Andrew Poulter

An indefensible frontier: the *claustra Alpium Iuliarum*

The road across the Balkans from Constantinople to Italy was of singular strategic importance; it was the main overland route which linked the Western and Eastern empires. For 300 years, from the Principate of Augustus until the reign of Diocletian, the road had proved an invaluable asset, allowing imperial armies to be transferred with relative ease from one half of the empire to the other; particularly important during the winter months when travel by sea was often impossible, and always hazardous[1]. But, during the late Roman period, this ›highway‹ was also used by both barbarian forces from beyond the Danube and by pretenders to the imperial throne when their armies moved west towards Italy and Rome[2]. The final section passed Singidunum (Belgrade) and then came up the open valley of the Save to Siscia and past Emona (Ljubljana), before crossing the Julian Alps through the Hrušica pass (Birnbaumer Wald), descending to the northern Italian plain or, during the winter months when snow blocked this route, overland from Emona, via Golo and on to Tergeste (Trieste). Access to the north Italian plain over the northern Alps was confined to narrow valleys which were easy enough to control, whereas the Julian Alps represented a more difficult problem; apart from the highway over the Hrušica pass, there were alternative routes which could be used to reach the Italian peninsula. One of these was down a road which forked south from the highway past Martinj Hrib, joining the Golo to Tergeste road just north of Laško polje. Two other regionally important roads were the inland route from Tarsatica (Rijeka), which crossed the northern part of Istria to reach Tergeste, and another which diverted south from the highway near Lanišče and headed south-west directly to the same city (fig. 1). The Later Empire was not the only period when this route had to be protected. During the Marcomannic wars in the late 160s, German invaders crossed the Danube and moved west into Italy to besiege Aquileia. As a response to the threat, a special military command, the *praetentura Italiae et Alpium*, was set up to protect the eastern Alps and northern Italy. By 171, the danger had passed and, if there had been garrisons in the Alpine passes at this time, they were short-lived and could have had no connection with a series of late Roman barrier walls and towers which were constructed within the Julian Alps, and which have been interpreted as an ›internal frontier‹, blocking attempts by hostile forces to cross the mountains and descend upon the Italian peninsula, a system conventionally called the *claustra Alpium Iuliarum* (figs. 1. 2)[3]. Nevertheless, it is argued here that the date of these barrier walls requires reappraisal and that their role should be re-examined, using the literary and archaeological evidence currently available.

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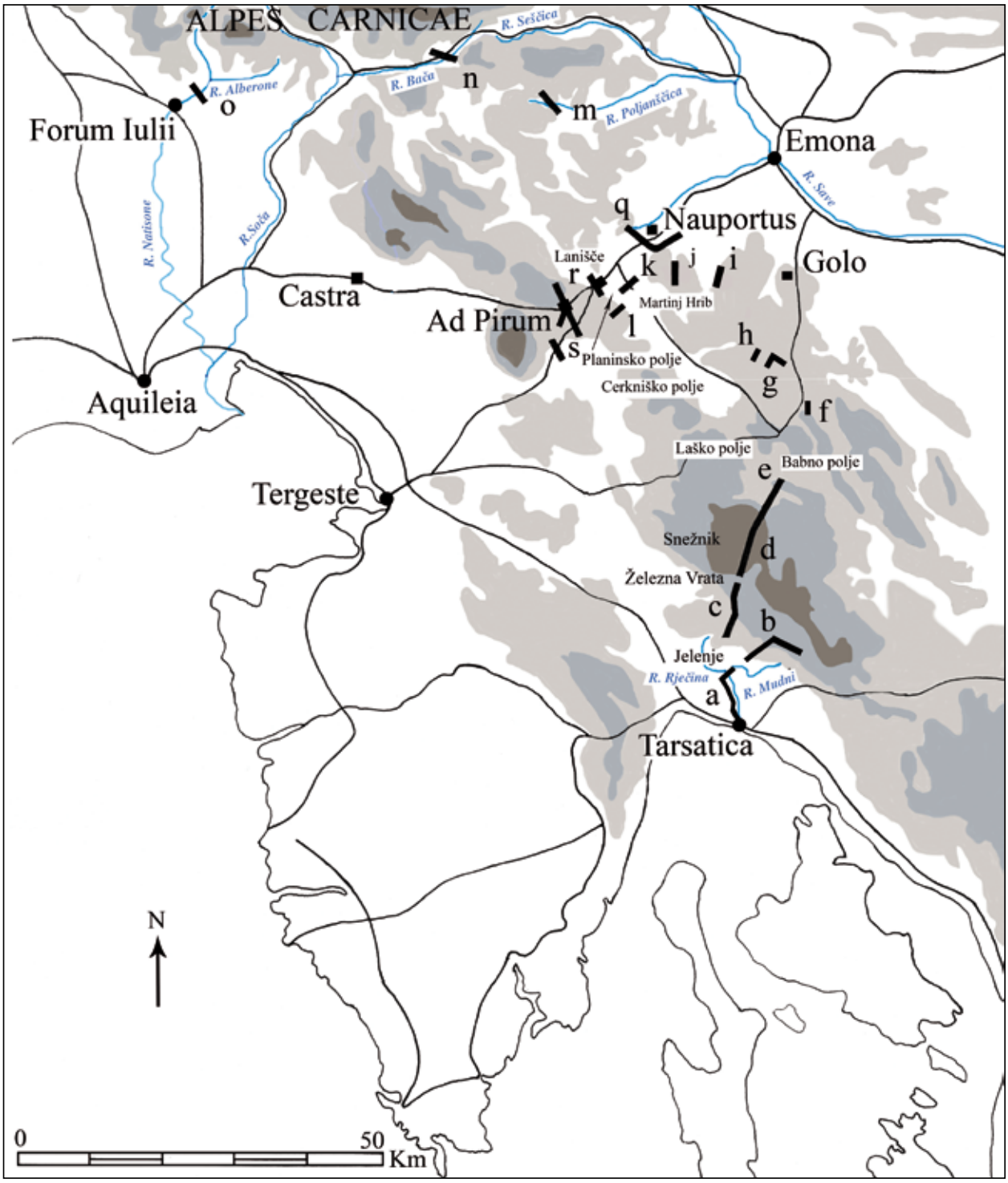
[1] I am very grateful for the advice and help given, especially by Wolf Liebeschuetz, Peter Brennan and Neil Christie, John Wilkes and Paul Bidwell, all of whom have read and provided valuable guidance. I also acknowledge helpful comments made by David Breeze and Hugh Elton (on the Isurian command).

[2] Here ›highway‹ refers to this main Roman road over the Alps, and not to other Roman routes or roads which were of lesser importance.

[3] See below, on the use of this term, note 45.



1 The barrier walls in Slovenia and Croatia

The Late Roman walls: their construction and tactical value

The walls were generally faced with uncoursed local limestone blocks with a rubble and mortar core except, occasionally, where the absence of mortar in the rubble remains implies that some sections may have been of dry stone construction. In alignment, the walls followed an irregular path, snaking across the countryside, using the natural advantages afforded by the contours of the terrain and including rock outcrops wherever possible, taking full advantage of naturally defensible defiles and precipitous mountain slopes where no masonry structures were necessary.

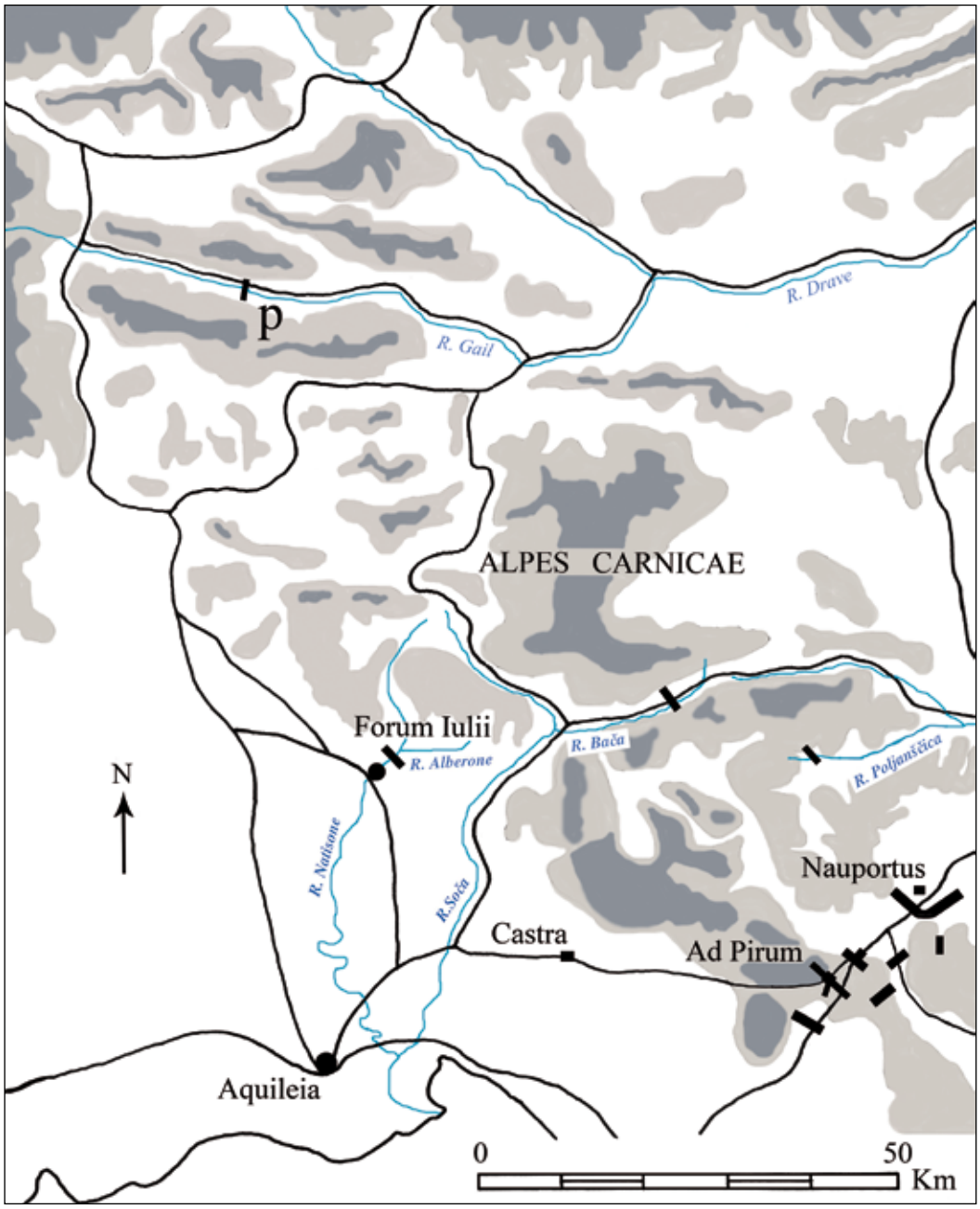
Any discussion of the barrier walls must rest firmly upon the monograph published by J. Šašel and P. Petru in 1971, in which they provided the first detailed survey of the entire line, building upon the excavations carried out during the late 19th and the 20th century and supplemented – where surface evidence no longer survives – by 19th century commentaries, the reliability of which has been carefully examined by the two authors. Nevertheless, the survey has its limitations, as the authors readily admitted. Some parts of the wall are well-preserved, standing ca. 0.50–3.0 m in height, but the course is more often represented by earth and stone mounds where no precise description is possible, except where excavations have been carried out. The location of towers is especially problematic; the raised mounds suggest, at some points, towers projecting east of the curtain, but also others abutting the western side of the wall. Many towers are certainly still unidentified, either where there are no signs on the surface, or because any surviving portions of superstructure have been covered by the collapsed remains of the wall itself. Exceptionally, it is possible to identify the number and location of towers and to see how they operated with the barrier wall, notably at the key fortlet of Ad Pirum (Hrušica), where good preservation, excavation and detailed survey have provided a clear appreciation of the wall's character, and of the location of irregularly spaced towers, each positioned so as to offer an excellent view along the barrier wall and eastwards along the highway as it climbed towards the top of the pass.

Despite the extensive research which has been carried out, there must have been more barrier walls than just those which have been identified. Some of the major routes coming west have not produced evidence for barrier walls although, strategically, they would have been required if the system was to effectively control all movement west into Italy[4].

Because the numbering of the walls by J. Šašel and P. Petru includes some sites not directly connected with the barrier walls, and because the evidence for the existence of some sections of wall is suspect, here they have been omitted. On the maps (figs. 1. 2) each of the barrier walls is denoted by a letter of the alphabet in small case. For those who wish to compare this account with the monograph, Appendix I lists sites, together with the identifying letters used in this paper and the Roman numerals allocated to the sites by Šašel and Petru, along with the site names used by the two authors (and more recent studies).

