara. Several key elements are founded on faulty evidence which render the entire fortification, if you will, unsafe for defenders.

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