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**IMAGE AND IDEOLOGY:
ROMAN IMPERIALISM AND
FRONTIER POLICY
IN THE SECOND CENTURY A.D.**

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A Thesis submitted for the degree of Master of Arts
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Except where specific acknowledgement is made to quoted sources this work is the result of my own research carried out under the supervision of Professor Beryl Rawson, Head of the Department of Classics, in the Australian National University.

March, 1992

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'A.C. Wilson', with a stylized flourish at the end.

A.C. Wilson

CONTENTS

Acknowledgements	iii
Abbreviations	v
Introduction	
Part 1: Problems and Definitions	
The Problem	7
Imperialism: Some Definitions	12
Part 2: Empire Without End	
Introduction	16
Ancient Expressions of Rome's World Empire	17
Modern Opinions of Roman Imperialism	35
Part 3: The Public Image Projected by Emperors	
Introduction	40
Trajan	45
Hadrian	54
Antoninus Pius	61
Marcus Aurelius and Lucius Verus	70
Commodus	82
Military Propaganda	93
Conclusion	97

Part 4: The Execution of External Policy

Introduction	100
Britain	102
Europe	114
The East	138
North Africa	157
Conclusion	161

Part 5: Conclusion 163**Appendices**

1. Table of Coin Issues: Types and Frequency	167
2. Table of Coin Issues: Activities of Emperors	173

Bibliography

Ancient Sources	174
Modern Sources	176

Maps

(These will be found after the page indicated)

1. The British frontier	103
2. The Rhine frontier	118
3. The Danube frontier	124
4. The Eastern frontier	141
5. The North African provinces	157

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ABBREVIATIONS

- AFRBA* S. Mitchell (ed.), *Armies and Frontiers in Roman and Byzantine Anatolia. Proceedings of a colloquium held at University College, Swansea in April 1981*, BAR International series 156, Oxford, 1983.
- ANRW* H. Temporini and W Haase (eds.), *Aufstieg und Niedergang der römischen Welt*, Berlin, 1972 - .
- BMC* H. Mattingly, *Coins of the Roman Empire in the British Museum*, London, vol. 1 (1923) 1976, vol. 2 (1930) 1966, vol. 3 (1936) 1966, vol. 4 (1940) 1968, vol. 5 (1950) 1975.
- CIL* *Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum*, Berlin, 1863 - .
- DP* R. Syme, *Danubian Papers*, Bucharest, 1971.
- DRBE* P. Freeman and D. Kennedy (eds.), *The Defence of the Roman and Byzantine East. Proceedings of a colloquium held at the University of Sheffield in April 1986*, BAR International Series 297, Oxford, 1986.
- EFRE* D.H. French and C.S. Lightfoot (eds.), *The Eastern Frontier of the Roman Empire. Proceedings of a colloquium held at Ankara in September 1988*, BAR International Series 553, 2 vols., Oxford, 1989.
- IG III/III²* J. Kirchner (ed.), *Inscriptiones Graecae, Vols. ii and iii editio minor*, Berlin, 1913 - 1935.
- ILS* H. Dessau, *Inscriptiones Latinae Selectae*, Berlin, 1892 - 1916.
- MA* A.R. Birley, *Marcus Aurelius: A Biography*, London, 1987.
- PIR* P. von Rohden and H. Dessau (eds.), *Prosopographia Imperii Romani*, Berlin, 1898.
- PIR²* E. Groag, A. Stein, L. Petersen (eds.), *Prosopographia Imperii Romani*, 2nd edn., Berlin & Leipzig, 1933 - .