Overall, there were three distinct parts to the system. The first ran north from the coastal city of Tarsatica (Rijeka), and then turned to the north-east, forming a continuous barrier. Further north, short barrier walls crossed the routes leading westward through the Karst uplands, although some of them in the interior seem badly located to perform this function. The second broad division applies to the barrier walls within the much higher mountains of the Alpes Carnicae, crossing valley routes leading west towards Italy, ending with the most northerly known example in the valley of the Gail (Austria). The third sector includes those barrier walls which barred the main highway through the Hrušica pass from Nauportus (Vrhnika) to Ad Pirum. While there are some differences in the layout and construction of the walls, it is evident that they all belong to the same strategic plan. However, it is worth considering whether or not the tactical position of the walls conformed to the generally accepted purpose – namely, to create a barrier, protecting the cities immediately to the west and, most particularly, commanding the routes leading westwards into the north Italian plain, the gateway into the Italian peninsula, and, by the 4th century, the heartland of Italy with its capital at Milan.

[4] Šašel – Petru 1971, 67. 71. 82–83. 86. 96.



2 The western limits of the barrier in Italy and Austria

The southern sector

The first section of wall (a) reached the sea at Tarsatica. Whether it abutted the city's defences or by-passed the fortified town to run down to the sea shore is uncertain, but its course, running north, is well-known, where it climbs the southern slopes of Kalvarija hill then, turning north-west, it follows the right bank of the Rječina, perched high above the steep descent down to the river (fig. 1). Although only two sections still survive, there is no doubt that they were both part of a continuous barrier[5]. The wall descended before climbing again, still clinging to the steep slope above the Rječina, swinging north-west to follow the river's changing course. One length of wall is remarkably well-preserved, still standing 2 m high and with one section surviving to what must have been its full height of 2.80 m. Since the eastern side of what must have been the wall-walk stood proud, forming a continuous parapet, it follows that the wall itself was only ca. 2 m in height[6]. This might seem too low to serve as a defensive barrier, but the steep slope down to the river must have provided extra natural protection; apparently, a higher wall was considered unnecessarily. The Rječina makes a sharp turn to the west and, although no traces of the wall survive immediately south of the river, it (b) reappears on the northern bank and passes through Jelenje, then runs north-east along the lower eastern slope of Mount Gradišće, above the river Mudni, a left bank tributary of the Rječina, and continues north-east along the eastern slopes of Mout Kilovac. It apparently ended at this point; to the east, where the mountains rise to over 1,000 m, access from the north and the east would have been impossible.

The role of the barrier wall from the sea, as far as Jelenje, must have been to oversee the route which followed the Rječina to Tarsatica and to control access to the upper reaches of the river from where it was possible to travel west to reach the road bound for Tergeste (Trieste).

Because access to the lowland west up the Rječina was protected by the wall at Jelenje (b), there was no need for an additional barrier, barring access up the river valley. The next section of wall (c) commenced on the north side of the valley, its starting point, high above a gorge, overlooking the source of the Rječina. The wall heads north-east, climbing from 600 m up to 1,140 m above sea level, traversing a rolling upland (for the most part below 700 m above sea level) until the last section where it climbs mount Siblje, 1,240 m high, to end above the gorge of ›Železna Vrata‹ (the ›Iron Gates‹, fig. 1). In its course, the wall cuts across small valley routes heading west towards the road to Tergeste or south into the Istrian peninsula.

The continuous barrier wall (d) resumes north of the gorge, still aligned to the north-east, passing Mount Snežnik on its eastern slope, to finally reach lowland at the eastern end of Babno polje. The wall passes through rough upland terrain, for the most part difficult country but not impassable. These uplands in this part of the system do not rise much above the 400 m contour. Travel westward was not restricted to steep-sided valleys as it was in the northern sector.

A barrier wall (e) traversed the lowland at Babno polje, cutting across the valley route which led north-west to the plain of Laško polje and then on into the larger open plateau of Cerkniško polje (fig. 1). This is the first of the short sections of barrier wall which characterise the system, replacing the continuous barrier. It ran from the steep mountainside south of Babno polje and then up the equally steep slope on the opposing side of the plain. The entire length of the wall appears to have been controlled from just three towers. Another barrier wall (f) ran up to the precipitous mountain slopes on either side of lowland, and was protected by five irregularly spaced towers. It crossed a valley route which headed west into the Cerkniško polje. Somewhat less immediately explicable are the next two sections. The first (g), on the eastern side of mount Dednik, comprised two walls, one joining the other at the summit of Gradišće hill, then descending, one to the west, the other to the south, each crossing a minor north/south valley. It is curious that these minor routes were controlled whereas the west/east route immediately

[5] An engraving of 1689 shows the wall emerging from the north-western part of the town and continuing in an unbroken line along the eastern slope of Mount Kalvarija. This is reproduced in Šašel – Petru 1971, fig. 1, 54.

[6] Šašel – Petru 1971, pl. 15, fig. 1. The inner side of the parapet appears to be faced and is built as one with the wall.

to the north (along the valley of the Rašica) has so far not produced any evidence for its own barrier wall. On the opposing, west side of mount Dednik, there was another barrier (h) which cut across the modern north/south road. However, to the north, such a barrier would have had little purpose; the route ends in a precipitous mountain side which rises to 1,000 m above sea level[7]. Although the wall today survives for only 382 m, P. Petru had good reason to believe that it continued around the north side of Dednik[8]. Both these elements do not appear to have been built to intercept an aggressor coming from the East. Rather, their role would seem to have been to control movements of those passing around or up to the relatively flat top of the mountain.

No evidence exists for any other barrier walls to the north, in the direction of Emona (Ljubljana). Moving west, south of the highway, a wall south-west of Rakitna (i) and orientated north/south, commands the pass leading south-west towards Cerkniško polje and north in the direction of Nauportus. Another, to the west at Pokojsče (j), crosses a route coming south from Nauportus, traversing the narrow valley which restricts entry into Planinsko polje and from there south into Cerkniško polje. Closer to the highway and to the west, a barrier wall (k) crossed the line of the Roman road which ran south-east into Cerkniško polje. It must have been regarded as particularly important since it included a small fortlet (Martinj hrib)[9]. To the south-west, a wall (l) cut across a route leading down from the highway, blocking the narrow valley which gave access to Planinsko polje then Cerkniško polje. None of these three walls would have helped to stop an attack from the East.

The northern sector

Beyond the main highway, the system of blocking walls and towers is used, but less frequently; the Alpes Carnicae, which separate Pannonia from Noricum, offer fewer opportunities for east/west travel. Rising to 2,000 m this range of mountains, running west/east, restricts movement south from Noricum towards Italy. The valley of the Poljanščica allows easy travel westwards from Emona. This route was blocked by a wall (m) which controlled movement to the west and then south to the Soča valley, and the Italian plain. Of even greater importance was the road from Emona which passed up the valley of the Seščica then down the Bača to its confluence with the Soča, a route into Italy, outflanking both Castra (Ajdovščina) to the south-east at the entrance to the Hrušica pass and Forum Iulii (Cividale) to the north. A barrier wall (n), although the sides of the valley were precipitous, had to cover a distance rather more than the preserved section of 1.5 km. Notably, one part of this wall was unusually well-preserved, standing 3 m high. One of the two most westerly of barrier walls (o) appears to have been built immediately north-east of Forum Iulii at the junction between the rivers Natisone and Alberone. On the spur overlooking the confluence, there may have been a small fortlet (or tower [?]) from which one barrier wall descended 800 m to the left bank of the Natisone and another, 900 m in length, extended down the opposing slope to the Alberone[10]. No sign of the barrier or fortlet survives today[11]. However, the detailed description of the site provided by J. Šašel and P. Petru is compelling evidence for the existence of walls which can only have been barrier walls. A similar arrangement, with two linked walls protecting the junction of two valleys, was noted in the southern sector (g). The tac-

[7] It was thought to have blocked the road to the modern village of Purkače (Šašel – Petru 1971, 69–70), but there is no way out to the north. The village lies beneath a near vertical cliff face.

[8] See Šašel – Petru 1971, 70.

[9] See below, p. 107–108.

[10] Šašel – Petru 1971, 85.

[11] Mount Barda is densely wooded and it is impossible to confirm the observations published by Leicht 1911 – when best preserved – and by Stuchi 1948. Miotti 1979 describes a rectangular ›fort‹, not dissimilar in size from that published by Leicht. However, he also describes a circular masonry foundation – which might have been a tower – for full discussion see Rupel 2005, 73–75; also Ciglenečki 2008, 515. My thanks to Mark Pearce who translated this account.

tical situation was of clear importance; mount Barda overlooked both valley routes and the road down to Forum Iulii, then on, down the valley of the Natisone, into Italy.

The only other known barrier wall (p) in the northern sector lay beyond the Alpes Carnicae, in the valley of the Gail (fig. 2). The wall, 1.5 km long, crossed the Roman road which linked the town of Virunum and the river Drave to the east with the route which led west and then south to Italy, either in the direction of Aquileia or further west, down to Verona.

The barrier walls along the main highway from Nauportus to Ad Pirum

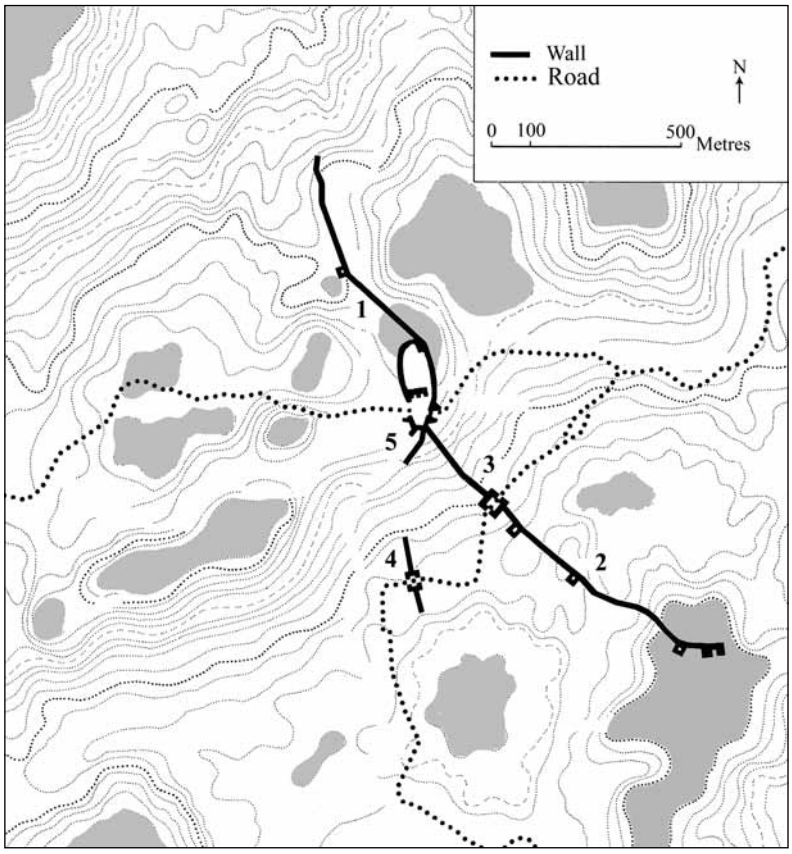
At the eastern end of the Hrušica pass, where the highway coming up from Emona starts its ascent from the lowlands of Pannonia, the approach is blocked by a wall (q). On the south side, it climbs Ljubljanski vrh and ends when the approach to the peak becomes precipitous, before resuming on the south-west side of the mountain (fig. 1). It then loops northwards to ascend mount Raskovec, climbing north-west to the peak, breaks off and then resumes, running down the northern flank, before heading north-east across mount Strmica to end at the top of mount Marinčev Grič. To the east, the mountains continue the line of the wall. This elliptical course made full use of the natural protection afforded by the hills; 1,500 m of the circuit did not require a barrier wall, leaving a distance of ca. 6,000 m of wall, down the lower slopes and across low ground either side of mount Raskovec. The total length of this line was ca. 8 km. One weakness in this impressive circuit was the lack of a wall covering the wide valley to the south-east (leading towards modern Borovnica) although passage south-west from this route was blocked by another barrier wall (j), controlling movement towards the upland plains. The towers were positioned at the best vantage points, rather than following a strictly regular spacing, but were, on average, ca. 100 m apart. The 66 towers identified must be close to the original number (assuming an average distance of one every 100 m, which adds up to 60). It is remarkable that there had been such a concern to take full advantage of the natural terrain, even though this required a substantially longer line than would have been the case if the wall had been set further west. Nor was it thought necessary to include Nauportus which was left outside, that is to the east of the barrier. The incorporation of steep-sided hills is a typical feature of the system, wherever the topography allowed. As the most easterly barrier wall, commanding access into the Hrušica pass along the highway, this must have constituted one of the key elements in the system, although, conspicuously, there is no sign of any forts along the line apart from a probable garrison in Nauportus.

