

Occupying Roman Arabia: Frontier Garrison as a Network

The disposition of forts on the south-eastern frontier of the Roman empire has been well catalogued and much discussed. Debates have typically focused on the relationship between nomadic populations and the Roman occupying force. On one side, S. T. Parker has long maintained that Roman authorities aimed to keep the Saracens in check with garrisons and patrols. Other scholars have questioned this interpretation, insisting that the Roman garrison on the frontier had a combination of administrative and police functions. This paper advances this academic debate by approaching fortifications in Roman Arabia from a network-perspective that examines how the logistical and spatial relations between forts adapted in reaction to various exigencies from the third to the fifth century. Network studies have often focused on benign networks of trade and social relations, leaving asymmetrical power relations in the background, but the tools of network analysis are well-equipped to handle the complexities of oppression, resistance, and negotiation that take place on the edges of empire.

In the first part of this paper, I contend that the social, logistical, and strategic relations between garrisons are of paramount importance if we are to understand how the occupying military interacted with the often archaeologically invisible native population. In the second part, I show how a spatial analysis of this network can help us evaluate competing hypotheses about the imperial occupational strategy and impact on Roman Arabia. I dispute the notion of a rationally-designed scheme of defense-in-depth, and I instead argue that the footprint of Roman occupation reflects a tightening of state controls on frontier peoples in a challenging environment.

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