

Barbarians and Romans in North-West Europe

from the later Republic to late Antiquity

edited by

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INTRODUCTION

John C Barrett and A P Fitzpatrick

The archaeology of 'culture contact' has been the general theme of a number of recent studies of the late Iron Age in northern and central Europe. These have isolated the organisational properties of indigenous pre-contact societies, demonstrating the way these properties partly determined the historical trajectory of the contact process. Obviously the other determining factor was the organisational demands of Roman military (and economic) activity. It is the mix of these two, relatively autonomous processes which seemingly gave rise to the history of a particular frontier region.

Whilst this line of reasoning has analytical strengths, for it clearly helps to organise our thinking, problems do remain. It is too easily assumed that Roman authority was the dominant force; whilst this may be true elsewhere it is an assumption which surely needs much closer examination in frontier regions. But a major problem in archaeology is also the way native studies have traditionally lain within the scope of 'prehistory' whilst Roman military history remains the preserve of Roman archaeology. As Burnham and Johnson have noted (1979, 2) this divide between specialisations occurs at the very point where the processes of integration need to be most carefully analysed. A further problem which also subverts the demand for holistic study is the different conception of history which both specialisations tend to imply. The difference is best expressed in terms elaborated upon by Braudel (1980, 25 ff); between long cycles of historical movement, the longue durée, and the shorter surface ripples of historical events. For some time now prehistorians have been concerned to understand long-term processes of social and economic change, just as by contrast Roman frontier studies often remain wedded to the precise chronologies of events. This distinction is not just a matter of different chronological scales of analysis, nor of different qualities of data, but concerns profound differences in the perception of historical processes, differences which are not directly compatible.

A unified history must recognise, as social historians have always done, that the events of invasion, campaigning and imperial policy were formulated within longer term and deeper seated historical processes. Others have begun to establish the way this kind of history may be written from the archaeology of this period (cf Burnham and Johnson 1979; Brandt and Sloftra 1983) and the studies contained in this volume contribute to that enquiry. They spring from two conferences held in 1984 and 1985. The Scottish Archaeological Forum meeting, Native Space and Roman Invaders held in Edinburgh, and The Barbarians held in Glasgow, examined the relationship between Iron Age indigenous communities and Roman Imperial authority on the north-western limits of the empire. Each conference was slightly different in its aim. The Forum meeting was specifically concerned with Roman/Native relations, the Glasgow conference looked at the long-term history of those societies which lay at and beyond the margins of the empire. However, both meetings ultimately explored a considerable amount of common ground and this volume has arisen from that shared experience. Published here are contributions deriving from both conferences along with

some additional material.

Four main themes emerge. The first concerns the kinds of value systems sustained within the Roman and native worlds which guided the way each dealt with the other. Fitzpatrick isolates kinship and warfare not only as organising principles for particular societies but as principles upon which they might interact. And Braund's study of Roman attitudes to 'barbarian' peoples allows him to explain the particular form imperial policy, which he interprets as 'economic' imperialism, took towards natives beyond the northern frontiers.

The establishment of these frontier zones around the north-west of the empire forms the second theme, for these zones with their military installations imposed something of their own logic upon the historical process. Hanson outlines the development of Roman frontiers and the military requirements which we might envisage for these frontier zones and how these changing requirements were serviced by the military installations themselves. But it is the supply of the frontier, particularly in its material requirements, which dominates a number of the papers which consider the degree of control the Roman authorities may have been able to exercise within and beyond the frontier zone. Whittaker reasserts the importance of understanding that mechanisms existed to supply the military needs of the frontier from deep within the empire. He suggests these mechanisms may have played a dominant role in the movement of materials to both military and non-military sites, leading to the creation of a homogenous frontier zone with those territories within the frontier having greater similarities to those territories without than to the rest of the province. But it is the local rather than long distance supply of resources which most other contributors consider. In his paper Fulford disputes the degree of integration and interdependence on both sides of the Frontier envisaged by Whittaker, arguing instead that the frontier was largely supplied from within the provinces. Groenman-van Waateringe considers the fluctuating sources of grain available to the Roman army in north-western continental Europe and suggests that they oscillated between long-distance and local supply. Bloemers also considers this changing relationship and pays particular attention to the previously neglected demographic impact of a standing army, first as a form of colonialism and subsequently through its demand for local recruits.

Higham looks at one region immediately behind what has usually been considered to be the frontier zone in north-west England. He examines the sorts of economic changes which might be recognised resulting from the supply demands of the Roman army, setting his analysis in the context of long-term ecological change. He suggests that the demands of the military precluded large-scale 'romanisation'. Macinnes, in her study of Scotland, reviews the extent to which Roman products may have been circulating and being deposited beyond the frontier. Whatever the nature of the exchange of the subsistence requirements for the army, Macinnes argues that although the quantity of Roman material beyond the frontier may be small in comparison with other areas, its significance should not be underestimated and that it was probably directed to specific groups amongst the native elites.

The third theme is the independent development of areas beyond the frontiers throughout the pre-Roman Iron Ages. Parker Pearson considers southern Scandinavia and northern Germany. He gives a critical appraisal of recent ideas concerning culture contact which explain social changes in regions beyond the 'core area' of empire in terms of prestige gift exchange

by demonstrating the importance of other, internal factors, such as warfare and long-term changes in the control of agricultural production. Raftery, for Ireland, synthesises his own recent monographs and considers fully the range of archaeological data which define an Irish Iron Age whose ultimate transformation was to create the kingdoms of the early historic period.