Despite the impressive line drawn across the eastern entrance into the pass, it was not the only barrier wall to have been built on the highway. Another (r) commanded a tactically strong position where the valley first narrows into a steep-sided gorge between mount Srnjak to the south and Ravnik pri Hotedršici to the north. Its importance is perhaps underlined by the inclusion of the small fortlet of Lanišče[12]. Even so, it is difficult to understand its function; it was only 10 km west of the barrier wall at Nauportus (q) and a mere 5 km from Ad Pirum to the west.

Of all the sections of barrier wall, those existing at the top of the pass (s), attached to the fort of Ad Pirum, uniquely demonstrate how access and passage through the barrier was achieved. Three barrier walls, each abutting the fort's curtain wall, survive as high as 2.0 m and all were apparently contemporary with the construction of the fort's defences (fig. 3)[13]. One headed north-west and included a single tower before it ended against the steep side of the valley (fig. 3:1). The second continued south-east and up to the top of the steep mountainside and had at least four towers, irregularly spaced along its course (fig. 3:2). This second barrier wall, at a distance

[12] Note, the argument that the fortlet was added during the second half of the 4th c. is not substantiated by the finds, nor by the unbroken barrier walls which abut it on both sides; see below, p. 107.

[13] The barrier walls which spring from the northern and southern sides of the fortification are contemporary with the fort's defences, or so it is maintained; Ulbert 1981, 18–19. See below, in the case of Lanišče, note 26.



3 Ad Pirum and its barrier walls, after Ulbert 1981

of 270 m from the fort, was interrupted by a rectangular gate-tower, bonded with the lower and upper portions of the barrier wall, and of substantial proportions (10.70 × 8 m), its walls 1.0 m thick, the entrance 2.65 m wide (fig. 3:3)[14]. East of the fort, the Roman road forked; the main highway continued west to enter the fort through its east gate, whereas a branch road climbed the southern slope to pass through the tower-gate. Since the main road continues into the fort, it seems reasonable to suppose that this route was reserved for official use and the military whereas the secondary road through the gate tower was for those who had no such authority; no doubt civilian travellers could be checked by soldiers stationed in the gate tower before they were allowed to proceed. Nor was this the only check-point which civilian traffic had to contend with. About 400 m to the south-west, a second gate tower, bonded with its own barrier walls, controlled the valley route heading towards Tergeste (fig. 3:4)[15]. That there should be two gates so close together is surprising. One explanation might be that the second gate tower was built to intercept civilian traffic from the west which had come up the highway but here opted for the road to Tergeste, avoiding the primary barrier wall and its tower-gate. However, the situation is not so simple. Another barrier wall (fig. 3:5) left the south-eastern corner of the fort and continued south for at least 40 m[16]. It was preserved for 48 m and has been traced for 137 m[17]. It starts off in a southerly direction then turns to the south-west so, assuming that it did not again alter its alignment, this wall could not have joined the barrier wall which extended north from the second gate tower (fig. 3:4). This wall takes a gentler gradient and must have served a different function: the most likely being that it controlled traffic coming up the highway from the west.

[14] Ulbert 1981, 29–35.
[15] Petru 1983.
[16] Ulbert 1981, 19.
[17] Šašel – Petru 1971, 95.

Because civilians arriving at the fort from the East were presumably diverted off the main highway, the same restriction probably applied to civilian traffic coming from Italy. It follows that there must have also been a diversion west of the fort where a branch route would have turned south-east and ascended towards the first gate-tower (fig. 3:3). The extra barrier wall (fig. 3:5) would have intercepted travellers arriving from this direction, where, presumably, they were directed though another gate-tower, duplicating the arrangement at the start of the road to Tergeste. If this explanation is accepted, then, from whatever direction they came, civilians would have had to pass through two gates, not just one. Whatever the reason for this may have been, it indicates that the primary wall with its towers was not intended to operate as a defensive line, otherwise the provision of additional barriers and gates immediately to the rear would have been superfluous.

The barrier walls: technical considerations

All the walls from Tarsatica to Železna Vrata (a, b, c) were 1.80 m wide, whereas, further north, in the southern and in the northern sector, and along the highway, where measurements could be obtained, the walls averaged only 1.10 m in width. The variation may be significant; as observed above, a section of wall (a) above Tarsatica was preserved to the height of what must have been the wall-walk with a continuous parapet on its eastern side. One possibility is that this difference in width results simply from the implementation of a slightly different set of instructions, issued to those building the southern part of the system. It might seem reasonable to conjecture that special measures might have been taken to provide a wall-walk where the narrower gauge was used. Rectangular stub walls, spaced 3.60–4.80 m apart, were attached to the curtain in some sectors and have been interpreted as supports for a wooden wall-walk[18]. Such additions to the wall have been noted at Jelenje (b), Rakitna (I), Nauportus (g) and at Rattendorf (p) beyond the Carnian Alps. However, there is no correlation between the wall-width and the appearance of these mortared blocks. The barrier wall at Rakitna is indeed 1.10 m wide but, at Jelenje, the wall belonged to the broad gauge (1.80 m), the same width as the broad wall (a) which did have a wall-walk and parapet and demonstrably had no need for additional supports to hold up a timber platform. In each of these cases, the supports appear on the west or ›Roman‹ side of the barrier, although this was not the case at Rattendorf[19]. Here the ›supports‹ are on the eastern, not the western, face of the barrier. A barrier wall with its wall-walk on the eastern side makes no sense; any threat here should have come from the East! At both Jelenje and Rattendorf, the lowland is marshy and any wall traversing the valley bottom would be in danger of subsidence. It would seem preferable to accept Petru's initial interpretation, that they were simply buttresses, spreading the weight of the superstructure in order to reduce the likelihood of subsidence leading to the collapse of the wall[20]. There is no reason to accept that these supports were connected with the provision of a wall-walk. Even so, a wall width of 1.10 m, is just sufficient to support a breastwork and a wall-walk. But, all that is known for sure is that a wall-walk existed above Tarsatica (a) and the same was probably true for the other, continuous walls, built to the broad gauge (b, c, d). But, there is no way of ascertaining whether the narrow gauge walls also had wall-walks.

The walls themselves, especially those built to the narrow gauge, were relatively insubstantial barriers. The wall is conspicuously low, only ca. 2 m in height above Tarsatica although, at Zarakovec (n), the wall still survives to a height of 3 m. The average may have been about 4 m, but this probably varied, responding to differences in the natural defensive quality of each site.

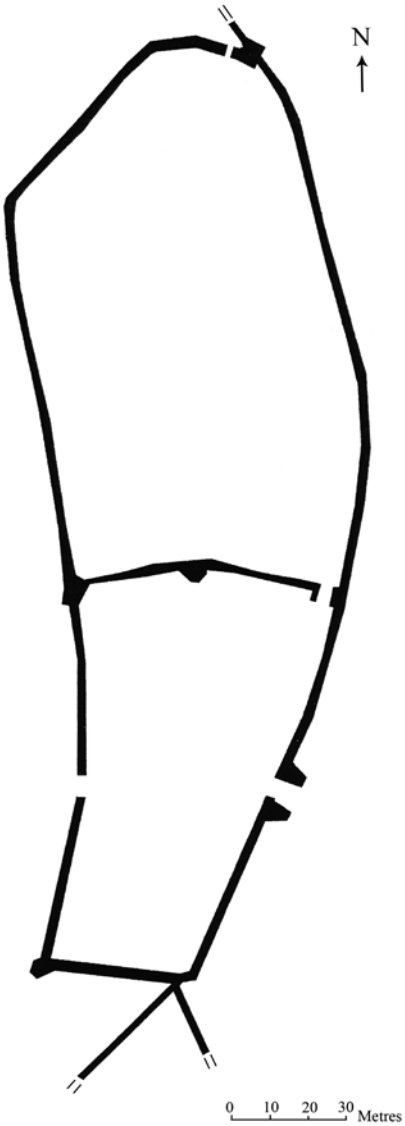
[18] Šašel – Petru 1971, 90. However, the stub walls would seem too far apart to have supported timber wall-walks.

[19] Dolenz 1952, 175–178; Šašel – Petru 1971, 90 fig. 13.

[20] Petru 1967, 125–126; Petru 1972, 363. It is not recorded how high the stub walls were. However, since Petru interpreted them as reinforcements for the wall, they may have originally stood no higher than the contemporary ground level, stabilizing the foundations but not visible in the superstructure. This must surely have been the case at Rattendorf.

Towers, forts and fortlets

The location and number of towers allocated to each sector varied markedly; the choice of position took full account of local topography and they were all built where they afforded the best possible, uninterrupted view of the surrounding landscape. The towers on the barrier wall which encircled Nauportus were ca. 100 m apart[21]. The towers themselves were either square (each side 4–6 m in length) or rectangular (4 × 5/6 m). Given their close spacing, their primary purpose must have been observation whereas signalling, if it was ever used, must have been a secondary consideration. From the survey by J. Šašel and P. Petru, it is not always easy to comprehend their exact form, or even, for sure, their relation to the barrier wall. Some appear to project to the west, others appear on the outer, eastern side. Most are unexcavated and the collapsed mounds of debris, which so often is all that remains, cannot be taken as faithfully replicating the form and position of towers in relation to the wall. How high they were, it is impossible to be sure, although if the wall-walk was ca. 4 m high, each tower could be expected to have stood at least two stories above the parapet, reaching a height of no less than ca. 8 m, probably rather more[22]. A pictogram in the Notitia Dignitatum (occ. 24) shows the barrier walls but is of no assistance in reconstructing the character or dimensions of the towers (fig. 7). To fit the space, the height of the towers is foreshortened (as on Trajan's column) and the schematic scene shows towers with conical, tiled roofs but none of the records of tower excavations records the discovery of roof-tiles. More probably, the uppermost storey was open and crowned with crenulations or, as in the barrier wall above Tarsatica (a), provided with a continuous parapet. Since there were no forts along the line of the wall, soldiers presumably lived in the towers.



4 The fort of Ad Pirum, after Ulbert 1981

Ad Pirum (Hrušica) was apparently built at the same time as its barrier walls and, at first glance, seems to have been a fort rather than a fortlet[23]. Its position, at the top of the Hrušica Pass, on the main route to Italy,

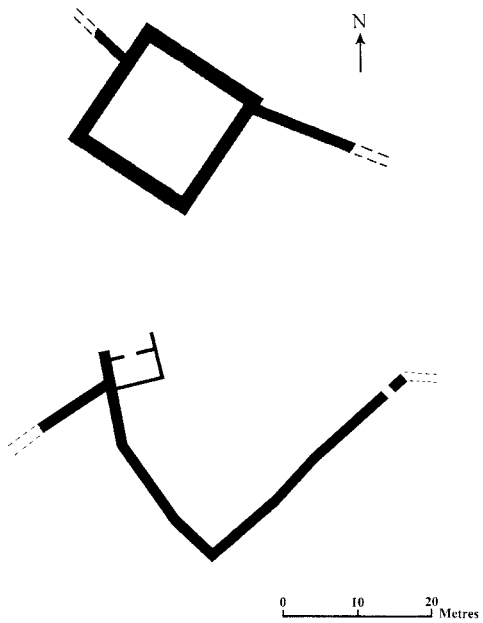
[21] Šašel – Petru 1971, 79.

[22] Even the small late Roman *burgus* at Koula, on the lower Danube, has a corner tower preserved to over 16 m in height; it had at least three stories. Historically, it is probable that the height of towers in forts and towns have been incorrectly assumed to have had only one storey above the wall-walk although, to be of practical advantage, affording a better view than from the wall top, towers less than two stories high would not have represented a significant improvement in visibility; Poulter 1995, 39–40.

