STRATEGY, DIPLOMACY AND FRONTIERS: A BIBLIOGRAPHIC ESSAY

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This essay provides an overview of strategy, diplomacy and the frontiers of the Roman Empire in Late Antiquity. It begins with a discussion of grand strategy before moving onto intelligence, diplomacy and foreign policy; it finishes with an overview of frontiers and regional defence systems.

GRAND STRATEGY

The issue of grand strategy has attracted considerable attention, though much debate still exists. Any discussion of grand strategy in the Roman Empire ultimately goes back to the important study of Luttwak (1976), who has more recently written a book that broadly speaking deals with strategy in the Byzantine Empire (Luttwak (2009); compare Haldon (2009). Grand strategy as outlined by Luttwak largely entails a broader pattern of foreign policy plans and military organisation that hold place over the course of the reign of a particular emperor, or even longer. Although Luttwak’s (1976) book was largely concerned with the early and high periods of the Roman Empire, he finished with the 3rd and 4th c., when he argued that the Romans had a pattern of “defence-in-depth”, largely implemented by Diocletian and Constantine (compare Blockley (1998); Carrié and Janziard (2001); Bartolini (2003)), that followed Rome’s expansionist aims through the 1st and 2nd c. This system involved placing military bases and mobile units well behind the frontier or border, in a position to react to the inroads of enemy forces.

His theory came under fire (Mann (1979); compare Wheeler (1993)), with many questioning the ability of the Romans to maintain any such military planning over long periods of time (Millar (1982)), others arguing that such theorising was anachronistic to Roman thinking (Whittaker (1994)). Others were concerned about the activities that Rome’s forces were engaged in; arguing that they were often focused on internal matters, such as banditry and general instability, rather than preparing for invasions from beyond the frontiers (Isaac (1990)). While many of these concerns are valid, and
hesitation about the use of the phrase ‘grand strategy’ is understandable, it is perhaps still a more useful term than those employed by many of the studies mentioned thus far.

Following the lead of Kagan and modern students of strategic studies, we ought to understand grand strategy, however, as “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” (Kagan (2006) 348). Such a definition has not yet been applied to late antique grand strategy and related issues. Although we lack some of the detailed epigraphic evidence in such abundance from the earlier Imperial period, much material of value remains, such as the problematic—though still useful—Notitia Dignitatum, not to mention the material evidence that illuminates considerable frontier activity, such as the remains of fortresses constructed along the Rhine and Danube from the reigns of Valentinian I and Valens (Heather (2010) 227–228). Indeed, there is good reason to suppose that there was some sort of grand strategy in Late Antiquity (Greatrex (2007); Heather (2010)), for the Romans were all too aware of the challenges facing them on their frontiers (Elton (1996); Lee (1993) 15–32; Humphries (2007)), and allocated resources as a result, while pursuing a number of policies to minimise these threats, military, diplomatic, and otherwise.
