The Romans, as the chief conquering people of the ancient European world, were engaged in a continuous task of frontier fixing, and a study thereof may throw considerable light on their statesmanship. On the details of this frontier regulation much new information has been obtained, and is still being gathered in, by excavation and by air surveys. In this article I am offering no more than a preliminary review of frontier history under the earlier Caesars.

Under the Republic the tentative and opportunist character of Rome's foreign policy, and the tumultuous rate of its territorial expansion, brought it about that each successive choice of a new boundary could be no more than a temporary expedient. But Augustus' momentous perception, that the Roman State was nearing the limits of its profitable expansion, carried with it the need, and the opporunity, for laying down some general principles of frontier establishment. In the light of this policy of stabilisation he recognised that a 'scientific' frontier, offering the best facilities for defence, should in general consist of mountains and deserts, of seas and of rivers. As we shall see, Augustus had a notable preference for river frontiers, and not without reason, for river valleys usually provide easy lateral communications for defensive forces, and the tributary streams often furnish good connexions with base fortresses and inner lines of defence. And no ancient armies knew better the value of mobility than those of Rome; none were better trained in marching or better provided with allweather roads. Not until the third century did the 'Maginot mentality' creep into the Roman defence.

(A) Africa.
Of the frontier problems to which the early Caesars addressed themselves, those of the African continent require least notice. Defence here consisted mainly of police operations against sporadic raiders from the desert oases and the fastnesses of Mt. Atlas; and the natural line of demarkation lay near the outer edge of the high steppe country with which the cultivable land is fringed. The only question here was how much of the pasturable plateau should be comprised within the Roman border. The Caesars solved this problem by a gradual advance to the salt lakes which extend beyond the isolated ridge of Mt. Aures. The reason for this progression was presumably that the unencumbered steppe offered an excellent patrolling ground for the nimble squadrons of the Numidian light horse, which from this point of vantage could give early warning of coming forays. The only artificial defences here required were base camps, and detached observation forts near the actual frontier line.

1 The value of these air surveys for the delimitation of frontiers has been notably demonstrated in North Africa and on the Syrian border; and much of the new information in the Ordnance Survey of Roman Britain (3rd ed. to be published shortly) is due to this source. The introduction of this method of research is largely due to Mr. O. G. S. Crawford, the editor of the Survey.
In the Nile valley the boundary, as ever since Pharaonic times, lay near Assuan, where the Nubian desert extends close to the river border, and navigation is obstructed by the last of the cataracts.

(B) Asia.

(1) Arabia. — On the Arabian border of Asia the problem of defence was substantially as in Africa. Indeed the Romans had even better reason for not advancing far beyond the cultivable zone, for the neighbouring Arabs were traders rather than raiders, and served the Romans well as intermediaries in the perfume trade of the Yemen and the spice trade of India and Ceylon. Accordingly Pompey had left Nabataean Arabia, extending from Damascus to the Gulf of Akaba, in the hands of a native dynasty, and Augustus confirmed this arrangement. It might therefore appear that when Trajan annexed the Nabataean land and constructed a strategic road along its desert front (A.D. 105) he was committing an act of over-insurance. It may be conjectured that the unrest in the Near East, which soon after involved Trajan in heavy warfare in Mesopotamia and Palestine, had previously manifested itself in forays on the part of some desert Arabs, which the Nabataeans had difficulty in repelling single-handed, and so induced the Roman emperor to take over the desert patrol.

(2) Mesopotamia. — The annexation of Syria by Pompey, and consequent extension of Roman territory to the Euphrates, presented Augustus with a question of a quite different order, to which neither Pompey himself nor Julius Caesar nor Antony had given a definitive reply. The Roman dominions now adjoined those of the Arsacids, the rulers of the well matured Parthian empire, whose military organisation enabled them to wage la grande guerre, and to open the long chapter of their wars against Rome with the resounding victory of Carrhae. Should the Romans make themselves safe against another such encounter by an advance in force to the Tigris, so as to wrest from the Arsacids both the river valleys, which were their main source of wealth, and so disable them from any major counter-attack? Or should they merely strengthen the Euphrates lines? Or should they follow a middle course by cutting off the projecting angle of the middle Euphrates and here construct a system of outworks to absorb the first shock of a Parthian offensive?