[23] Although the barrier walls abutted and did not bond with the fortification, the excavator was confident that they all formed part of the same programme; Ulbert 1981, 18. Even so, it has been argued that this indicates that the fort predates the construction of the barrier walls; Pröttel 1996, 135. More probably, the fort was indeed built first but that the construction of the barrier walls followed and was part of the same building operation. The walls of the fort would have been higher and heavier than the low barrier walls; bonding may well have been considered a structural weakness because the fort walls would have had a greater chance of subsidence than the barrier wall; this could have fractured the connection with the barrier walls if they were of one build. See also, Lanišče, below, p. 107.

was strategically the centre point of the system (fig. 1). It commanded the last barrier wall before entering Italy. The curtain-wall, 2.70 m wide, was substantial and protected by curiously irregular-shaped towers and two gates, sitting astride the main road. Even so, the fortification was relatively small (1.5 ha) and its internal topography indicates that the garrison was even smaller than its overall size might suggest. It was divided into two parts by another, slighter wall, which had a small central expansion, interpreted as a tower. The upper part of the enclosure clung to a steep slope and excavation failed to discover any signs of occupation (fig. 4)[24]. Although the function of this part of the fort is unclear, it is more likely to have been used for storage, or perhaps for livestock in transit; it is improbable that it contained barracks. The lower enclosure encompassed relatively flat ground but was only 0.35 ha and that was divided into two by the Roman highway. Working on the tentative allocation of six men for each of the six towers, and the same number for the two known and a third presumed tower-gates, this would total 54 soldiers. Even if the towers, as must have been true for most other sections of barrier wall, and tower-gates were used to accommodate this force, there would still have been precious little room inside the fort for even a skeletal garrison. Hypothetical though such calculations must be, it would be surprising if the fort, its tower-gates and towers held a force any larger than 100 men.

Up the road from Ad Pirum, a small fortlet of Lanišče (r), with its own barrier walls, measured only 20 × 20 m (fig. 5)[25]. It was built close to the Roman road and, so it is believed, built into the wall after it had been constructed although, from the description, it seems more likely that the fortlet was built first and then incorporated into the barrier wall; most probably, both operations were part of the original construction programme[26]. This *castellum* had substantial walls, ca. 1.60 m thick. The fortlet contained pottery, small-finds and coins, the latest three all minted in A.D. 388; it was evidently occupied although, given its size (0.04 ha), it could only have housed a handful of soldiers. There is here no sign of an entrance through the surviving section of barrier wall, but one must have existed in the valley floor, close to, or adjacent to the fortlet.



5 The fortlets of Lanišče (above; after Petru 1967) and Martinj hrib (below; after Leben – Šubic 1990)

South of the main west/east highway, another small fortification, Martinj hrib (k) was ca. 0.35 ha in size, hardly large enough to have contained more than a very small detachment (fig. 5)[27]. It commanded a good vantage point on the southern slope of mount Gradišće, overlooking the road heading south to Cerkniško polje (fig. 1). The fortlet was attached to the southern side of a barrier wall which crossed the valley

[24] Ulbert 1981, 19.

[25] Petru 1967, 122–124; Petru 1972, 364–365; Ulbert 1981, 7.

[26] Petru 1967, 122–124. From the description, it is not entirely clear why the fortlet must have been a secondary addition. The argument is based upon the observation that there was a small butt-joint between the south-east corner of the fortlet and the barrier wall which headed south-east up the side of mount Srnjak. Had the wall been cut for the insertion of the fortlet, evidence for this modification should have been visible in the face of the barrier wall where it joined the fortlet; no such repair is recorded. At Ad Pirum, the barrier walls also abutted the outer face of the curtain wall but this does not prove that the fort was not part of the same building programme. See above, p. 106.

[27] Petru 1967, 124–126; Ulbert 1981, 8; Leben – Šubic 1990, 313–333.

between mount Gradišće to the west and Obli vrh to the east. The northern side of this irregular, polygonal shaped fortification does not survive but its entrance was located at the northern end of the east wall, just south of the corner where it must have joined the eastern barrier wall. Given the position of the doorway, the primary attention of the garrison would seem to have been to the north, in the direction of the highway. Excavation produced a rich collection of finds, including coarse ware, spearheads, and coins, mostly 4th century in date and terminating with issues of Theodosius I (379–395)[28]. Only one building was partly excavated and produced *tubuli*, proving that it was heated[29]. Perhaps the room was part of a small bath-suite. Evidently the fortlet was occupied on a permanent basis.

A possible fortlet, San Pietro al Natisone (o), at the north-western extremity of the system, east of Forum Iulii, superficially resembled Ad Pirum[30]. It was apparently divided into two parts of roughly equal size. But the total area of the fortlet was very small (0.08 ha) and instead of being close to a road, it was built high on the ridge which separated the valleys of the Alberone and Natisone. The small size of the fort and its apparent location, high above the valley floor, is odd and even its existence is uncertain, particularly as no trace of it survives today[31]. The location provided a splendid view up each of the two valleys, but the fortlet could have accommodated only a very small detachment, capable of monitoring, but not obstructing traffic moving west towards Italy. It is possible that one of the enclosures was reserved for official use, as tentatively suggested for Ad Pirum; the steep slope up to the fortlet might just have been possible for mules or packhorses, but not for wheeled transport[32].

No other fortlet – or fort – has been found attached to a barrier wall[33]. Because, for considerable distances, the barrier wall is visible as an upstanding structure, a projecting enclosure would have been easy enough to locate[34]. It follows that forts, event fortlets, were not an essential part of the system.

Another late Roman fortification lies north of the arc of barrier walls in the southern sector and south-east of Nauportus. It was constructed on the hill top of Sveta Marjeta, high above the modern village of Golo, a position which affords a clear view over most of the plain around Emona and also the adjacent valley route, leading north towards the city – but it is well west of the known Roman road (fig. 1). Unusually large (2.5 ha) in comparison with the fortlets on the barrier walls, the trapezoidal, apparently late Roman enclosure, has not been explored and no barrier wall has yet been found[35]. Until excavation has taken place, the date and its possible association with the barrier wall system remain unproven[36].

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[28] However, the finds do not prove that the fortlet was an addition to the system and dates to the late 4th c., see below, p. 113 contra, see below, note 29.

[29] Leben – Šubic 1990, 313–354; Petru 1967, 124–126.

[30] Šašel – Petru 1971, 85.

[31] Unlike the barrier walls, where the description sounds plausible, the fortlet may have been mistakenly identified. See above, p. 102.

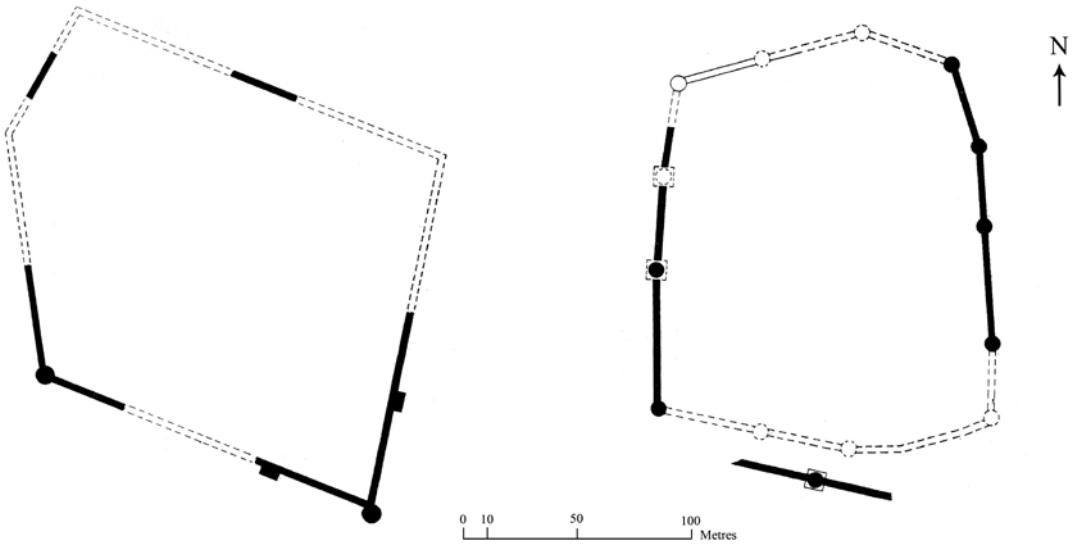
[32] See above, note 11.

[33] Note that another site existed: formerly a road-side settlement, Longaticum (Logatec), on the main highway between Ad Pirum and Nauportus. However, to date, no traces of barrier walls or a late Roman fortification have so far been found.

[34] On mount Šiblje, immediately south of Željezna Vrata, where the wall reaches a slight plateau on the mountain's southern flank, it appears to surround an irregular, projecting area ca. 20 × 40 m which might have been intended to incorporate a fortlet; Šašel – Petru 1971, 62. However, this seems unlikely since there is no sign of a back wall. If the original plan had been to divert the wall to accommodate a fortlet, it seems that it was never built.

[35] Šašel – Petru 1971, 70–71. Late Roman coins have been found in the vicinity (Ciglenečki – Modrijan – Milavec 2011, 41) but this is inadequate dating for the fort.

[36] That the fortification with 2 m thick walls is located on top of a hill is unusual. It remains possible that this fort is later, perhaps 5th–6th c. and contemporary with hill-top sites known to exist in the region. For these ›fortified‹ hill-top sites see Ciglenečki 1987, and below, p. 118–119.



6 Nauportus (left; after Ulbert 1981) and Castra (right; after Osmuk 1990)

Despite the lack of forts – or even fortlets – directly associated with the barrier wall, four larger fortifications could have played a more significant role in defending the routes into Italy; Castra, presumably a fort, Nauportus, the *colonia* of Forum Iulii and the coastal city of Tarsatica. By the early 4th century in the Balkan provinces, not only were distinctions of status of no practical importance, former cities could have served as military bases[37].

Nauportus was located in open lowland just east of the ascent up into the Hrušica pass and close to the Balkan highway, at the furthest western end of the Danubian plain (fig. 1). Its early history as a commercial trading entrepot on the main road over the Julian Alpes is well known whereas, in the late Roman period, excavation has revealed little about its internal organization and function[38]. Its fortifications were modest in size (2.36 ha), and pentagonal in shape, with projecting rectangular towers along the curtain and circular corner towers (fig. 6)[39]. Although situated east of the long section of barrier wall (q) which crossed the highway, coins of Valentinian and Theodosius I from graves in the extramural cemetery indicate that the site was still occupied at least until the very end of the 4th century[40].

Forum Iulii (fig. 2) had a rectangular circuit. At 12.5 ha it is larger than the other sites but nothing is known about its internal layout. It lies at the extreme western limits of the system; if

[37] A particularly explicit example is the case of Tropaeum Traiani on the lower Danube where the *municipium* was replaced by a singularly massive fortification, but which, at its centre, appears never to have had a *forum* but did have a large granary, perhaps for military rather than civilian use, as was the case at Savaria, where the Praetorian prefect Vulcacius Rufinus had granaries built under Constans (ILS 727) in AD 347–349, not for the citizens but for military supplies *(res annonaria)*. Here, there is no reference in the monumental inscription of any municipal authority. Similarly, at Tropaeum Traiani, the foundation inscription for the new ›city‹ (IGLRom 170) was erected under Constantine and Licinius in 315/317. The purpose of the new strong defences were to protect the frontier *(ad confirmandam limitis tutelam)*. Even though the Danubian frontier was some distance to the west, the inscription implies that the site had a military garrison. At the end of this fulsome inscription, almost as an afterthought, it is affirmed that the defences were also for the protection of civilians *(etiam Tropaeensium civitas)*. This is the earliest evidence that a city in the Balkans was shared by soldiers and civilians. For a survey of the evidence from the Balkans as a whole, see Poulter 1992, 103–123.

[38] Petru 1977, 483. 510; described as a *municium instar* by Tacitus (ann. 1, 20) Nauportus, although it had at least two temples, one dedicated to a local god, the other to Neptune, its status during the Roman period seems to have remained that of a *vicus*; Schmid 1925, 183.

[39] Šašel – Petru 1971, 75–77; Ulbert 1981, 9; Horvat 1990, 185–187.

[40] Horvat 1990, 91–92.

it contained a military force, its role must have been restricted to securing the northern and eastern routes which led down to the Italian plain.

Castra, at the western entrance into the Julian Alps, was tactically a suitable location for a force entrusted with the protection of the highway, although it could not have been a large one; it was only 2.7 ha in size[41]. The irregular circuit, with its partly projecting, circular towers has been assigned to the Constantinian period (fig. 6)[42]. There are, however, doubts as to whether it was fully occupied in the 4th century; a large *atrium* style building (*principia* [?]) stood within the eastern part of the fort; another large structure (administrative building [?]) occupied the space close up against the southern curtain; but trenching to the west found no sign of buildings, notably no sign of barracks[43]. In all probability, its distance from the outlying barrier walls would have restricted its military value to the Balkan highway unless, perhaps, it contained cavalry.

Even less is known about the interior of Tarsatica except that its defensive circuit enclosed ca. 11 ha. A garrison here could have supplied soldiers occupying the towers along the first sector of the continuous barrier wall (a) but, without excavation within the modern town, it is impossible to determine what proportion of the fortified area was reserved for military use.

The only other fortification which could have performed a military role is the port of Tergeste (Trieste), but it lies ca. 60 km by road from the central part of the southern sector and, although the barrier walls controlled the roads leading west towards it, any military force within the city itself could not have provided any immediate support if one or more barrier walls required reinforcement.

