



The Archaeological Journal

Book Reviews



THE FRONTIERS OF IMPERIAL ROME. By David Breeze. Pp. xxi and 242, Illus 77. Pen and Sword, 2011. Price: £25.00. ISBN 978 1 848844 27 8.

The creation of borders posed a particular problem for an Empire founded on a belief in *imperium sine fine*. As attention switched from advance to securing the boundaries of conquered territory it was impossible to ignore that Rome's armies had stalled. Redolent of the limits of imperial power, ancient sources generally skirt the subject, leaving contemporary accounts few and often cryptic. Such reticence has not extended to modern scholarship.

For over a century, scientific excavations have provided ever finer details of the frontier fabric, while much ink has been spilt constructing and demolishing interpretations of their purpose. Yet Rome's frontiers have bequeathed a problem for current students of her borders too. Running for over 7,500 km through twenty modern countries with different research traditions, languages, and alphabets, the frontiers have generated an intimidating body of literature. A synthetic overview of the archaeology is long overdue, and now David Breeze has provided one.

A distinguished scholar of Britain's northern frontiers, chairman of the International Congress of Roman Frontier Studies, and authority on the Roman military, Breeze's mastery of this complex subject is apparent throughout. The book is split into three sections examining sources both written and archaeological, the various categories of frontier, and their interpretation. The result focuses unashamedly on the military remains, rather than the civilian towns and indigenous settlements that also populated the frontier zones. By opening with an episode in AD 406 when a force of Alans, Suebi and Vandals breached the Rhine frontier, Breeze immediately signals his own view of the frontiers: they were designed to control the movement of people, not armies (p. xvii).

Despite techniques that range from fortifying river banks to scoring artificial lines across the landscape, Breeze believes that the purpose of the frontiers was essentially uniform. Perceiving variation as a means of achieving the same aim in different contexts, he casts the frontiers as a single monument. This is controversial, and a number of scholars contend that the 3 m-wide stone wall constructed in Britain and the comparatively slight contemporary timber palisade erected in Germany, for example, were designed to meet different types of threat. Breeze prefers to see the unprecedented scale of Hadrian's Wall as indicative of no more than that Emperor's weakness for grandiose architectural projects (p. 68). While this will continue to polarize, Breeze is generous in providing space for views that run contrary to his own, ensuring readers are fully aware of such

debates. The conclusion summarizes the intention behind Rome's frontiers in a single word: security.

Accompanied with a useful series of maps, this volume is an impressive achievement. It will serve as both an essential introduction to the subject and a stimulus to further debate. In his introduction Breeze notes that a number of recent books on frontiers were written by historians unfamiliar with the archaeological evidence. There can be no excuse for that now.

MATTHEW SYMONDS