From the scale on which Caesar had prepared the 'revanche for Carrhae' we may infer that he intended to follow up victory in battle by annexing most if not all of Mesopotamia. But, given his predisposition not to break new ground save for compelling reasons, Augustus made peace with the Arsacids on the basis of the existing frontier; and subsequent emperors who planned an advance to the Tigris always ended by voluntary retirement. The most notable instance of this flow and ebb occurred under Trajan, who actually realised Caesar's ambition of overtaking all Mesopotamia and displayed the arms of Rome on the Persian Gulf, yet shortly before his death fell back towards the Euphrates; and Hadrian definitely reverted to the old boundary. Some fifty years later M. Aurelius' general Avidius Cassius repeated Trajan's conquests, but his emperor took no advantage of them, save to retain the small territory of Osroëne in the angle of the Euphrates as a trip-wire gone. In A.D. 197 Septimius Severus for the third time swept through Mesopotamia and captured the city of Seleucia (the equivalent of later Bagdad), yet he eventually drew his
frontier on approximately the same lines as M. Aurelius. The same fluctuations of advance and retreat also characterised the frontier settlements of later Roman emperors in their dealings with the Sassanid successors of the Parthian monarchy.

The hesitations of the Roman emperors in their choice between the Euphrates and the Tigris suggest that in their view the merits of these two frontiers appeared to be closely balanced. To the modern inquirer it may seem that the abounding riches of both the river valleys, and the eminence of Seleucia as a centre of communications, ought to have definitely tilted the balance in favour of the Tigris. But we do not know how far the Caesars took the economic factor into consideration. In regard to the strategic factor, they knew no doubt that the course of the Tigris from the Armenian mountains to the sea was shorter than that of the Euphrates; and they may have been aware that the Tigris, which carries a larger and more constant volume of water, formed in itself a more effective barrier. But against this we must set the fact that whichever way a Roman advance towards Seleucia was made, whether down the Euphrates, or across the ill-furnished steppe land of inner Mesopotamia, or from Asia Minor across Armenia, the total length of the march might put a serious strain on Roman communications; and the history of Trajan’s campaigns (about which we have relatively full information) makes it clear that this emperor did not dispose of a sufficient force to seize and hold Seleucia without endangering his rear. Herein perhaps we may find the key to Roman policy on this sector of the frontier.

(3) Armenia. — To the north of Mesopotamia, the Armenian highland was temporarily occupied by Roman forces as a flank guard to an army operating between the river valleys, or engaged in the main advance to the Tigris. But, apart from the one west-to-east line of communications by way of the upper Euphrates and the Araxes, any continuous march through Armenia can only be made over an incessant switchback route of hill and dale; and the Araxes valley eventually leads away from the Tigris basin. Hence it never seems to have been part of the Caesars’ policy to include Armenia permanently within their frontiers.

(C) Europe.

(1) Italy. — In the days of Augustus the first consideration of frontier politics was still whether Italy could trust to the protection of the Alpine barrier against intruders from the European continent. Behind this barrier Italy could conduct its defence on inner lines, with a lateral road on the north bank of the Po, focussed on Milan, to co-ordinate its several sectors. But in Rome the memory of past Gallic invasions, and of the break-through by the Cimbri in 101 B.C., lived long, and it was partly with these in mind that Julius Caesar drew a new frontier along the lower and middle Rhine.

By the time of the Bellum Gallicum a new danger to Italy appeared in the formation of a monarchy, centred in Dacia (Transylvania), that extended from the middle Danube to the Crimea. Its king, Burebistas, was prolonging his raids into the Balkan peninsula as far as Illyria, and could be expected to probe the pass through the Carnic Alps which offers the easiest entry into Italy. True, the sudden death of Burebistas (c. 44 B.C.), and the collapse of his realm, offered
a pretext for putting aside the Dacian problem. Nevertheless, as soon as Caesar's adoptive son Octavian was free to turn his arms to fresh conquests he entered the Danube basin by the valley of the Save and established a base for further advance at Sirmium (36—5 B.C.). Here for the time being he had to suspend his ulterior projects, but meanwhile he had made secure the weakest part of Italy's land frontier.