- RAP* E. Birley, *The Roman Army. Papers 1929-1986*, MAVORS Roman Army Researches, M.P. Speidel (Ed.), Vol IV, Amsterdam, 1988.
- RE* G. Wissowa et al. (eds.), *Pauly's Real-Encyclopädie der classischen Altertumswissenschaft*, Stuttgart, 1893 - 1978.
- RFRFP* A.R. Birley, "Roman frontiers and Roman Frontier Policy: Some Reflections on Roman Imperialism", *Transactions of the Archaeological and Architectural Society of Durham and Northumberland*, 3 (1974), 13 - 25.
- RFS 7* M. Gichon et al. (eds.), *Roman Frontier Studies. Proceedings of the Seventh International Congress held at Tel Aviv in 1967*, Tel Aviv, 1971.
- RFS 9* D.M. Pippidi (ed.), *Actes du IXe Congrès International D'Études sur les Frontières Romaines, Mamaïa, 6 - 13 Septembre 1972*, Bucharest, 1974.
- RFS 11* J. Fitz (ed.), *Limes: Akten des XI internationalen Limeskongresses (Székesfehérvár, 30.8-6.9 1976)*, Budapest, 1977.
- RFS 12* W.S. Hanson and L.J.F. Keppie (eds.), *Roman Frontier Studies 1979: Papers presented to the 12th International Congress of Roman Frontier Studies*, BAR International Series 71, 3 vols., Oxford, 1980.
- RFS 13* C. Unz (ed.), *Studien zu den Militärgrenzen Roms III. 13. Internationaler Limeskongress, Aalen 1983*, Stuttgart, 1986.
- RFS 14* H. Vetters and M. Kandler (eds.), *Akten des 14. Internationalen Limeskongresses 1986 in Carnuntum*, 2 vols., Vienna, 1990.
- RIB* R.G. Collingwood and R.P. Wright, *Roman Inscriptions of Britain, Vol. 1, Inscriptions on Stone*, Oxford, 1958.
- RIC* H. Mattingly and E. Sydenham, *The Roman Imperial Coinage*, London, vol. I, (1923); vol. II, 1926; vol. III, 1930; vol. IV/1, 1936.
- RP I* E. Badian (ed.), *R Syme, Roman Papers*, vol. 1, Oxford, 1979.

- RP II* E. Badian (ed.), *R Syme, Roman Papers*, vol. 2, Oxford, 1979.
- RP III* A.R. Birley (ed.), *R Syme, Roman Papers*, vol. 3, Oxford, 1984.
- RP V* A.R. Birley (ed.), *R Syme, Roman Papers*, vol. 5, Oxford, 1984.

INTRODUCTION

When Gibbon wrote that "The principal conquests of the Romans were achieved under the republic; and the emperors, for the most part, were satisfied with preserving those dominions which had been acquired..."¹, he echoed a sentiment that has been accepted almost unquestioningly ever since. For the subsequent two centuries the accepted view of the external policy of the Roman empire has placed too much emphasis on the Varian disaster and the consequent *consilium coercendi intra terminos imperii* of Augustus² and so has failed to accept imperialist motivations in any post-Augustan territorial increase.

The framework for most modern discussions of the principate has been that any expansion after 9 A.D. was purely the result of exceptional strategic or political requirements. Claudius' annexation of Britain is not recognized as the blatant territorial aggrandizement it was, but is dismissed because necessitated by considerations of internal politics. The annexations of Dacia and Arabia by Trajan, and his later Parthian expedition, are excused as being responses to external aggression, or as attempts to increase the security of the empire by establishing so-called 'scientific frontiers'³. Hadrian, by abandoning all Trajan's conquests east of the Euphrates and his subsequent lack of interest in campaigning, is often viewed as having returned to the policy of Augustus. Antoninus Pius, despite the fact that under him the imperial frontiers in Britain and of the Rhine provinces reached what was to be their greatest extent, is seen as following in Hadrian's footsteps. Marcus Aurelius is still respected as the archetypal 'philosopher-emperor' who was unfortunate in having to spend most of his reign fighting wars to defend the empire against encroaching barbarians. Septimius Severus, in purely territorial terms the most expansionist post-Augustan emperor, is widely regarded as untypical and an aberration. In spite of the apparent contradictions

1 E. Gibbon, *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, 1776, reprint New York, 1963, p. 107.

2 Tacitus, *Annals*, I.11

3 This is the argument much-favoured by E. N. Luttwak, *The Grand Strategy of the Roman Empire from the First Century A.D. to the Third*, Baltimore, 1976 (paperback edition 1979), pp. 107-8.

inherent in such a position, it is still the dominant view of Roman frontier policy under the Principate.