The final theme is one of reflection on the difficulties which are raised by the approaches and questions put forward in this volume. Breeze considers the shortcomings of the archaeological record of northern Britain against these demands and finds it wanting in environmental analyses, problem-orientated excavations and integrated artefact studies. He concludes by emphasising that a better understanding of 'romanisation' is required. In contrast, Barrett challenges the value of this concept, arguing that it is a self-fulfilling concept which has reached the end of its usefulness. He proposes an alternative attempt at an understanding of the interaction, based not on the cultural diffusionism of 'romanisation' or 'acculturation', but on the ways in which new cultural values were achieved and sustained, emphasising the ideological rather than the material.

Perhaps the most encouraging feature of the volume is the way that all the authors consider barbarian and Roman alike and attempt to integrate archaeological and written sources. Most are also willing to consider varying geographical and chronological scales of analysis and draw on evidence from elsewhere in Europe, as well as comparative studies, albeit to a lesser extent. Ideally this should not occasion comment as these are approaches which many scholars would sympathise with, but it is fair to say that such catholicism has been rare in this field of study in recent years. The divide between Roman and barbarian is still sharp in, for example, the latest Limeskongress acta (1986). As many contributors comment, further progress will depend on integrated research. At present, studies such as those on Roman coins inside and outside the frontier in Germany, by Davies (1983), or on samian in barbaricum between Pannonia and Dacia, by Gabler and Vaday (1986), are notable for their rarity as well as their content. The ideas outlined by Bloemers in his paper are intended to further develop the archaeology of the Netherlands which, as Willems has elegantly demonstrated, is already outstanding in the quality of its information and interpretation (1984). This is the standard which this hoped for research must match and surpass.

While the papers collected here are certainly neither the first nor the last step, it appears to be a sure one in what we believe to be the right direction. None the less, difficulties still remain. While it is generally agreed that progress is still required in the collection and interpretation of archaeological data, the interpretation of literary sources is often thought to be exempt from this. But there is a tendency amongst those papers which approach the barbarians primarily from written sources to characterise them as an ideal ahistorical type. In part this reflects the timeless world which the ancient barbarians were thought to occupy on the fringes of the known world by the classical world, but it also reflects one facet of modern historical study. In contrast, the chronological depth available in archaeological sources prompts a rather different approach. This is brought out most clearly in Groenman-van Waateringe's paper, where she distinguishes a series of changes which might have been missed if she had adopted an historical characterisation.

Some areas are also not covered satisfactorily. While the present volume substantially reflects an increasingly fruitful debate across the

subject boundaries of prehistoric and Roman studies, it also reflects as clearly the gap between Roman and early Medieval studies which was apparent at the conferences. Lastly, impressive though much of the analyses outlined here are, discussion of the societies and actors involved, both barbarian and Roman, still has far to go. We hope that these papers give ground for optimism and debate in these fields.

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Chapter 5

ROMAN AND BARBARIAN: THE ECONOMY OF ROMAN FRONTIER SYSTEMS

Michael Fulford

This contribution is concerned with the period of the more or less static frontiers which developed as Roman expansion ground to a halt in the first and early second centuries AD. Material evidence demonstrates a wide range of contacts between administered Roman territory and societies, both those, as in Gaul and Britain, that were eventually annexed and those, as in the East or in Central Europe, that remained permanently beyond the limits of the empire. The development of fixed frontier systems with regularly disposed fortresses and forts did not rupture contacts with societies beyond them but, because of their greater permanence, they had a more marked impact on those communities with which the garrisons had an intimate and lasting contact. In some areas, such as in the north of Britain the long-term presence of forts and their garrisons served to promote civilian settlements, notably the dependent vici which grew up outside every fort, where no comparable nucleation had occurred before.

Although the development of frontier systems has been very much the preoccupation of military historians and archaeologists working within an historical framework, the economic consequences of their existence have not begun to influence the direction of current research. In a recent paper, for example, Whittaker has argued that 'availability of resources and trade or economic needs may offer a more comprehensive explanation both for the logic of frontier formation and for the eventual collapse' (1983, 110). This was a prefatory remark in a paper which I wish to examine in detail. The paper concluded that 'They (the frontiers) crumbled not because of dark eruptions of new barbarian hordes, even if that contributed, but because frontiers are always zones, constantly shifting and in ferment, ambivalent in their loyalties and often having more in common with the 'other side', as it were, than with their own political centre. One of the major factors in creating this ferment was food and trade in staples' (1983, 121-122).

Whittaker's theory (cf Ch 4 above) is founded on four propositions:

1. 'Roman frontiers frequently cut through zones of relative homogeneity - and in particular of economic or social homogeneity'. (original emphasis).
2. 'that frontiers should not be regarded as linear barriers but as "zones of differentiation". That is to say, frontiers are really regions which are marginal because they are mixed both socially and economically, representing as they do the change over from intensive to extensive production, where the capacity to collect food surplus is offset by social systems that are incapable of producing those surpluses'.
3. 'zones of differentiation are by definition zones of symbiotic exchange - exchange between systems of intensive and extensive production'.
4. 'frontiers are by their marginal nature necessarily agents of change.

The very stability and the economic stimulation of the exchanges alters the marginality of both the economic and military balance'.

The thrust of Whittaker's arguments, as his concluding remarks reveal, is that as the population of barbarian societies beyond the frontier grew (itself a questionable assumption), so did its dependence on the supply of staples from within the empire (1983, 117). As the latter increasingly failed to satisfy barbarian needs in the later empire, so it became subject to their attacks. The destruction caused by these raids and the Roman responses only served to exaggerate the underlying problem, a scarcity of basic resources. The implication is that a mutual interdependence of Roman and barbarian which had developed during the first and second centuries collapsed as a consequence of the cumulative effect of inherent inadequacies of the frontier system.