Octavian the triumvir had put the north-eastern Alpine passes out of enemy reach; but there remained for Augustus the problem of the central Alpine region, from which the Cimbri had made their thrust into Italy. Here the height of the passes and the sheer massiveness of the Alpine range might seem to render prohibitive the cost of a protective advance. But for the sake of the Italian heart-land Augustus was prepared for an effort of the Caesarian type; and the brilliant pincer operation by which his stepsons cleared the valleys of the Rhine (from Basle) and the Adige rendered easy the occupation of the entire central massif (15 B.C.).

2) The Danube lands. — The Alps had now been made into Italy's citadel, and her defences were complete. But there remained the major problem of providing a general frontier for the European zone of the empire. Julius Caesar had here shown the way by establishing the middle and lower Rhine as the boundary in the west; and before he completed the inner defensive bulwark round Italy, Octavian had felt his way towards another outer river line. Whether his occupation of the Save valley in 36—5 B.C. was planned at the outset as a first stage in an advance upon the Danube is uncertain: perhaps it was intended merely to open a back door upon Illyria. In any case, Augustus could not in the long run evade the long overdue task of amending the unduly and precarious boundaries of the province of Macedonia, which had suffered periodically from incursions by plundering tribes from the northern Balkan lands and beyond. Therefore, after the campaign of Actium he directed all his available forces to clear the Morava valley and the passes of the main Balkan range, so as to gain the line of the Danube. With the gradual establishment of Roman garrisons in the territory thus gained the entire lower course of the river became the Roman boundary in eastern Europe. The process was completed by the annexation of the kingdom of Thrace in A.D. 46 2.

A simultaneous advance of the frontier to the upper and middle Danube was achieved by a number of independent operations which were perhaps undertaken in the first instance as local rectifications of the boundary line rather than as a part of a comprehensive and premeditated plan, but led on by a gradual filling of gaps to the establishment of an unbroken river line. In 15 B.C. Tiberius and Drusus followed up their swoop across the Alpine sector by a quick advance to the upper Danube. In 12—9 B.C. Tiberius made a more gradual forward movement from the line of the Save through the forested foothills of the Alps, so as to reach the Danube on its middle course, and established central garrison points at Carnuntum (Bratislava) and Aquincum (Buda-Pest) near the great bend. In the ensuing thirty or forty years the new boundary was consolidated from Passau to Beograd.

2 Details of the Roman frontier operations are usually lacking in our scanty literary records. But archaeological evidence for the siting and dating of Roman roads and camps is gradually providing the means for reconstructing more fully the frontier establishment.
Thus a series of experimental moves forward in the century from Caesar's conquest of Gaul was completed by the fixing of the Roman frontier contumaciously with the Rhine and the Danube. This is the supreme example of Rome's reliance on river boundaries.

(3) The Rhine and Elbe. — The combined frontier of the Rhine and Danube entailed this disadvantage, that the sharp projecting angle of the Rhine at Basle considerably increased the length of the boundary and offered aggressors from Germany a convenient central of operations. It was probably in recognition of this that in B.C. 15 Tiberius and Drusus followed up their campaign in Switzerland by an advance from the upper Rhine to the upper Danube, so as to smooth out the Basle angle in some degree. But between 9 B.C. and the end of his reign Augustus engaged in a far bolder scheme which would have had the effect of substituting the Elbe for the Rhine as the Danube's counterpart. It is not certain whether Augustus had any clear idea of the course of the Elbe, or whether on this occasion he once more acted in a Caesarian spirit of adventure. In any case, the German campaigns of his stepsons (9 B.C. and onward) were so conducted as almost to command success. By threading their way along the convenient tributaries of the main German river system (the Main, the Lippe and the Saale), they safely opened long avenues through the forest; and they replenished their supplies by fixing rendez-vous with detachments of the Roman Channel Fleet, which had meantime opened up the estuaries and the Weser and Elbe and had navigated these up-stream to the meeting-point.