The date of the system

The barrier walls have been universally accepted as late Roman, although the actual date when they were constructed is less certain than has often been claimed; the consensus remains that the institution of this ›frontier‹ dates to the early 4th century, and was the creation of either Diocletian or Constantine[44]. Support for this view has been based, partly on ancient literary sources which have been thought to record the existence of defences in the Alps, and partly on the premise that the barrier walls must have been intended to counter a major threat from the East. Because the danger of barbarian invasions could not have been envisaged for most of the 4th century, an alternative explanation has been generally favoured, namely that the fortifications must have been built – and thereafter reused – to defend the Alpine passes at times of civil war, keeping at bay an army marching north along the Balkan highway towards Italy[45]. A second line

[41] Ulbert 1981, 5–6; Petru 1974, 181.

[42] Osmuk 1990, 183–198. Note, although the theoretical line of the southern curtain is maintained in the plan, it seems reasonable to presume that the outer section of wall with its round tower actually represents the true line of the southern defences.

[43] Petru 1974, 180–181.

[44] Ulbert 1981, 43; Petru 1978, 505–506; Petru 1997, 536; Christie 1991, 417; Marconi 2004, 347. 350. 354; Bigliardi 2007, 207. 304. An exception is Napoli who maintains (1997, 282–284) that the walls might be as late as ca. 375–425 (see below, p. 113).There is some concern: Christie points out that, although Ad Pirum and the barrier walls may be early 4th c., the organization recorded in the Notitia may not have been established until late in the 4th c.; Christie 1991, 416–417. A variant argument sees the system as having been established to ca. 300 but that the two fortlets of Lanišče (r) and, Martinj hrib (k) were added about the middle of the 4th c. Here, this conclusion is not accepted, see below, p. 111. Until more convincing evidence is forthcoming, it remains likely that all elements formed part of the original plan.

[45] Schmid 1925 185–189; Ulbert 1981, 35. 44–45; Petru 1978, 505–508; Petru 1983, 132; Christie 1991, 416–417; Christie 2007, 566. Napoli 1997, 282–284; Christie 2006, 324–326; Christie 2006, 325; Ciglenečki – Modrijan – Milavec 2011, 262. However, Christie rightly reminds us that historical events are not so easily associated with ›destruction deposits‹ identified in excavations; Christie 1991, 417. Also, Christie has observed that the defences could only hold up a limited force without reinforcements (Christie 2006, 326): a valid observation, but not one commented upon by any other authority.

of reasoning relies upon the interpretation of the archaeological evidence from the fortlets associated with the barrier walls.

Much rests upon the ancient accounts which describe fighting in the Alpine passes. Ammianus Marcellinus alludes to the *claustra Alpium Iuliarum*, in connection with the civil war between Magnentius and Constantius II in 351/352 (Amm. 31, 11, 3). The term *claustra* can have a variety of meanings, depending upon the context in which it is used. True, one interpretation could be that it is here a military term and means »barriers erected in the Alps«. This is grammatically possible but, when applied to mountains, the word could equally mean »the narrow passes through the Alps«. The most plausible interpretation is that, in this passage, *alpium* is a subjective not an objective genitive; in other words the mountains themselves are described as the barrier. So also, Tacitus in his account of the civil war in A.D. 69 and the debate whether or not Vespasian should advance directly into Italy to confront Vittelius, referring to the Julian Alps, he uses the term *claustra montium* (hist. 3, 2, 4). In this period, there was certainly no system of barrier walls to protect Italy. Similarly, Tacitus (hist. 1, 6) notes the recall of Nero's forces from *the claustra Caspiarum* where they were stationed, ready to launch a campaign against the Albani; *claustra* here cannot be alluding to a fortified frontier as it did not exist. Here, Tacitus must be referring to the ›Caspian barrier‹ (the Caucasus Mountains) or to the pass though the mountains (the Caspian Gates). Ammianus Marcellinus' use of the expression *claustra Alpium Iuliarum* therefore should not be seen as an official title for a system of barrier walls, but is much more likely to mean »the Julian Alps and the passes through them« or, simply, »The Alpine barrier«.

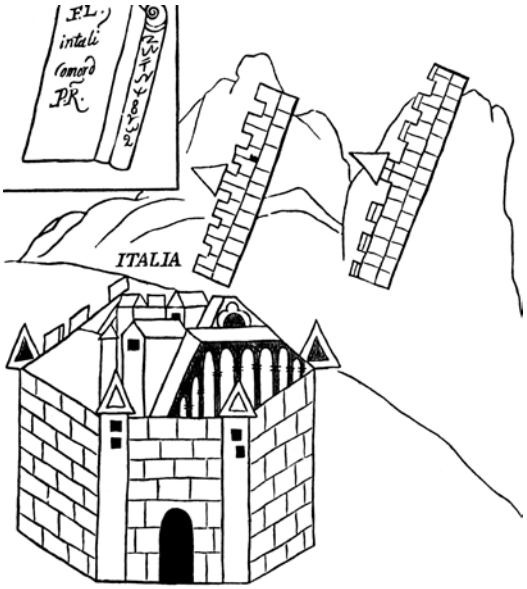
In his panegyric in honour of Theodosius I, Pacatus, describing the civil war between Theodosius I and Magnus Maximus in 387–388 (12, 30, 2), states that the usurper *superatis Alpibus Cotiis, Iulia quoque claustra laxaret*. This was translated, surely correctly, by C. E. V. Nixon as »he crossed the Cottian Alps and broke through the barrier of the Julian Alps as well«. Once again, the Julian Alps themselves are the barrier.

Ambrosius (exc. Sat. 1, 3, 1) mentions the absence of a suitable stone defensive line to counter an invasion of Quadi and Sarmatians in 375 and this has been accepted by N. Napoli as a *terminus post quem* for the erection of the *claustra Alpium*[46]. However, Ambrosius provides a possibly more helpful statement in connection with an incursion of barbarians in 392; he notes that »we were still preparing a wall to add to the Alps«: *Nos adhuc murum Alpibus addere parabamus* (Ambr. obit. Valent. 4). This might refer to the construction of the Alpine walls and, if so, it implies that no such ›wall‹ had existed in the past. Even so, the context here is dramatic, not necessarily factual. In the passage which follows, the Alps themselves are described as a defensive wall *(Alpium vallum)* and as a rampart of snow *(aggere nivium)*. The passage ends with the observation that the real defence was provided by the emperor himself, not by fortifications *(Gratia Valentiniani ... muro nos sui imperii protexit)*. This cryptic allusion to a wall (and not multiple walls) is not precise enough for us to be sure that Ambrosius is referring to the construction of the barrier walls and its associated fortlets.

Another account which has been taken as evidence for the existence of Alpine defences describes the battle of the Frigidus between Theodosius I and Eugenius in 394 (Ambr. obit. Theod. 7). We are told that Theodosius had difficulty drawing up his battle line quickly enough because of the narrow approach to the river *(cum locorum angustiis ... agmen exercitus paulo serius in aciem descenderet)*. This is a fair description of the topography but Ambrosius makes no mention of barrier walls.

These texts and all the others, painstakingly collected by J. Šašel and P. Petru, are in reality of no help in identifying when the barrier walls were erected. Still, there is no doubt that the system of fortifications existed – or more likely had existed and was remembered – by the

[46] Napoli 1997, 283.



7 The *comes Italiae, tractus Italiae circa Alpes* (Not. dign. occ. 24, after Seek 1962)

time the Notitia Dignitatum was last revised, sometime in the 420s[47]. The *comes Italiae* commanded the *tractus Italiae circa Alpes,* and the accompanying illustration depicts two crenulated walls, each equipped with a turret (Not. dign. occ. 24). Steep mountains in the background can safely be accepted as being a schematic depiction of the Julian Alps (fig. 7). There can be no doubt that here we have a direct reference to the barrier walls. However, as far as the literary evidence goes, all that can be taken as certain is that the barrier walls existed before the end of the second decade of the 5th century A.D.

The archaeological evidence that has been used to date the construction of the barrier walls rests heavily upon the excavations in the fort of Ad Pirum (fig. 4). Reconstructing the sequence relies largely upon the interpretation of the numismatic finds. The coins found during the excavations (229 in total) do not constitute a significantly large collection and only a few are recorded as having a stratigraphic context. Because 3rd century issues are relatively well-represented, it is accepted by the director that the site was inhabited before the construction of the fort[48]. This deduction is supported by the presence of African Red Slip Ware (ARS) dated to ca. 230–340, but there is no way of knowing whether these finds belong to the fortlet or to the earlier, probably civilian settlement[49]. However, it has been suggested, optimistically, that the nominal increase in coin-finds in the second and third decades of the 4th century reflects an increase in military activity[50]. T. Ulbert maintains that the forts (and the barrier walls) were constructed by Diocletian or by Constantine and, if it was the latter, they must have been a defensive precaution in case his colleague Licinius opened hostilities and marched north along the Balkan Highway[51]. In support of this conclusion, Ulbert records that a refuse deposit outside the fortifications lay over a layer of mortar which he interprets as the construction level for the fort[52]. Three coins came from this soil level; the earliest was an issue of Licinius and it is claimed that this provides a *terminus ante quem* for the erection of the fortifications. But as, according to T. Ulbert, this deposit continued to accumulate during the 4th century, it can be inferred that the other two coins were minted later in that century. Coins cannot provide a *terminus ante quem;* given the presence of two later coins in the same context, the Licinian issue must be residual. It could have been deposited with material derived from the pre-fort occupation level. Equally, one sherd of ARS, datable to ca. 250, came from the refuse dump but it could also be residual and does not provide a secure *terminus post quem* for the fortifications[53]. There is therefore no support for the excavator's conclusion that the fort was constructed early in the 4th century.

[47] Here I am following the generally accepted view that the Notitia Dignitatum was compiled in the 3rd decade of the 5th c.

[48] Ulbert 1981, 39–42.

[49] Pröttel 1996, 133–134.

[50] Mackensen 1981, 131–152.

[51] Ulbert 1981, 45.

[52] Ulbert 1981, 443–444.

[53] Pröttel 1996, 134–135. The clear evidence for residuality in the ceramic record of the excavations has been demonstrated by Pröttel (1996, 136–137). This early date, favoured by Ulbert, is questioned by Christie (1991, 416 note 28) who observed that the dates of the two other coins from this context have not been published.

To sum up: it is in fact not yet possible to ascertain, whether on textual or on archaeological grounds, when precisely the system of fortifications was established. For the fort of Ad Pirum, a date for its construction early in the 4th century seems unlikely; its irregular shape and crudely planned towers are notably inferior to Tetrarchic and Constantinian fortifications on the Danubian *limes*. Its character fits better with a construction-date towards the end of the 4th century. Since the fortlet was part of the ›system‹, it follows that the barrier walls themselves, in all probability, also date to the latest phase in the history of Roman Illyricum.

The history of the barrier walls

On the presumption that the barrier walls must have played a part in the three civil wars which involved fighting for control of the route across the Julian Alps in the 4th century, burnt deposits, dated by the coins they contain, have been linked with one or other of these events. Such optimism is ungrounded: it is not possible to provide such a precise date for a destruction level, relying upon numismatic or other small-finds. The dates when the coins were minted provide no reason to connect them with a particular historical event. For example, the discovery of two coins of Constantius in a destruction deposit within the larger tower-gate at Ad Pirum, has been taken as proof that the superstructure was burnt down during the civil war of 352 and that repairs must have been carried out by Maximus in 388[54]. Knowing what we do about the circulation of coins, long after they were minted, an attempt to link them with historical events is unwarranted[55]. It has been maintained that the discovery of coins dating from the mid 4th century at Martinj Hrib and Lanišče indicates that they were a late 4th century addition to the system[56]. This is not a reasonable conclusion; coins and small-finds from these fortlets are most likely to date to the last years of their use and the paucity of earlier coins provides no support for the view that these fortlets must have been built about the middle of the 4th century[57]. The issue of coins in the region reached a peak in the period 364/378[58]. Consequently, coins of this date could be expected still to be in circulation in the late 4th century.

The end of the system

The abandonment of the barrier walls and the fortlets – or at least the end of the co-ordinated operation of the system – can be dated with greater precision. The scarcity of ARS dated to 380–450 and the total absence of typically 5th century forms suggest that occupation at Ad Pirum ended ca. 400[59]. The latest coins from the site date to 383/408[60]. Of four coins from

[54] Petru 1983, 133.

[55] That 4th c. coins could still be in circulation, even as late as the end of the 5th c., see Guest 2007, 298–301. Coins of mid 4th c. date could well have been still in use at the end of the 4th c., possibly later.

