

Defending the northern frontiers of the Sasanian Empire: recent fieldwork from the Great Wall of Gorgan to the Caucasus

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Between the 4th and the 6th century AD, the Sasanian Empire built up the most massive defensive infrastructure of any ancient or medieval Near Eastern Empire. Perhaps it was even of greater scale than that of the Roman Empire, and it was certainly larger than that of the Late Roman state. The Great Wall of Gorgan, some 200km long with over 30 forts filled with large barracks, was only one of several frontier walls. Fortresses in the hinterland (often c. 40ha and sometimes well over 100ha large), if probably occupied temporarily only, were large enough to hold thousands to tens of thousands of occupants each. The Sasanian armed forces were evidently of a considerable size. Some of the construction projects, e.g. of a bridge on which the Gorgan Wall crossed a river or substantial walls built at the edge of precipices in the Caucasus, also provide evidence for formidable engineering skills. This was part of a sophisticated network, designed to be able to react to threats at multiple frontiers, notably in the north. Natural obstacles were skilfully used to enhance the security of frontier territories. Unprecedented expansion of settlement in many of the empire's lands and the foundation of large new cities were made possible through successful border defence. Growing inner prosperity at the same time enabled the empire to carry out these massive construction projects and to sustain an army that must have totalled hundreds of thousands of men.