The major prop of Whittaker's thesis rests on his first three propositions which are themselves inter-related: Roman frontiers tended to be at the limits of the region of intensive agricultural exploitation, and so interrupted symbiotic exchange with regions of extensive exploitation. While it is difficult to take issue with the observation that frontiers were arbitrary in terms of their relation to native societies and their agricultural systems, more contentious is the evaluation of the economic relationship between communities divided by those frontiers. Studies of the regions affected by frontier systems have not yet begun to evaluate the before and after effect of their construction. There is no evidence yet at our disposal to gauge the effect of, say, Hadrian's wall on the communities it divided. It is difficult enough, without recourse to C14 dating, even to distinguish settlements of relevant date, let alone determine whether there were exchanges between communities, whose rupture or control might have a serious effect on them. Suggestions about population growth and decline during the Roman period north of Hadrian's Wall are very dependent on the assumption that the beginning and end of a settlement's life can be dated by the dateable Roman material from it, whereas the presence or absence of such material is more likely to relate to social and economic factors (cf Jobey 1974; Burgess 1984, 171). Hadrian's Wall itself is an example of a frontier system which does not obviously mark a division between intensive (ie predominantly arable) and extensive (predominantly pastoral) exploitation, but which lies within a region whose emphasis was on pastoral farming, though by no means to the exclusion of arable. Similarly, it is by no means clear how the existence of the frontier of the Rhine and Danube actually affected the societies living on the opposing banks. That they shared certain characteristics has been demonstrated, as with the example of oppida in the first century BC (Wells, 1972, 14-31), but the extent of the underlying cross-river traffic is far from clear. In any case, at the time of the Augustan offensive into Germany the major oppida were destroyed at the hands of the Germanic tribes such as the Boii (Collis 1984, 50). We should do well to remember that the frontiers hardened against societies which were themselves static or in a state of evolution or disintegration.

Although the European frontier was located towards the limit of that part of Europe which had promoted major nucleated settlement in the last century BC, which Whittaker would regard as the limit of intensive as opposed to extensive agriculture, it is by no means clear how far the less agriculturally developed Germanic tribes which emerge from the pages of Tacitus' Germania were dependent on societies to the west and south. A distinction has to be made between interdependence at the level of

subsistence and interdependence in the exchange of prestige goods. Just as in Britain the clear distinction between highland and lowland zones ('extensive' and 'intensive') is no longer valid since it can be shown that cereal cultivation played a part in the highland economy (Evans *et al* 1975) as pastoralism did in the lowland zone, so also it is clear that societies beyond the Rhine and Danube practised mixed farming strategies (Thompson 1965, 4-8, 26-8; 1966, 25-34; Gent 1983). Nevertheless, the organisation of these societies and their economies was not such as to produce surpluses that could readily be gathered by a tax-gathering system such as that upon which the Romans depended. Although there is substance in the first three of Whittaker's propositions, we need to consider (while recognising that the imposition of a frontier system may present short-term difficulties for subsistence agriculture) whether societies had to, and did, adjust in the longer term to its existence. Secondly, the degree of interdependence of divided societies at subsistence level remains questionable, not least because so little has been done to examine this in the context of the pre-frontier situation. As for the traffic in prestige goods, the data collected on Roman material beyond the frontier (eg Eggers 1951; Kunow 1983) makes it clear that the development of the frontier created no detectable interruption.

If we are to attach importance to the trans-frontier traffic which can be traced in the historical and archaeological record, to the extent that it had a significant effect on the behaviour of barbarian societies, we need to develop some means of measuring the degree of mutual dependence upon it. We can approach this first from the Roman standpoint by considering how the frontier system as a military organisation was maintained. Establishment costs were borne out of the general revenue accruing to the empire. Where the money was spent to maintain the frontier system will represent the extent of the frontier's hinterland. Communities close to the frontiers will have supplied a proportion of what was required; an amount that would vary both according to the size of the establishment to be supplied, the capacity of the native communities to deliver and the degree of coercion on the part of the Romans. It might have amounted to no more than what was extracted as tax. In most cases the authorities had to look much further afield for their requirements and certain basic needs, as Breeze (1984) has shown, sometimes had to be sought at a distance in neighbouring provinces. It will have been more difficult to requisition from societies with a dispersed pattern of settlement which lacked identifiable central places.

The problem then is how to identify that 'hinterland' from which the frontier system regularly drew upon for their needs. There are several ways to approach this problem: firstly, by examining grain deposits in forts it may be possible to demonstrate by the type of cereal and the associated seeds the environment where they were grown. Professor Groenman van Waateringe, for example, draws attention (Ch 6 below) to the consistent presence of wheat in the forts of the lower Rhineland when the available evidence from neighbouring native settlements points to barley as the major cereal (Körber-Grohne 1981). The implication is that the wheat was imported from outside the Rhine delta. At Caerleon the presence of seeds of certain weeds associated with a particular deposit of grain pointed to an origin outside Britain (Helbaek 1964). Analysis of faunal remains can also be equally helpful. It has been shown that the pax Romana in north-west Europe led to the breeding of larger domesticates within the empire (Bökönyi 1974, 128-33; Boessneck and von den Driesch 1978, 31-3); metrical analysis of surviving bone assemblages may help to clarify how far the fort and vicus assemblages are comparable with those from native farmsteads. Maltby has

noted that, on the basis of the small available sample, in the south-west and the 'highland zone' smaller 'Iron Age' stock is prevalent in the Roman period (Maltby 1981, 185-192). Much more work is necessary to define the source of the animal populations upon which the frontier establishments depended. The continental European evidence for the lack of larger animals outside the frontier is in itself a revealing insight into the lack of movement and breeding between populations.