[56] Pröttel 1996, 135; Petru 1967, 123; Kos 1986, 203. Ciglenečki noted that the fortlets along the highway produced most coins minted from ca. 350 and argues that these fortifications must have been added to the system in the 2nd half of the century (Ciglenečki 2005, 124; Ciglenečki 2009, 175). On the coin finds, see also Leben – Šubic 1990, 331.

[57] It proved impossible to identify an intact stratigraphical sequence during the excavations at Martinj Hrib which might have added weight to this late dating; Leben – Šubic 1990, 331. For the weakness of the structural argument used to bolster the case for a later date, see above, p. 107–108.

[58] Kos 1986, 197.

[59] Pröttel 1996, 137.

[60] Mackensen 1981, 149 note 34. The same date applies probably to Lanišče and Martinj Hrib; Ulbert 1981, 48. Christie notes the discovery of a gold coin of Valentinian III (425–455) was overlooked by Ulbert but, as Christie appreciated, a single issue and one of high intrinsic value does not provide an argument in favour of continued military use of the site; Christie 1991, 417 note 39.

Lanišče, the latest dates to 387/388[61]. The fortlet of Martinj Hrib produced late 4th century issues, the last one struck by the usurper Maximus (383–388)[62]. Recent excavations at Castra yielded 3rd and 4th century issues, the latest of Arcadius (395–402)[63]. As on the Danubian frontier, the supply of pay for the soldiers manning the Alpine defences ceased about the beginning of the first decade of the 5th century, despite the fact that there had been a programme of reconstruction on the Danubian frontier as late as the reign of Valentinian[64]. The cessation of coin supply marks the end of any effective, co-ordinated operation of the system, and the loss of military control over the passes through the Julian Alps[65]. The end of the *claustra Alpium Iuliarum* occurred about the time when Alaric crossed the Alps with his army in 401. The small Roman force, strung out along the barrier walls, could never have resisted the Goths; flight westward in the face of the enemy is one possible scenario. Alternatively, the garrisons may well have been withdrawn to strengthen Stilicho's army, at a time when he was known to have been short of troops[66]. Later, some of the fortifications may have been temporarily reused, but on an ad hoc basis and there was never any attempt to reinstate the system of barrier walls, nor the fortlets, including Ad Pirum[67].

The organisation of the ›frontier‹ and its garrison

Calculating the probable garrison required to police the entire system can be no more than a very rough estimate, but is worth attempting. The total length of the barrier walls must have been at least 70 km[68]. If the 100 m spacing between towers at Nauportus is accepted as the norm, then the barrier walls would have required at least 700 towers. Since there were very few fortlets attached to the wall and these were very small, each tower must normally have accommodated its own soldiers. The number required in each tower remains speculative but six soldiers should have been sufficient to maintain a continuous watch and patrol. A rough estimate of 4,200 men for the entire garrison of the barrier walls would seem a reasonable guess. The few known fortlets directly linked to the walls (Martinj Hrib, Lanišče, San Pietro al Natisone [?] and Ad Pirum) were too small to have contained forces which substantially increased that figure. As described above, very little is known about the use which was made of the other, larger fortifications. Castra lay well behind the last of the barrier walls on the highway, 20 km west of Ad Pirum. Even if it was an entirely military establishment, it could perhaps have housed a garrison of 1,000 although, from what we know about the interior, this is probably an overestimate. Nauportus, which is slightly smaller, might have been capable of containing a similar force were it not that it probably also contained civilians; a force of 500 would seem a more likely garrison. Tarsatica was somewhat larger, but it presumably also remained a civilian centre; 500 soldiers might be a reasonable guess. Forum Iulii had the largest fortification but, assuming the same circumstances applied as at Tarsatica, it is unlikely that there would have been space for more

[61] Kos 1986, 195.
[62] Leben – Šubic 1990, 336.
[63] Osmuk 1990, 395–402.
[64] For the renewed building on the Danube, see Christie 2007, 554. The latest bulk supply of coinage to Carnuntum dates to the period 364/378 and terminates in the first decade of the 5th c.; Gugl 2007, 344–355. On the coinage and the latest issues, indicating a cessation of coinage, see Kos 1986, 206–207.
[65] The end of coin circulation provides a reasonably precise date for when the army no longer received pay and, critically, implies that the *annona*, which included basic food supplies as well as more exotic imports, must also have stopped, leaving any residual garrisons to either abandon their duties or fall back upon their own resources, as exemplified by the fate of Noricum in the 5th c., which is described in the *Vita Sancti Severini*; Alföldy 1974, 213–227.
[66] The plausible connection between the arrival of Alaric and the end of the *Claustra* has been noted; Kos 1986, 207.
[67] Christie 2007, 555–558; Christie 1991, 417 note 39. Although a stray find, the single gold coin of Valentinian III, simply proves that someone visited the site at a later date. Its discovery does not prove that coin supply continued into the 5th c.
[68] Petru 1978, 506.

than 500 men. These estimates are on the generous side, but the figures may go some way to compensate for the fact that there must be more undiscovered barrier walls and towers which have not been included in the first part of the calculation. The total force could therefore have been as large as ca. 6,700 – a substantial investment in manpower[69]. However, the dispersal of these forces suggests that the system could never have been capable of repelling an army or even a large force seriously bent upon invasion. At Benete (f), for example, there were five towers, and no fortlets[70]. A garrison of 30 soldiers (6 × 5), spaced out along the barrier wall, could not have resisted a determined enemy. Forum Iulii is too far north to have been capable of providing immediate support, except for the possible barrier wall immediately east of the town (fig. 2). Tarsatica is at the southern end of the system and perhaps could have provided a reserve, capable of intervention as far north as Jelenje, leaving only Nauportus possibly with an effective force in close proximity to the barrier walls at the eastern end of the Hrušica pass. Perhaps with the exception of Nauportus, it is clear that the other possible military bases are too remote to provide support for the barrier walls and their tower garrisons, especially in the northern sector where they were widely spaced and separated from one another by impassable mountain ranges; the small number of soldiers based at any one barrier wall could not expect immediate assistance in an emergency. A force at Castra could have assisted in the protection of the highway, supported, perhaps, by a garrison at Nauportus, but it was not well placed to reinforce outlying parts of the system.

Another factor complicates the calculation of the total numbers of troops available. The Notitia Dignitatum lists three legions, all bearing the names Julia Alpina, presumably because the Julian Alps had been their designated area of operations: *legio prima Iulia Alpina* (Not. dign. occ. 5, 107. 257; 7, 34), *legio secunda Iulia Alpina* (Not. dign. occ. 5, 108. 258; 7, 60) and *legio tertia Iulia Alpina* (Not. dign. occ. 5, 99. 248; 7, 35). The first and third legions are recorded as being stationed in Italy and were possibly under the direct command of the *comes Italiae*, although, because this is not specified, both may equally have been only responsible to the *magister peditum* and not to the count. Certainly, the second legion was quartered in Illyricum and could not have been under the jurisdication of the *comes Italiae*, even if it was involved in protecting the eastern approaches to the pass[71]. Nor is it clear how the two legions were distributed; they may have been held in reserve, or based in the four larger fortifications described above. They may even have been split up to man the towers; otherwise troops must have been drawn from other units which were available to the praesental *magistri*, or were taken from federate units not recorded in the Notitia Dignitatum[72]. To add to the uncertainty, *legio I Iulia Alpina* is listed as a pseudocomitatensian unit which suggests that it had been withdrawn from a regional command, whereas the third legion is comitantensian and should therefore have formed part of the field army. If the latest information was included in the Notitia, compiled in the 420s, then it may reflect the situation after the Alpine command had been disbanded, and the document would then not be relevant to the form or disposition of units which had previously been available to the *comes Italiae*, perhaps including cavalry as well as infantry.

Despite the uncertainties surrounding the forces assigned to the *tractus Italiae*, the illustration for the *comes Italiae* in the Notitia is accurate in two key respects; it shows separate barrier walls with towers (not forts) and they are placed within a mountainous landscape which must be the Julian Alps because no similar walls have been identified in other parts of the Alpine chain

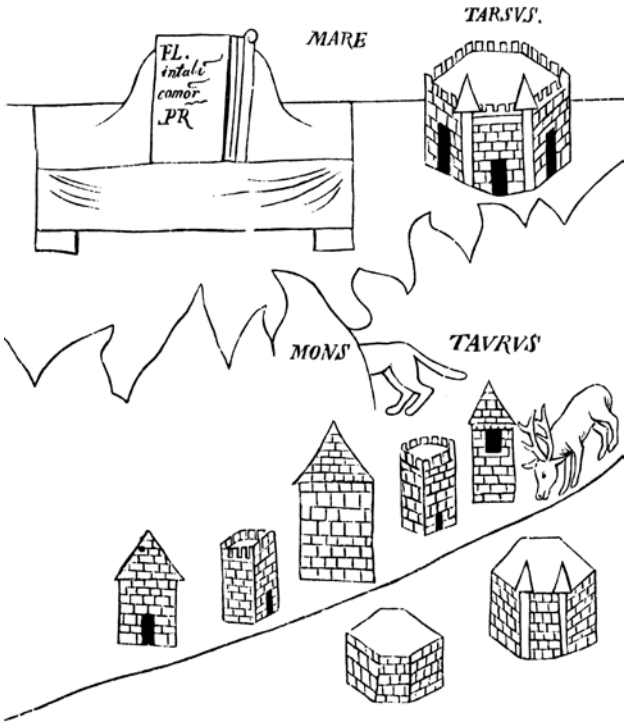
[69] This calculation might well be wide of the mark. But, speculative as it is, the process does demonstrate that a large number of troops must have been required to effectively man the walls.

[70] Šašel – Petru 1971, 65–67.

[71] The territorial extent of the command is vague; the *tractus Italiae* could well have extended to include defensive measures in the northern Alps as well; Christie 2007, 566.

[72] Under the pictogram for the *comes Italiae* (Not. dign. occ. 24), the regional command is described as *Tractus Italiae circa Alpes* but the *officium* is omitted and so, too, the count's military forces. It is possible that units assigned to the *comes* are included in the list of units under the command of his superior, the *magister peditum praesentalis.* But this means that it is not known for sure what forces might have been provided for the count.

(fig. 7). The picture also includes a drawing of a defended site, apparently full of buildings – unlike the normal pictogram for forts which is usually empty. This has been assumed to represent a city, presumably the headquarters of the *comes*. But there are problems. There exist six other pictograms which are similar to that provided for the count (Not. dign. or. 44; Not. dign. occ. 27. 29. 36. 44. 45); they contain mistakes and discrepancies which could have already figured in the original late Roman text, or may have been introduced by medieval copyists[73]. But all have essential features in common; a fortification, equipped with multiple towers, whereas the fort pictograms usually – though not invariably – have simply two towers, flanking the entrance. The most striking aspect of the ›city pictograms‹ is that they contain numerous buildings and, conspicuously, colonnades, often in the south-eastern corner where they form a dominant part of the design (fig. 7). It seems certain that all these illustrations derive from a single original drawing and it is evident that the design is more appropriate to a town than a fort. Even so, there is no uniformity in rank or type of command which distinguishes them as a group; three have the rank of *comes*, two are *praesides*, one is a *corrector*, and another a *dux.* The choice of the ›city pictogram‹ seems to have been arbitrary, possibly used when there was sufficient blank space on the page[74]. Nevertheless, the view that the pictogram for the *comes Italiae* does represent a city gains some support, not from the pictogram itself, but from a comparison between the Alpine scene and the illustration accompanying the only other ›line of internal security‹ which appears in the Notitia. The *comes per Isauriam* (Not. dign. or. 29) has a full page to describe his command, and this includes, in the top right-hand corner, a fort pictogram which appears below the name of the city of Tarsus; surely implying that this was the count's headquarters (fig. 8*)*. Although the pictogram selected was not, *senso stricto*, what one would expect, the smaller design may have been chosen because the scribe wished to include an unusually large amount of additional information on the page. Even though the use of one or other of the pictograms may have no consistent link with the office to which they are ascribed, the fact that both of the commands did have a pictogram surely supports the reasonable deduction that both *comites* had permanent bases. The pictogram for the Italian command can still be understood as representing the headquarters of the *comes Italiae* although, unfortunately, and unlike the Isaurian case, we can only guess where it was. But it is easy enough to find a suitable candidate. During the 3rd century and again during the civil wars of the 4th century, Aquileia is regularly linked with campaigns which involved the defence of the Alpine highway. Its military importance is underlined by its location at the centre of the road network which converged upon it, and its strategic position on the main



8 The *comes per Isaurium* (Not. dign. or. 24, after Seek 1962)

[73] There are mistakes where the scribe has either been remarkably careless or does not quite understand what he is copying; in the drawing provided for the *comes Italiae*, the roofs of towers are present at the corners of the fortification but not the towers themselves which do appear in most of the other examples (fig. 7).