In my view a better framework for analysis of Roman imperialism in the post-Augustan world sees external policy during the Principate as being dependent on a continuing state of tension between those elements of the ruling class that held to the politics of expansion, and those which adhered to the politics of the 'surfeited empire'. There can be no doubt that such differences of opinion existed and had an effect on emperors. Despite Luttwak's view of the matter, external policy during the Principate was demonstrably inconsistent. This helps explain why Tiberius, having helped Augustus acquire more territory than any other Roman leader, was content to keep the empire as it had been left to him, and why Claudius, impelled by political needs, accepted the ideological option and annexed Britain, earning in the process four triumphs. The Flavian emperors, very much 'new men' after a century of the Julio-Claudians, and needing military prestige, made provinces of most of the client kingdoms of Asia Minor as well as adding the *Agri Decumates* to the empire, a valid, if easy, method of enlarging the empire.

The second century was no different. Trajan, still regarded as the archetypal 'soldier-emperor', added more to the empire than any other emperor after Augustus by his annexation of Dacia, Arabia, and, although unsuccessful, Armenia and Mesopotamia. These wars of Trajan, as I hope to demonstrate, were motivated primarily by nothing more than a desire for territorial aggrandisement. Trajan's attention to civic projects such as his *alimenta* scheme for poor children and the maintenance of the corn supply should not divert us from his military ambitions. Indeed his attempt at blending the traditional elements of military glory and civic activities, but always with the main emphasis on martial achievements, goes far to confirming his pre-eminent position as the best of Rome's emperors, no less than the *optimus princeps* described by Pliny and Dio Chrysostom.

Under Trajan, as Luttwak has pointed out, "wars were feverishly anticipated, and this time there was no disappointment"⁴. After two

4 Luttwak, p. 54.

wars fought over a period of five years, Dacia was annexed as a province in 105/6. Arabia, hitherto a client kingdom, was also made a province in 105/6, possibly in advance preparation for the Parthian wars. After a number of decisive military engagements in the east Armenia became a province in 114, and Mesopotamia likewise in 115. Trajan made alterations in the administrative arrangements for the provinces: Pannonia was divided into two imperial provinces, Superior and Inferior; Thrace was made an imperial province; and Galatia-Cappadocia was again separated into two imperial provinces. Imperial provinces, always with the exception of Egypt, were invariably at this time governed by *legati Augusti pro praetore*, and it is tempting to see in this creation of three extra imperial legateships a move by Trajan to create additional posts that could be used as rewards for his successful generals and supporters⁵.

Hadrian who had a traditional, if not a particularly successful, military career, is generally seen as peace-loving and non-expansionist. The contrast is all the more obvious following so closely on the military expeditions of Trajan. Trajan was widely loved and served as a model for how all future emperors should behave, indeed was seen as the best type of autocratic ruler even in the middle ages. Hadrian died "hated by the people" according to Dio⁶. It is implied that this was due to his murder of various members of the Senate, particularly the four Trajanic consulars who were put to death, either on Hadrian's direct order or by a Senate intent on sycophancy. The deed, whatever its necessity and whoever its author, went down the years in infamy. According to Dio it was one of the primary reasons the Senate refused to deify the dead emperor in 138⁷. The long period in which Augustus reconciled the Roman aristocracy to the Principate did not, and could not, bring an end to political discord within the Senate. Adherents and friends of a particular emperor came to the fore on his accession and held sway in the Senate. The killings of 117 were either ordered by Hadrian or advocated by the emperor's partisans in the Senate with his knowledge and agreement.

5 A. Garzetti, *From Tiberius to the Antonines, A History of the Roman Empire A.D. 14 - 192*, tr. J.R. Foster, London, 1974, p. 345.

6 Cassius Dio, LXIX, 23.2.

7 Dio, LXIX, 23.2-3.

It is hard to see in these killings anything but an attempt to remove vocal critics of Hadrian's foreign policy. The four put to death were all consulars and at least three of them were highly talented and successful military commanders. There might well have been a plot, if these leading generals were dissatisfied, as they might well have been, with Hadrian's withdrawal from the East and parts of Moesia. The existence, or otherwise of a plot against the new emperor does not alter the point that the most likely explanation for the deaths is the opposition between the expansionists as exemplified by these four consulars, and the static imperialists as exemplified by Hadrian and his friends and advisers. In his latter days Hadrian is said to have denied any participation in the deaths and even to have destined Nigrinus for the succession⁸. I cannot accept this. The source for this was seemingly Hadrian's autobiography, surely not the most unbiased of sources. And that Hadrian in early 118 can have spent time considering the succession, let alone have made a decision, seems highly improbable.