Since most of the regular supplies to the frontier consisted of perishable items of food, clothing, fuel etc, we have to rely on 'tracer elements' to determine their source. Recently the idea has been developed that for it to be economic for certain low-value goods to be traded long distances, they would have to have formed a minor component of larger and otherwise more valuable loads. So Middleton has argued that the extensive trade in sigillata in Gaul and the Rhineland was parasitic on the supply routes that supported the Rhineland frontier (1979). A similar case can be argued for early Roman Britain and, as late as the late second century, we can present a case for the northern frontier's dependence on a hinterland which consisted of almost the entire province. This is deduced from the number and diversity of sources of the various coarse pottery wares that are found in frontier establishments (Fulford 1981; 1984). The assumption is that the pottery was attracted northwards along supply lines which carried the official requisitions. In the course of time the dependence of the northern frontier on long distance supply routes gradually diminished, partly as a result of the reduction in the size of the garrison and partly, perhaps, because of increased productivity from lowland farmers thus reducing the catchment area from which it was necessary to draw supplies.

Undoubtedly communities nearer the frontier garrison contributed as well, if only in the form of taxation. If we are to use material evidence as an indicator of the extent of the interaction between Roman and native close to the frontier, then the very lack of Roman material on native sites in northern Britain is surely significant. Coinage on native sites there is so rare as to make it highly improbable that it was used as anything but an object of barter (Robertson 1970; 1983). The poverty of the material assemblage of native sites in general is well known, thanks to George Jobey's meticulous work in the northern frontier region (cf Jobey 1982). South of Hadrian's Wall there are fewer excavated sites from which to make exhaustive comparisons, but recent work in Cumbria on native settlements has produced similar evidence. However, though relatively poor in terms of the Roman material present compared with southern sites, the Cumbrian sites appear to be a little richer than their counterparts north of Hadrian's Wall (Higham 1982; Higham and Jones 1985, 99-100; cf Ch 9 below). This might suggest that the authorities tended to look for their needs within the frontier wherever possible, even though societies on both sides of the frontier shared a similar economy. In the case of the northern frontier as a whole in, say, the second century, the character of the native economy and social organisation seem to have precluded any dependence on that sector, but, the area might be regarded as a source of 'top-up' supplies. In mid-second century Britain the entire province was, in the sense that I have defined, the frontier zone.

The pattern along the frontiers varied considerably, depending upon the kind of organisation and economy that the Romans encountered. We have already referred to the lower Rhineland in the context of the initial conquest; by the second and mid-third century sufficient adjustments had been made to the native economy within the frontier that Roman and native

had become more integrated as their material assemblages reveal (Bloemers 1983). This Romanisation within the frontier zone only served to emphasise differences between communities either side of the Rhine (Willems 1983, 121). As the native economy within the frontier responded to the needs of the Roman establishment, so the dependence on the long-distance supply routes diminished as the evidence of extra-regional imports shows.

What the British and Rhineland evidence reveals is that the everyday needs of the frontier were met from within the empire. When local economies were inadequate the imperial authorities were prepared to look deep within their own territory for the necessary requirements. The only circumstances where the Romans might have looked across the frontier is where there was a sufficient degree of centralisation and stability to make a practicable arrangement. Where such circumstances prevailed the Romans generally turned to annexation as a solution, as in the case of (southern) Britain, the agri decumates and Dacia.

This being so, it is still necessary to account for the Roman material that did find its way across the frontier. At the outset it has to be admitted that a basic problem inhibiting our understanding of the significance of Roman finds beyond the limes is the lack of detailed studies of Roman material inside the frontier so that useful comparison can be made. We desperately need, for example, the kind of analysis of Roman material from native sites south of the Scottish border, including south of Hadrian's Wall that Professor Robertson has made of finds to the north. How else can we gauge accurately the effect of the frontier on the circulation of goods on either side of it? At present we can simply observe that Roman finds are scarce from native sites in Scotland, particularly after the early third century when we no longer have to contend with the problem of recognising losses from troops on campaign or in garrison on the Antonine Wall. We need to investigate further Higham's observation that native sites in Cumbria are richer in Roman material than settlements in Northumberland (Higham 1982; Higham and Jones 1985, 99-120). How much richer? Are we comparing settlements of a comparable status? We can also observe that after the withdrawal of Roman forces from Scotland the pattern of coins lost there bears no relation to the pattern from southern England (Robertson 1970; 1983). Even if these coins had a completely different value to coinage within the frontier - if they were regarded only for their metal content, for example - we still might expect to see some correlation in the pattern of losses either side of the frontier if the level of traffic was sufficiently high to leave residues that reflected the provincial pattern of loss (Casey 1984). Our view of Roman material beyond the frontier will take on a different connotation when we have comparable data from northern England as a whole.

The classic study of Roman material beyond the European frontier remains that of Eggers (1951), although it has been modified in detail by more recent studies (Kunow 1983). The patterning of Roman finds beyond the Rhine and Danube has given rise to the term 'buffer zone', a region extending up to 200km beyond the frontier, where the number and character of finds has suggested to Hedeager (1978), for example, a limited money economy, perhaps including markets and a merchant class and, in Whittaker's view, a zone intimately related to the existence of the frontier system. As with Britain, the emphasis on finds outside the frontier to the exclusion of distribution patterns within may have affected our perspective (Fulford 1985).