[74] I am grateful to Peter Brennan for suggesting this pragmatic (if disappointing) conclusion. It would explain the apparently indiscriminate use of the larger ›city pictogram‹.

road leading west into the Italian peninsula. It had a harbour able to contain a fleet for resupplying the city if threatened by attack and which could be used for the rapid deployment of forces along the coast to Tergeste, Tarsatica and the Dalmatian coast, a role which it maintained throughout the late Roman period and beyond (fig. 2)[75]. The choice of any of the larger centres within, or on the fringes of the Alps would have limited the options for supporting all parts of the system. Aquileia must surely have contained the headquarters of the *comes,* his *officium,* and an unknown proportion of his military forces.

The function of the system

In the above account, different words are used to describe the ›barrier walls‹, for the sake of stylistic diversity, rather than upon any conviction that the purpose implied is self-evident. Each word brings with it different meanings, ranging in scale from »defence«, »blocking« to »control« and, at the lower end of the scale, »regulation«. The series of ›barrier walls‹, extending from southern Austria to the Adriatic, can safely be accepted as part of a co-ordinated plan, directed towards a particular end – or possibly ends. No barrier walls have been identified in the northern Alps; here the passes are few and presumably easier to defend, but it is still significant that no similar measures were applied. The barrier walls appear to have only existed in the Julian Alps.

Some of the barrier walls face east and these could have been positioned to intercept individuals or groups moving west towards Italy, although none would have had the manpower to resist a major armed attack[76]. This certainly applies to the barrier walls in the northern sector (m, n, o, p) and the barrier walls between Ad Pirum and Nauportus. Within the southern sector, where crossing points were not restricted to narrow valleys, the continuous walls from Tarsatica to Babno polje must have served the same function.

However, some of the barrier walls do not fit with this explanation. The diversion made by one barrier wall (b), heading north-east, along the lower slopes of the mountains meant that the lowland to the south (Grobničko polje) could be observed but anyone crossing it could not be prevented from doing so until they reached the barrier wall at Jelenje. The extension of the barrier wall so far is difficult to comprehend unless its role was to supervise movement, not from the East, but from the North where two valley routes, one between the mountains of Gradišće and Kilovac, the second immediately east of mount Kilovac, both led north into the mountainous uplands west of the high peaks of Vrešine and mount Obrud. A similar concern for mountain massifs is apparent further north where two barrier walls (g and h) encircle mount Dednik, controlling minor valleys on the east side and, on the west, cutting across a north/south route, and probably continuing around its northern slopes. These two sections of wall focused upon the mountain, not upon controlling traffic coming west.

One particularly striking feature of the barrier walls is the number which control routes leading towards Cerkniško polje from the East (e, f) and especially from the North (I, j, k, l), well west of the barrier wall (q), the first to cut across the highway as it entered the Julian Alps. This plateau must have been worth controlling. Cerkniško polje is an upland plain, 50 km long and 7 km wide, and averages a modest 550 m above sea level. A Roman road comes south-east from the highway through an adjacent plain, Planinsko polje (450–400 m above sea level), then runs along the eastern side of Cerkniško polje, offering easy access south-east to Laško polje and the central part of the system in the southern sector (fig. 1). Its importance as a route, allowing possible reinforcement from the highway forts (Castra, perhaps from Nauportus) to reach the remoter barrier walls may have been envisaged but this still does not explain why this region was so systematically surrounded by barrier walls. It has water resources, rarely

[75] Christie 2006, 291–294.
[76] See above, p. 115.

available in the Karst highland. Strabo (7, 5) mentions »Lougeon Helos«, the Cerniško Jezero, an intermittent lake in the southern part of the plain which often disappears underground in the summer, to reappear in the autumn. That Strabo should consider the lake worth mentioning (and a road which reached it from Tergeste) suggests that it was of some importance, and, although he notes that the area was marshy, this would apply only to the southern part of the plain. Unusually for the upland zone, it has deep soils, suitable for agriculture; its northern edge had been occupied during the Iron Age. For such a large garrison in the southern sector and on the highway, the Cerkniško polje would have provided an immediate source of foodstuffs for troops stationed on the barrier walls, at least as far south as Jelenje where supply from Tarsatica would be a more convenient way of provisioning the towers along the nearby barrier walls (a, b). A reasonable explanation would be that these barrier walls were intended to control the movement of goods and people to and from a lowland area which was capable of producing agricultural goods required to sustain the military.

Given that the longest section of barrier wall on the highway lay at the eastern end of the Hrušica pass (perhaps supported by a garrison in Nauportus) it is odd that, behind that line, there were additional barrier walls at Lanišče (r) and Ad Pirum. The apparently reasonable explanation, that they represent successive modifications to the ›line of defence‹, is untenable; the dating for Ad Pirum (r), the smaller tower-gate on the road to Tergeste (s), Martinj Hrib (k) and Lanišče (r) indicates that all continued to function down to the very end of the 4th century. It is therefore improbable that the barrier wall around Nauportus was considered sufficient to protect the land to its rear; the dispersal of its forces around the circuit would suggest as much. Nor could the even smaller numbers of soldiers along the other sections of wall have been capable of dealing with any major threat. Another purpose must be found. Ad Pirum is the only location where the crossing points through the barrier wall are largely understood. As argued above, the diversion of ›civilian traffic‹ through the main tower-gate (not permitting passage through the fort) suggests that the small garrison was concerned primarily with checking movement up and down the highway. Passage could be prohibited (at night [?]) when the doors in the tower-gates could be barred. Both the larger tower-gate (fig. 3:3) and the one immediately to the south on the Tergeste road (fig. 3:4) had passageways, ca. 1.30 m wide, passable for pedestrians and probably wide enough for wheeled vehicles[77]. An explanation for this arrangement might be that civilians were being taxed for using the road or for passing from Illyricum into Italy. If this was the case, then this would explain why there was another gate-tower at the start of the road heading from the highway towards Tergeste. If civilians were indeed charged for using the roads, this would also explain the location of Martinj Hrub (k), immediately south of the highway, blocking the route heading south-east through the upland plains. Whatever the precise reason for these tower-gates, they certainly indicate close control was exercised over those travelling within the region, but they could not have played an active role in the defence of the roads themselves.

Aware, perhaps, that the wall garrisons would require substantial assistance if they were required to perform a defensive role, it has been implied or suggested that additional manpower could be summoned from the numerous ›hill-top sites‹ (›Höhensiedlungen‹) which existed in the region[78]. Third century coin-finds do suggest that many of the sites may have been used as temporary refuges; the few buildings found appear to be flimsy structures made of wood and clearly not military, nor do any appear to have had late Roman fortifications. The argument that permanent upland settlements were established as early as the second half of the 4th century (and therefore overlapping with the use of the barrier walls) is not proven by the recovery of coins

[77] For example, the wheel ruts cut into the slabs flooring the south gate at Nicopolis ad Istrum were 1.45 m apart and had clearly been cut to guide wheeled traffic and avoid damage to the sides of this tower-gate; Poulter 1985, 90.

[78] See Šašel – Petru 1971, 99. For an implied connection with late Roman hill-top sites, see Ulbert 1981, 11 and especially Ciglenečki 1987, *passim*; Ciglenečki 2005, 124–125; Ciglenečki 1999, 292; Ciglenečki 2008, 488–493; Ciglenečki 2009, 177–181.

dating to the late 4th century – which may well be residual[79]. Neither is it possible to determine, even when imported fine wares are present, whether these sites were so early in date or whether, as seems most likely, they were first occupied in the 5th century, after the abandonment of the barrier walls. Even if some were established in the very late 4th century, this would not support the argument that these hill-top sites had a military function. Although presumed to be fortified, the ›hill-top sites‹ were partially or fully encircled by a wall, at most 1 m wide; this could never have functioned as a defensive curtain but could only have served as an enclosure wall, surrounding the late 5th or 6th century ecclesiastical complexes which most of them contained[80]. Moreover, the discovery of belt-buckles and cross-bow broaches is no reason for arguing that these sites contained a garrison; these items were certainly worn by civilians, not necessarily by soldiers. Crucially, because these sites are situated high up steep-sided hills, often down side valleys, they could never have played a role in the defence of the passes. Important as these sites were, especially in the late 5th and 6th centuries, they then functioned as religious centres and, as yet, whether they contained a substantial population is unknown[81].

On the scale of military importance, the barrier walls could be said to slip towards the bottom of the range. Their function could only have been to control or supervise the use of roads and routes. Separated by mountains, the individual barrier walls could not have played any part in the civil wars of 351/352, 387/388 or 394. That leaves the question open as to why the system was established at such a cost in manpower, supply and material resources.

What is required is a significant but ›low intensity threat‹. One often overlooked problem was banditry. Bandits *(latrones)* were always a danger for travellers in mountainous country[82]. A Roman tombstone set up for Antonius Valentinus at Castra commemorates a soldier in the *legio XIII Gemina* who was killed by bandits in the Julian Alps at a place known to be »wicked« or »criminal«, presumably because of its evil reputation for banditry: *interfecto a latronibus in Alpes Iulias loco quod appellatur Scelerata*[83]. The tombstone was erected by the deceased man's son: presumably the soldier was based in or close to the scene of his murder. But such crimes were commonplace, if perhaps more frequent in mountainous upland. The walls (g and h), which surrounded mount Dednik and those which skirted the lower slopes of the mountain massif east of Jelenje (b) may have been intended to control upland areas, where bandits could seek refuge. The succession of barrier walls between Ad Pirum and Nauportus were ideally situated to intercept anyone using the road, whether locals or travellers. Still, endemic as it was, the scale of the Roman counter measures surely seems out of proportion to the problem. In fact, the title *latrones* was equally applicable to small bands of barbarians crossing into the empire as it was for home-grown bandits[84]. During the invasion of the Quadi and Sarmatians in 375, the half-brother of Ambrose was killed in the Alps when there was »no more significant a barrier than wooden barricades« (Ambr. exc. Sat. 1, 31). This invasion might have been an incentive to set up a more permanent system of control. Although a large scale invasion could hardly have been met by the barrier walls, if the threat to Italy was from small warbands, and not a confederacy of barbarian

[79] See above, note 55. Also, for the continued use of 4th c. coins in Noricum well into the 5th c., see Ladstätter 2000, 82.

[80] Recent excavations have not produced evidence to support the contention that these were fortified sites. Tonovcov Grad near Kobarid occupies a naturally defensive location but, where the approaches to the hill-top were less precipitous, a ›defensive wall‹ has been claimed; Ciglenečki – Modrijan – Milavec 2011, 19–21. However, it was only 0.80 m thick: an enclosure wall yes, but such a slight structure could not have served a defensive function. Recent work at another hill-top site, Tinje pri Žusmu has produced an outer ditch, but no sign of a defensive wall has been found; Ciglenečki 2000, 147–148.

[81] Ciglenečki 1999, 291–298 note 67 and Ciglenečki – Modrijan – Milavec 2011, 70–71. 262. 269–271. Here the excavations at Tonovcov grad will be of key importance in demonstrating whether or not the ›hill-top sites‹ could have contained a substantial (presumably civilian) population.

[82] Grünewald 1999, 20.

[83] InscrIt 339. See also CIL Suppl. Italica X (Rome 1992) 235.

[84] Some kind of fortification was built on the banks of the Danube by the *dux Scythiae* in 337/340 (IGLRom 238). The inscription helpfully describes its function as protecting civilians from *latrunculi* who were for ever crossing the river to pillage the province.

forces, then the walls would prove effective enough. Apparently, at this time, there were also bands of other barbarians living immediately north of the Danube and they regularly crossed the frontier to pillage Illyricum[85]. Another possible explanation is provided by the 9th August 378 when the emperor Valens was defeated and killed in the battle of Adrianople, and his army annihilated. The ensuing chaos was not immediately checked by Theodosius who was unable to suppress the Gothic invaders by force, but had to resort to a political compromise. Even after the conclusion of peace in 382, the destruction of the villa economy on the lower Danube, and the settlement of the Goths on the land (as *foederati* [?]), possibly garrisoning Roman-built fortifications, must have had repercussions in Illyricum as well as on the lower Danube[86]. Civilians fled with their possessions south to Thrace and Macedonia[87]. After the withdrawal of Gratian's field army to Italy and the transfer of Illyricum to Theodosius, civilians followed, as did the young Valentinian II, who had been living in Sirmium[88]. The arrival of refugees in the Alps may have proved another cause for concern; the newcomers required supervision and resettlement. Also, the threat of Gothic warbands coming north up the Balkan highway surely would have caused panic amongst the civilian population of Illyricum.