Having made sure of the Elbe, Augustus was emboldened to attempt a gigantic pincer operation between two land forces. In A.D. 6 a Rhine army was directed up the Main to make touch with a force which Tiberius was to conduct from Carnuntum across the whole length of Bohemia. Had the gods smiled on this venture, the Romans would no doubt have gone on to establish a more distant but much more compact frontier along the Elbe and the Moldau, with a short land-bridge to Carnuntum on the middle Danube. But, like in Trajan's Mesopotamian wars, lengthening lines of communication overstrained the resources of Tiberius' garrison detachments, and rebellion in his rear compelled him to call off the entire pincer movement. And three years later the Clades Variana, in which a new Roman commander, inexperienced in forest warfare, was ambushed and lost his whole army, caused Augustus to write off all his trans-Rhenane and trans-Danubian policy and to revert to his Rhine Danube line.

Augustus' policy of pinching off the Basle salient was resumed on a much reduced scale by Vespasian and Domitian, who gradually pushed out a line of high ground between Bonn and a point on the Danube near Regensburg. This advanced line was consolidated by Antoninus Pius by means of a continuous barrier of earth or palisades. But this barrier, and the intermediate chain of castella behind it, served merely as outworks of the main frontier along the rivers.

3 Presumably this barrier was intended as an obstacle for mounted raiders, like the Great Wall of China.
4 The systematic investigations in the zone of the limes Germanicus have served as a model for all such researches.
Bohemia. — After the withdrawal of Tiberius' forces from Bohemia in A.D. 6 the middle Danube sector of the frontier was not subject to new experiments until after A.D. 167. In this year two German tribes, the Quadi and the Marcomanni, under pressure from two hinterland peoples with the ominous names of Vandalii and Langobardi — the spearhead of the later Great Migrations —, made a clean breach near the big Danube bend, and it took some twelve years of hard fighting (A.D. 167—79) to repair the broken front. M. Aurelius, who had borne the brunt of battle in person, now planned to make a break in the river boundary by advancing his lines to the curve of the Bohemian mountains and the western Carpathians. Had he lived to do this, he would have provided the Roman empire with the same forested bulwark which the Czechs subsequently sought to maintain against the overlapping German tide, and he would have sealed off the Moravian Gate, which was even then becoming a main approach for migrants from Further Europe. But a line of defence which formed three sides of a quadrilateral would have extended the Roman frontier considerably. Consequently Aurelius' project was abandoned by his successor, who contented himself with providing a line of outworks not far from the Danube.

Dacia. — The lower Danube frontier held good for a century, until the Dacian monarchy was resuscitated by king Decebalus, who exploited the rich gold mines of the southern Carpathians to build up a compact state and a well-found army, and broke the Balkan defence line in a sustained offensive. The counter-attacks under Domitian and Trajan (A.D. 86—106) entailed upon the Roman armies a heavy task of exploration in the defiles of the Carpathians before they could make the final clinch with Decebalus. Having at last disposed of Decebalus, Trajan overcame his reluctance to abandon the well-tried principle of river boundaries and drew a new frontier which partly followed the loop of the Carpathians, so as to include Transylvania as a forward bastion of defence. But it appears as if the Roman emperors never completed the usual outer limes of roads and forts to north and west, and as if the open plain between the Danube and Theiss was left as a no-man's-land. On the other hand they drafted a considerable civilian population into Dacia for the further development of the mines. No doubt the principal Roman reason of the Caesars for annexing Dacia was to deny it as an invasion base for future Decebalii. But in this instance it may be assumed that they were also influenced by a glittering economic allurement into making a major extension of the frontier.