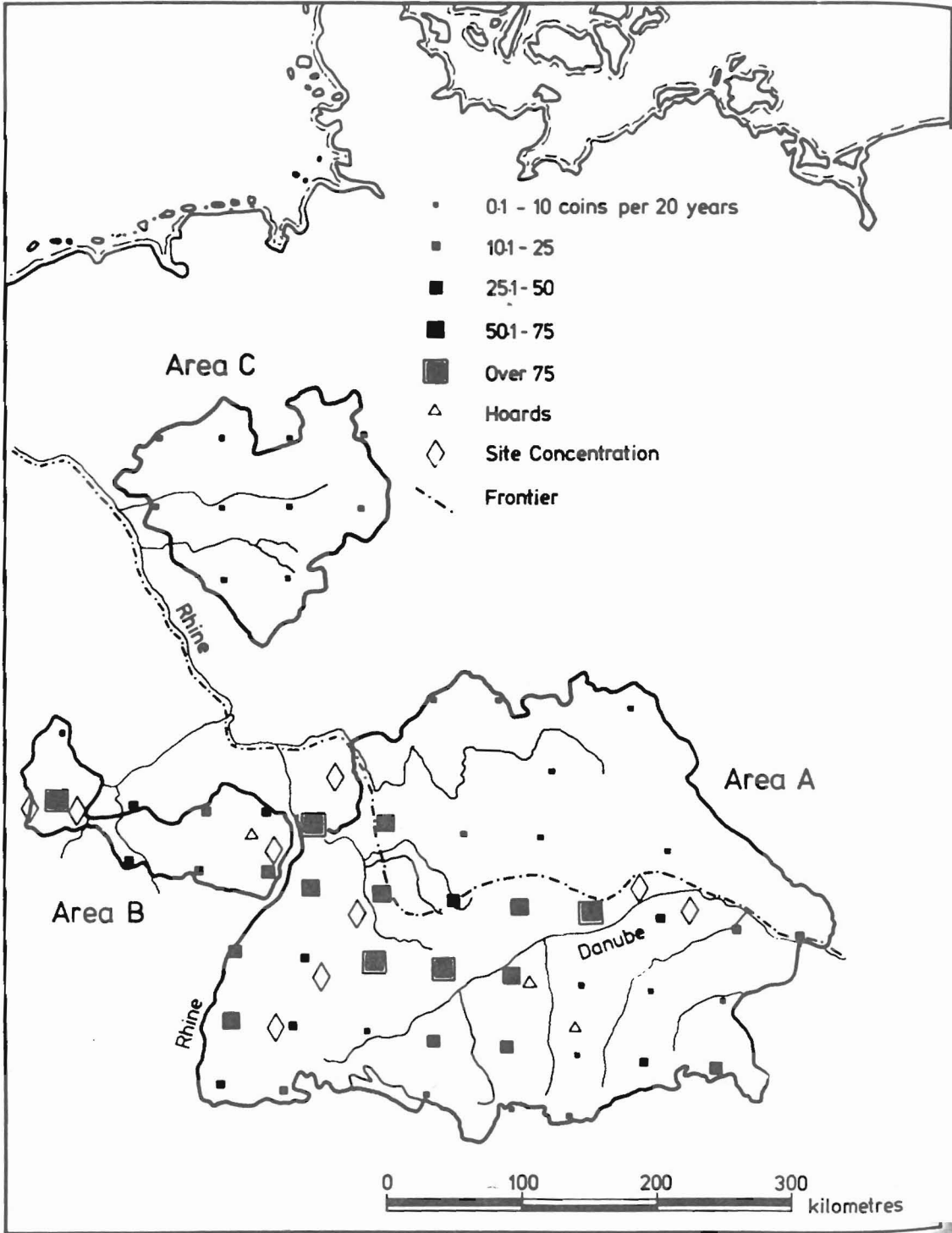


Fig 5.1 Distribution of coins of Hadrian in Germany (after Davies 1983). Each symbol (and on Figs 5.2 & 5.3) represents coin loss, excluding site concentrations and hoards, in an area of 50km by 50km.

Thanks to the Fundmünzen der römischen Zeit in Deutschland volumes we can now make preliminary surveys of the pattern of coin loss across certain parts of Gernany which include the frontier. John Davies has now done this with interesting results (1983). Using the evidence of the coinage of Hadrian, we can see that there is a sharp contrast between the amounts of coinage lost inside and outside the frontier (Fig 5.1). We can also see that the actual build-up of coinage is not very pronounced along the frontier itself; the latter was well integrated into the ecooomy of the hinterland. However one may regard the way in which coinage was used, the difference between intra-mural and extra-mural finds suggests that the frontier did indeed have a barrier-like effect and that the Roman authorities did not look beyond the frontier to satisfy its economic needs to anything like the same extent as it did within the limes. While coinage might be regarded as a special case, sadly there are few other studies of Roman material which include intra-mural and extra-mural finds. Several ceramic distributions may be cited as complementing the coin evidence: Gallo-Belgic wares of the first century BC to the mid-first century AD (Timby 1982), central and East Gaulish wares of the second to mid-third centuries AD (King 1981), late third to early fifth century Argonne ware (Hübener 1968). These distributions all show a pronounced cut off at the frontier. While finds beyond the frontier may be numbered in their hundreds or, rarely, thousands, those within the frontier have often been too numerous to defy authoritative cataloguing (Hedeager 1978).