It is possible that there was not just one reason, but a combination of problems, which led to the construction of the barrier walls. Which of these (or other problems) account for the construction of the barrier system, we shall probably never know. For the present, one can only guess that the most likely date for the creation of the barrier walls lies somewhere in the very late 4th century, when the Western Empire faced an unprecedented challenge to its authority. This date would fit with the crude and irregular construction of the fortlets which formed part of the system. In practice, this made possible close supervision of the roads and of access to some of the larger mountain massifs, supervising the movement of civilians who, perhaps reluctantly, nevertheless accepted the sequence of check-points and gateways, exemplified by the complex arrangements at Ad Pirum.

Internal frontiers in the Roman and late Roman period

In recent years, the subject of ›internal frontiers‹ has been of particular interest to scholarship[89]. Within the Balkan peninsula, one other system of barrier walls has been recently studied. The Balkan range (Haemus Mons) runs west to east across modern-day Bulgaria, separating the lower Danubian plain from the southern lowlands of Thrace. This mountain chain represents a significant natural barrier: in its central sector, travel is restricted to a few passes which allow communication between the two regions. However, at the eastern end, the mountain diminishes in height before it reaches the Black Sea coast and it was in this section, where the routes south were more numerous, that a barrier wall, 43 km long, ran east from the valley of the river Eleshnitsa, where the mountains rise steeply to the west, to the sea at Obzor (ancient Templum Iovis). Although the line ran west/east, a section, 2 km in length, followed a north/south alignment where it intersected the main road from Marcianopolis to Thrace which led south-east to the imperial city of Constantinople. The central part of this line was occupied by a most unusual fortification, whose walls form a regular polygon, situated astride a barrier wall, convincingly identified as the ›Haemus Gates‹[90]. Equipped with externally projecting round towers, the fort had two large pentagonal tower-gates, one facing west, the other on the opposing eastern side

[85] Kos 1996, 169–170.
[86] Poulter 2007, 92–94.
[87] Amm. 31, 15, 2.
[88] For details, see Liebeschuetz 2005, 273–274.
[89] See, for example, the session on internal frontiers, organizer V. Maxfield, The internal frontiers, in: Morillo – Hanel – Martín 2009, I, 70–84.
[90] Dinchev 2007, 118.

of the curtain[91]. The construction of this part of the line was impressively massif; the walls, built with regular tile courses and limestone blocks, were 2.65 m thick, easily wide enough to accommodate a parapet and wall-walk. Two other fortlets, of indeterminate shape, but smaller in dimension than the main fort, were positioned, one at each end of the barrier wall which was also provided with towers, rectangular in shape, straddling the curtain and regularly spaced, ca. 80 m apart; 10 towers to the north of the main fort and 5 towers to the south. Although this section was carefully engineered and well provided with observation towers, the size of the garrison could not have been large; the fort was only 1.2 ha. It could have housed a garrison, large enough to have supplied soldiers to man the towers, but not large enough to resist a major attack. Other possible forts existed in the region but not apparently along the line of the barrier[92]. To the east, the remaining 40 km of barrier wall to the sea was continuous but varied in quality; some parts consisting only of an earthen wall and an outer ditch. The date of the polygonal fort has been comfortably established. Built ca. 400, it apparently survived the political turmoil, especially from the middle of the 5th century, and continued in use until the end of that century when occupation terminated with destruction by fire. The utility of this line was still considered valuable; the fort was reoccupied and was maintained until ca. 580, a chronology mirrored in the history of a fort to the north, well beyond the Haemus[93].

A report of the hasty erection of barricades at the beginning of the Gothic Revolt in 377, to prevent the enemy from crossing into Thrace[94] cannot refer directly to the barrier system in the eastern Haemus, a planned and carefully constructed fortification which could not have been built in that chaotic year, nor immediately after the battle of Adrianople. But, following the departure of the majority of the Goths with Alaric, military control was immediately reimposed on the lower Danube. This situation provides a more likely context for the construction, not of a military frontier, but a demarcation line, capable of controlling the movement of independent-minded Gothic war bands, although quite incapable of repulsing a major attack. As in the Alps, control, not defence, appears the most likely function for this barrier. Nor need the ›enemy‹ have been only Goths. During the High Empire, the Bessi, a tribe occupying the Haemus range, gained a formidable reputation for banditry[95]. In the troubled years at the end of the 4th, and again during the second half of the 5th century, they would have found an unrivalled opportunity to resume their traditional profession as *latrones*: bandits do not change their spots.

The Notitia Dignitatum contains the description of another ›internal frontier‹, namely the command of the *comes per Isauriam* (Not. dign. or. 29). Listed in the text are his *officium* and two legions under his control. The accompanying illustration is exceptionally informative (fig. 8). The central scene shows a mountain range, helpfully named Mons Taurus, and a road lined with towers and fortlets. As noted above, the drawing also includes a fortification with the name of the city of Tarsus, surely the headquarters for the *comes* and his *officium*. The choice of Tarsus was tactically sound; it lies 44 km south of the ›Cilician Gates‹ (Gökoluk pass) on the highway leading north to the Anatolian plateau, a strategically important route, connecting southern Asia Minor with Syria and the Near East. The narrow gorge, following the river Gökoluk, is ca. 110 km long and provided ideal terrain for bandits to waylay travellers. It

[91] Dinchev 2007.

[92] Dinchev 2007, 126–130.

[93] The fort at Dichin was constructed ca. 400 and the coin series continues at least down to the reign of Leo when it was taken by assault and burnt down, only to be immediately reoccupied and held during most of the 6th c.; terminal issues date to the reign of Tiberius II (578–582); Poulter 2007, 82–97 and, on the coins see Guest 2007, 296–307. Not that this was true for all fortifications. Iatrus, on the Danube, seems to have been abandoned during the 2nd half of the 5th c. The *burgus* at Koula, in north-western Bulgaria, though its impressive remains still stand today, was not held beyond the middle of the 5th c. The same would seem to be true at Dobri Dyal in the northern foothills of the Haemus where current Bulgarian/British excavations indicate that this hill top fort was built ca. 400 but abandoned ca. 450 and was not reoccupied in the 6th c.

[94] Amm. 31, 8, 1: *inter Haemimontanas angustias clauserunt.*

[95] Strab. 7, 5, 12.

must be this road which is illustrated. So much in this scene makes sense: the inclusion of fortlets and watchtowers is what could be anticipated as the most effective means of controlling a dangerous tract of country; Isauria had a well-deserved reputation for banditry, especially during the late 3rd and 4th centuries A.D. and it is against this threat, not an external enemy, that the system must have been established. Here also, the aim was to protect and secure a strategic highway, but the small military force could not have been used to block the movement of armies, whether Roman or barbarian.

Dealing with mountains, or rather the populations they contained, was no novelty. The same tactics of control and monitoring peoples living in mountainous regions had been used during the early empire. In Numidia, from the 2nd century A.D., perhaps from the reign of Hadrian, a drystone wall and ditch (traditionally called the ›Fossatum‹) ran around the eastern, southern and northern sides of the Hodna Mountains, a distance of 140 km. But it was ca. 130 km south of the forts on the desert edge and the *limes* road. It had towers but its course was irregular and appears not to have been a strongly defensive structure; rather than being designed to counter a hostile mountain population, the only role it could have performed was to regulate the movement of civilians, entering or exiting this mountain massif[96].

The short-lived Flavian frontier in Scotland already seems to exhibit the characteristics of an internal frontier, well to the south of the legionary fortress at Inchtuthil. East of the forts which were established at the mouths of the valleys leading up into the Caledonian mountains, the Roman road was lined by closely-spaced observation towers and fortlets (known as the Gask ridge); the garrisons would have been too small to deal with a significant force, coming down from the mountains, if they bypassed the auxiliary forts controlling the main access routes down the glens. Their purpose must rather have been to observe and supervise movement, and could only cope with a people who were, at least nominally, acquiescent when such supervision was imposed. One role could be to control movement of Roman supplies being taken north, materials which might well have been of interest to *latrones* inhabiting the mountains to the west. However, the towers do not continue all the way north to the legionary fortress but are limited to the stretch of road which runs between the Forth and the Tay[97]. It seems possible that the line of timber watchtowers were built to protect Fife, the largest expanse of agricultural land and pasture available in eastern Scotland, a valuable resource for military supplies.

That all hill-top populations were invariably hostile would be an ungenerous assumption. There is always a symbiotic relationship between mountain people (with their own natural resources, such as wool, leather goods, cheese, wild-animal skins, to name a few) and the lowland population which had the land to grow and sell vegetables, grain and had better grazing land. If, as is likely, transhumance was practised, herds of sheep or cattle could have been brought down to lowland pasture in the autumn and returned to mountain grazing in the spring. Such a regular migration would have required supervision, and offered opportunities for taxation.

Conclusion

These internal lines of control, on the Haemus, in Isauria, in Numidia and Scotland have many features in common with the *Claustra Alpium*; their purpose was regulation, not defence. Even so, it would be wrong to assume that all mountainous regions posed exactly the same problems. In the case of the barrier wall system in the Alps, it seems certain that it was designed, not so much to defend, but to control, very closely, the movement of people travelling within the Julian Alps, and along access routes up into the highland massifs and plains, perhaps supervising the arrival of refugees from Illyricum. Because the response in the Julian Alps led to the construction of such an extensive system, the threat must have been serious – or perceived to be so.

[96] Fentress 1979, 112; Breeze 2011, 83–84.
[97] Breeze 2011, 162; Breeze – Hodgson 2009, 85–89.

The system may have been set up to counter not just one problem, but a combination of different ones; such as, controlling the flood of refugees northwards after the battle of Adrianople, the danger of Gothic raiding bands from southern Illyricum, the need to protect agricultural production within the high plains, raiding parties from across the Danube, or the never-ending threat to civilian traffic presented by local bandits. All may have been factors and all could have provoked imperial intervention in the late 4th century, but not earlier. What is certain is that the barrier walls were not capable of defending Italy from an approaching army, whether Roman or barbarian. The barrier walls in the Julian Alps, as an organized system, may well have operated for only a short period of perhaps 20–30 years. By the time Alaric arrived on the scene with his army in 401, the barrier walls may well have been abandoned, even though they were remembered long enough for their existence to be recorded in the Notitia Dignitatum.

Appendix

A concordance of site references used here and those used by Šašel – Petru 1971.

Alphabetic reference	Number (after Sašel – Petru 1971)	Site name
a	I	Rijeka (Tarsatica)*
b	II	Jelenje on the Gróbmičko polje
c	III	the Rečina source to Željezna Vrata
d	IV	the eastern area of Mt. Snežnik
e	V	Babno polje
f	VII	Benete
g	IX	Gradišće
h	X	Selo pri Robu
i	XII	Rakitna
j	XII	Pokojišče
k	XXV	Gradišće/Martinj hrb *
l	XXVI	Grčarevec
m	XVI	Nova Oselica
n	XVII	Zarakovec
o	XIX	San Pietro al Natisone*
	XX	Cividale (Forum Iulii)*
p	XXIV	Rattendorf im Gailtal
q	XIV	Vrhnika(Nauportus)*
r	XXVII	Lanišče*
s	XXVIII	Hrušica (Ad Pirum)*

* = Barrier walls associated with fortifications (discussed under the section on forts). Doubtful sections of the barrier wall and regions not included in the discussion: VI Loški Potok; VIII Strmca; XVIII Podmelec; XXI Canale del Ferro; XXII Upper Carniola; XV Polhov Gradec; XXIII Carinthia.

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Abstract

Andrew Poulter, An indefensible frontier: the claustra Alpium Iuliarum

It has been long maintained that the system of barrier walls and fortlets in the Julian Alps dates to the early 4th century and that it was a fortification line used to defend Italy during times of cival war. Reviewing both the historical, archaeological and topograhic evidence, it is here argued that its military importance has been much exaggerated; one role may well have been to regulate traffic and perhaps to exact taxes from the civilians using the imperial road system, or crossing from Illyricum into Italy. Its date cannot be yet established for certain but the most likely context is the very end of the 4th century A.D., not long before it was abandoned at some point during the first decade of the 5th century. Contrary to received wisdom, it was incapable of repulsing any major threat from the East, whether Goths or Romans. Regulation and taxation, however, do not require the erection of barrier walls. There must have been additional reasons for its construction even though the walls were unable to deal with anything more than a low intensity threat. What the perceived danger was, it is impossible to say, except that there were a series of problems facing the Western Empire ca. 390–400 which could warrant the system's creation in the Julian Alps; an influx of refugees from Illyricum, Gothic war bands from Thrace, raiding parties from across the Danube and the endemic danger posed by local bandits. Any one of these, or more likely a combination of several factors, precipitated the decision to regulate, but not seriously to defend the routes which led west from Illyricum and into the Italian peninsular.

Keywords

Frontier – Barrier Walls – Late Roman – Claustra Alpium – Ad Pirum