Britain. — The problem whether to follow up Caesar's conquest of Gaul by extending the Roman frontier beyond the Channel first presented itself to Augustus, who eventually decided against this further step. The reason which he gave for this, that conquests in Britain would not repay their costs, implies that the security of Gaul was not seriously menaced by the occasional tip-and-run raids of British chiefs who lacked the means and the organising power for any systematic invasion, and that the island's slowly developing economic resources offered no quick prize of victory. Why Claudius went back on Augustus' resolve — desire for the kudos of conquests 'ultra Oceanum', a hope
against hope that Britain after all might prove an Eldorado, or a strategic precaution against previously underrated invasion dangers? — remains a matter of controversy.

The advance across Britain raised anew the question of frontiers in a familiar form, how far to press a victory. The Roman armies naturally occupied the entire English plain, which offers no serious internal barriers; and when they went on to incorporate the Welsh highland and a broad strip of the northern hill country, so as to guard the cultivable English lowlands against their neighbours’ raids, they anticipated the well considered policies of Plantagener and Tudor monarchs. But in northern Britain the problem of ever lengthening communications once again caught them between two minds.

Agricola, the general who had carried the Roman arms from Tyne to Forth, and along the rim of the Highland massif as far as Aberdeen (A.D. 79—83)⁵, was naturally led on to adopt the policy of making a clean job of it ‘removing the sight of liberty’ from the natives. He sent forward his fleet to explore Pentland Firth, and harboured a wild surmise that he could make short work of Ireland — as to whose position in Ocean the Romans were still quite hazy. The emperor Domitian, realising the strain which this, at best, would place on Roman resources, called a timely halt; but he paid a tribute to Agricola’s achievement by allowing him to consolidate the ground already won. The main element of Rome’s first frontier defences in North Britain consisted of a chain of small forts and observation towers strung along a cross-road between the Forth and Clyde estuaries, and a large base camp at Newstead-on-Tweed. A sparse line of forts was also retained along the foot of the Grampians.

By A.D. 100 these advanced forts had been abandoned; c. A.D. 115 a deep breach was made through the Forth-Clyde line, and the Roman garrisons evacuated all Scotland. In A.D. 122 the emperor Hadrian, after a personal inspection of the isthmus between Tyne and Solway, selected it as the site of Rome’s most monumental frontier. When completed in 127, ‘Hadrian’s Wall’ consisted of an imposingly solid curtain of dressed stone, astride of a northward facing series of ridges, and well garnished with built-in forts and outlying castella. Behind the line, at Corbridge-on-Tyne, a large storehouse provided the garrison against the event of a long investment. Seemingly the Wall was designed to last as long as ‘Roma Aeterna’ herself. Nevertheless in A.D. 142—3 the emperor Antoninus replaced it by a similar barrier on the re-occupied Forth-Clyde line. Though the Antonine Wall was merely of timber or turf, it also lay athwart a line of high ground and was comparable in strength with that of Hadrian. Yet some fifty years later it succumbed once more to a Caledonian onslaught, and in spite of a riposte by massed reinforcements under Septimius Severus, who sent the invaders hurtling back to the Highlands, the emperor once for all re-entrenched the frontier guard on the more southerly line.

Of the two walls, the Scottish one had the seemingly decisive advantage of measuring only 33 English miles as against the 70 miles of Hadrian’s Wall. But it entailed a far longer line of communications through an ill-developed

⁵ For recent accounts of the Roman campaigns in Britain, see A. R. Burn, Agricola and Roman Britain (1953); I. A. Richmond, Roman Britain (1955).
country. Presumably it was the sensitiveness of Roman frontier forces for their lines of supply which turned the scales against the Antonine Wall. In any case, Hadrian's Wall justified the preference which it eventually received, for it held good until the close of the fourth century.

The frontier policy of the Roman emperors was characterised by alternate phases of advance and retreat on some fronts, which suggests that now and then they were caught between two minds. But it was based on reasoned principles; and in typical Roman fashion these were maintained without undue rigidity, and with a timely readiness to make corrections in their manner of application. As an example of Roman statecraft it may repay a more detailed study.

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6 Recent air surveys have shown that an attempt was made to safeguard communications between the two walls by means of scattered forts. Even so, distances were too great for the frontier guard.
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