Although there is a danger of exaggerating the importance of the 'buffer zone' and indeed beyond, to the economic survival of the frontier system, there are a few areas where the amount of Roman material from settlement contexts suggests a greater degree of interdependence than seems to be the case generally. One such area is Frisia where settlements have produced quantities of finds, including many of low-value type, such as pottery and brooches, which suggest that relations were not simply confined to the elite (Eggers 1981). Another area is the agri decumates, the triangle of land between the Rhine and Danube, which was actually part of the empire between the later first century and the mid-third century AD. Although the numismatic evidence from the pre-annexation period (ie Flavian period) is ambiguous, since we cannot be sure how much pre-Flavian coinage was actually lost before annexation, it does suggest that the use of coins within the native economy in this region had reached a comparable level to that within the frontier, west of the Rhine. Comparison with the area to the north (C, Münster), which is poor in finds, is also suggestive (Fig 5.2). A comparable pattern can be detected with early fourth century coins; while there is a marked contrast between the agri decumates, then no longer part of the empire, and territory to the west of the Rhine, there is also a clear difference between the pattern of loss in Münster and the valley of the Lippe and the southern German region (Davies 1980) (Fig 5.3).

The agri decumates and Frisia, then, can serve as examples of areas beyond the frontier which, more than other regions, were inter-related with economies of the frontier provinces. It remains unclear how mutually inter-dependent these regions were on the empire; the evidence of iron-working from Fedderson Wierde, for example, cannot be regarded as replacing an industry within the frontier. We cannot yet easily trace iron to its source; nor can we easily compare the relative output of different centres (cf Whittaker 1983, 115). Roman material from these areas is distinguished by its comparatively humble character and the fact that it derives mostly from settlements rather than burials or votive deposits, which account for most of the finds of Roman material from central Europe and Scandinavia and

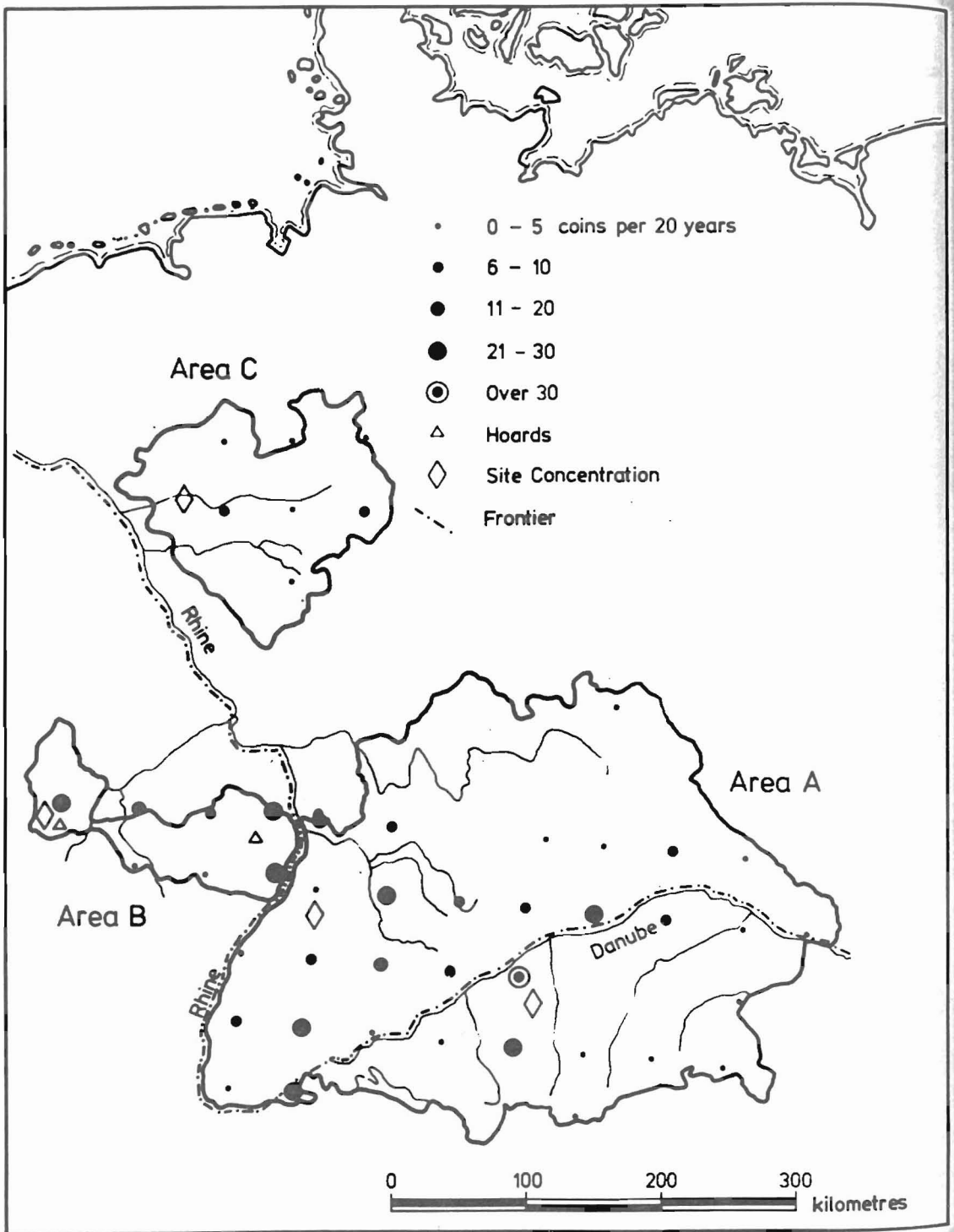


Fig 5.2 Distribution of Republican coin finds in Germany (after Davies 1983).