Now the Senate may have seen itself opposed to the autocracy of emperors (although I doubt this) but senators' memories were not that long or unforgiving. There must have been more to the senate's attitude in 138 than four deaths 20 years before. Why can we not suppose that the hostile tradition arises in part from Hadrian's continuing refusal to allow the expansionists to have their way? It was not a person who respected either the Senate or tradition who put an equestrian in charge of both Pannonia and Moesia with the same powers as the prefect of Egypt. It was not a respecter of tradition who gave up conquered territory, or who built fortified border walls; or who indulged in gladiatorial combat in public. In these matters Hadrian showed himself an innovator. It is equally plausible that his external policy was a departure from the Roman tradition of expansion and as such incurred the hatred of more traditional senators.

Hadrian's successor, Antoninus Pius, had held no military commands in his career, nor had he served time away from Rome except for the proconsulate of Asia in 134/5. It may well be that he was chosen for

8 SHA, *Hadrian*, VII.2.

this as much as any other reason⁹. One of the first actions of Antoninus Pius, when he succeeded Hadrian, was to push the frontier of Britain forward (discussed below, p. 106f). It is highly probable, as A.R. Birley has suggested, that this was a 'sop' thrown to the military traditionalists who had been held in check for so long¹⁰. At the same time the frontiers of the Rhine provinces were moved forward about 40 kilometres, although this was more likely to have been recognition of the extent of Roman military control than outright territorial expansion (see below, p. 119f.). It is certain that no other territorial aggrandisement took place under Antoninus, as the traditional view of him would lead us to expect. Unlike Hadrian, Antoninus had excellent relations with the senate. It is possible that this good reputation was a product of the emperor's attempts to appease all shades of senatorial opinion, including those who had been neglected by Hadrian. And it is unlikely that he would antagonise senators when he was able to avoid it. What better way of legitimising his position and propitiating the senate than by allowing the active expression of different policy options?

Marcus Aurelius, who is still remembered as a philosopher rather than a soldier, spent most of his reign away from Rome fighting barbarians. For once a war in the east was begun by Parthia, although the presence of a Roman force well inside Armenia cannot be adequately explained. Evidence suggests that Lucius Verus' eastern wars resulted in the stationing of Roman troops in Armenia and northern Mesopotamia. Even if no new territory was annexed, Rome must have effectively controlled these one-time provinces of Trajan as a result of the war. There is ample evidence as well that Marcus Aurelius intended to annex Marcomannic and Sarmatian territories through his northern wars¹¹. We also have evidence in the *Historia Augusta* of a difference in opinion between the two emperors on the northern operations which might indicate that each held to a different position on the issue of external policy¹².

There is clear evidence for Commodus' abandonment of his father's

9 A.R. Birley, "Roman Frontier Policy under Marcus Aurelius" in *RFS* 7, p. 8.

10 Birley, *RFRFP*, p. 17.

11 See the discussion in Birley, "Roman Frontier Policy under Marcus Aurelius", p. 10-11.

12 SHA, *Marcus Antoninus*, XIV.4-7. See the discussion below, p. 133f.

northern wars in the *Historia Augusta*¹³. The speech of Pompeianus recorded in Herodian, while not necessarily accurate, at least indicates that different opinions were held by those who advised the new emperor. Commodus clearly came down on the side of the non-expansionists, ignoring the older military men who had advised his father¹⁴. It is also noteworthy that under Commodus the defensive fortifications on the Danube were markedly increased, also suggesting that the anti-expansionist policy had gained the ascendancy.

The evidence given above, not necessarily conclusive, certainly suggests the existence of a dichotomy in approaches to Roman external policy at least during the first two centuries of the Principate. If not compelling it is, nevertheless, an encouragement to further examination in more detail of the functioning of Roman external policy in the light of the existence in Roman political opinion of an imperialist option of expansion.

13 SHA, *Commodus*, III.5. Also Cassius Dio, LXXII, 1.2.

14 Herodian, I, 6.4-8.