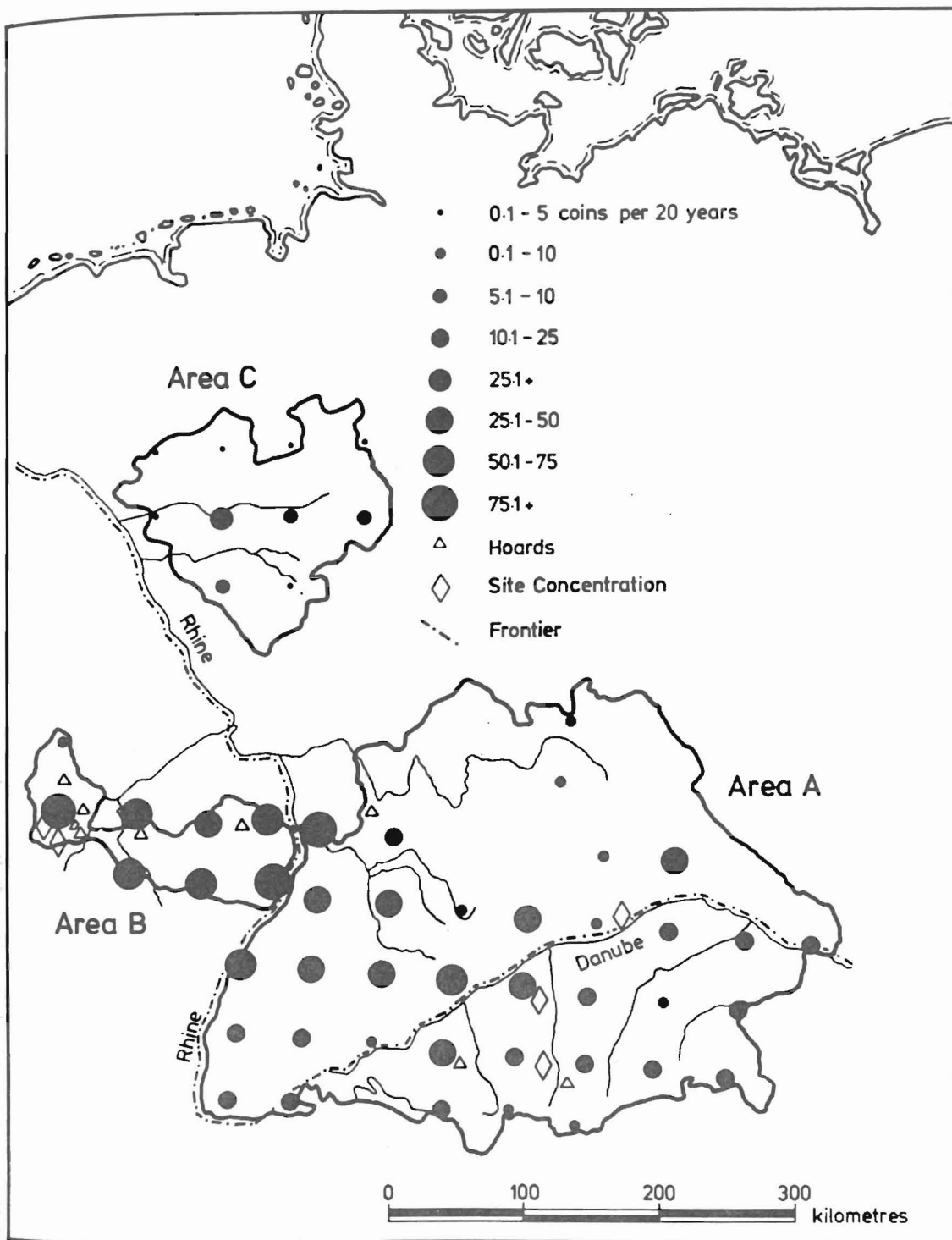


Fig 5.3 Distribution of coin finds of the period AD 294-317 in Germany (after Davies 1980).

point to a circulation confined to the elite.

Thus we can conclude that the survival of Roman frontier systems, from an economic standpoint, was only marginally dependent on societies outside the frontier. To a large extent the frontiers form the outer limit of a self-contained world. Even for communities in the immediate hinterland within the frontiers, there was a mixed degree of dependence which varied both regionally and chronologically according to local circumstances such as social organisation and farming economy.

But even if economic relations with the barbarian world were not critical to the economic survival of frontiers, they existed nevertheless and it is important to assess their significance as a more general phenomenon of Roman relations with the barbarian world.

It is clear from the contexts of the majority of finds of Roman material from central and northern Europe and Scandinavia that these objects were highly regarded by native society. Finds occur mainly in graves or as votive offerings; they circulated among the elite and their possession and disposal can be regarded as critical in both promoting and supporting a hierarchical society. The mechanisms by which this material entered barbarian society varied; some arrived as diplomatic gifts or as subsidies to defuse threatening political confrontations against the frontier - the silver vessels which Tacitus (Germ 5) informs us were given to German envoys and chiefs serves as an appropriate example, or the payment made to the Maeatae in Scotland by Virius Lupus in the late second century (Dio LXXV, V). Many of the finds probably arrived in exchange for luxury goods such as amber or furs. Such mechanisms, various as they were, regulating long distance traffic, must be seen as distinct from any regular intercourse upon which the economic survival of the frontier system depended.

Reciprocal exchange systems between the Roman and barbarian world at the level of luxury goods are not, of course, confined to Europe alone. Much more important, at least in terms of the value of exchanges, were the connections with India and Asia which supplied, most importantly, silk and spices to the Roman world. According to Pliny, writing in the first century AD, the annual cost of the trade to India was 55 million HS (Nat Hist VI, 101); later he estimated the annual cost of trade with China, India and western Asia at 100 million HS (Nat Hist XII, 84). The accuracy of these figures is not important here; such transactions (and Pliny's relative silence on the subject) put Rome's economic relations with barbarian Europe in perspective. This luxury traffic can be seen as separate from the specific issue of frontiers, having its origin long before their existence and continuing thereafter. Study of the European finds indicates that there was no appreciable change in the flow of Roman goods to central Europe and Scandinavia as a whole during the Roman period (Hedeager 1978). However, changing distributions do show that different groups were gaining access to this material at different times. It is not possible therefore to relate any of the periods of barbarian unrest with any interruptions or diminution in the movement of goods across the frontier. Indeed, where we can adduce substantial changes in imperial expenditure this is not reflected in trans-frontier finds. It is important to observe that a reduction of about 50% in the combined military establishment of Britain and the Germanies (which itself implies a 50% cut in expenditure) between the later first and mid-second century AD had no obvious impact on traffic across the frontier nor any contemporary response from Barbaricum (cf Fulford 1984).

Nonetheless it is clear that peace was bought, not just by force of arms but by the payment of subsidies, usually of gold or silver, but also, according to Themistius (Orat X. 135B), of grain and ship-loads of clothing. Whether he is referred to a long established practice of sending grain or a development that was associated with Valens is not clear. In general our sources are not clear as to which tribes benefited from these payments; nor do we have much information as to their size and regularity. The practice seems to be an extension of the diplomatic gift and was established by the first century AD (see Braund, Ch 1 above). Payment was presumably directed to the tribal leadership and it was their coherence and the relations with their retainers that were threatened if subsidies were discontinued. When this happened, as it did with the Visigoths in the fourth century, war with Rome did not follow as an immediate and inescapable consequence (Thompson 1966, 13-14).

We know too that in the case of the Visigoths, the interruption of trading relations reduced them to great hardship 'owing to the lack of the necessities of life', so helping Valens to victory over them in AD 369 (Thompson 1966, 19, citing Amm Marc XXVII, 5. 7). This seems clear evidence of the damage that could be caused by completely breaking off normal trading relations, as opposed to the strict regulation of trade which was widely practised. It is evident too that the effects of a complete embargo were felt on both sides (Themistius Ora X, 135 CD). Two uncertainties arise from the Visigothic evidence; firstly the extent to which trade was devoted to staples as opposed to luxuries, secondly how far we can generalise from the evidence of the lower Danube to the frontier as a whole. Given the expense involved in moving bulky commodities like grain overland, it would seem unlikely that perishables of that kind commonly formed items of long distance as opposed to local trade. Within the empire, for example, it required imperial intervention to pay for food and its transport to relieve famine in Antioch in AD 362-3 (Julian Misop 369). It has also to be remembered that just as it was difficult to extract surplus as tax from a society of dispersed settlement and lacking a centralising social organisation, so too would be the reverse, of distributing commodities like grain within such a society. The inherent difficulties of paying subsidies in the form of bulky commodities like grain may well explain why the preferred medium throughout the Roman period was of precious metal.

To conclude: we should discriminate between a day-to-day maintenance of frontier systems that was to a very large extent dependent on the provincial economies of the empire and the continuing undercurrent of long distance traffic in luxuries across the frontier. Even where we can detect evidence of regular interaction, this has not been observed at a level where, in the form of artefact distributions, it obscures the frontier itself. In the later empire, the unrest among barbarian societies could be soothed, albeit temporarily, by subsidies of various sorts from the imperial government. We clearly need to understand a great deal more about the conflicts within barbarian society in the later empire, but it is difficult to see how these could have arisen through any breakdown in the longer term habitual economic relations between Rome and the barbarian world. This is not to deny grave economic and social pressures within barbarian society, but their development cannot be attributed to the frontier and the vicissitudes in Roman and barbarian relations. The Roman European frontier was more of a barrier than a semi-permeable membrane and the level of traffic, generally strictly controlled, was not so great as to produce an homogeneous culture

on either side of it. Interdependence between Rome and the barbarian world was, with few exceptions, limited and the lack of development among trans-frontier societies is more apparent than growth (cf Fulford 1985). Whether in the form of trade or as subsidies, the economic links across the European frontier should not be overestimated. Evidence that the volume of traffic and barbarian dependence on it had grown during the later empire is far from conclusive. Indeed if such was the case, and we were to accept the model of interdependence, we would expect to find evidence of comparable growth within the frontier provinces over the same time period, but this remains to be demonstrated. Even if the resources of food etc. were available within the empire as a whole, and that is unlikely, it is doubtful whether there were the means available to mobilise them to satisfy those societies whose circumstances gave them no alternative other than to attack and invade the empire. In order to refine our knowledge of the character of these relations, we need a great deal more information on the similarities and contrasts between settlement, material culture and economy of societies on both sides of the frontier. Once marshalled, the archaeological evidence can provide this information, but necessarily within a broad chronological framework, which can then be set alongside the slender, particularistic, but chronologically more precise historical record.

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