Chapter I: The Extent Of The Empire In The Age Of The Antonines--Part I.

Introduction.

The Extent And Military Force Of The Empire In The Age Of The Antonines.

In the second century of the Christian Aera, the empire of Rome comprehended the fairest part of the earth, and the most civilized portion of mankind. The frontiers of that extensive monarchy were guarded by ancient renown and disciplined valor. The gentle but powerful influence of laws and manners had gradually cemented the union of the provinces. Their peaceful inhabitants enjoyed and abused the advantages of wealth and luxury. The image of a free constitution was preserved with decent reverence: the Roman senate appeared to possess the sovereign authority, and devolved on the emperors all the executive powers of government. During a happy period of more than fourscore years, the public administration was conducted by the virtue and abilities of Nerva, Trajan, Hadrian, and the two Antonines. It is the design of this, and of the two succeeding chapters, to describe the prosperous condition of their empire; and after wards, from the death of Marcus Antoninus, to deduce the most important circumstances of its decline and fall; a revolution which will ever be remembered, and is

still felt by the nations of the earth.

The principal conquests of the Romans were achieved under the republic; and the emperors, for the most part, were satisfied with preserving those dominions which had been acquired by the policy of the senate, the active emulations of the consuls, and the martial enthusiasm of the people. The seven first centuries were filled with a rapid succession of triumphs; but it was reserved for Augustus to relinquish the ambitious design of subduing the whole earth, and to introduce a spirit of moderation into the public councils. Inclined to peace by his temper and situation, it was easy for him to discover that Rome, in her present exalted situation, had much less to hope than to fear from the chance of arms; and that, in the prosecution of remote wars, the undertaking became every day more difficult, the event more doubtful, and the possession more precarious, and less beneficial. The experience of Augustus added weight to these salutary reflections, and effectually convinced him that, by the prudent vigor of his counsels, it would be easy to secure every concession which the safety or the dignity of Rome might require from the most formidable barbarians. Instead of exposing his person and his legions to the arrows of the Parthians, he obtained, by an honorable treaty, the restitution of the standards and prisoners which had been taken in the defeat of Crassus. [1]

[Footnote 1: Dion Cassius, (l. liv. p. 736,) with the annotations of Reimar, who has collected all that Roman vanity has left upon the subject. The marble of Ancyra, on which Augustus recorded his own

exploits, asserted that he compelled the Parthians to restore the ensigns of Crassus.]

His generals, in the early part of his reign, attempted the reduction of Ethiopia and Arabia Felix. They marched near a thousand miles to the south of the tropic; but the heat of the climate soon repelled the invaders, and protected the un-warlike natives of those sequestered regions. [2] The northern countries of Europe scarcely deserved the expense and labor of conquest. The forests and morasses of Germany were filled with a hardy race of barbarians, who despised life when it was separated from freedom; and though, on the first attack, they seemed to yield to the weight of the Roman power, they soon, by a signal act of despair, regained their independence, and reminded Augustus of the vicissitude of fortune. [3] On the death of that emperor, his testament was publicly read in the senate. He bequeathed, as a valuable legacy to his successors, the advice of confining the empire within those limits which nature seemed to have placed as its permanent bulwarks and boundaries: on the west, the Atlantic Ocean; the Rhine and Danube on the north; the Euphrates on the east; and towards the south, the sandy deserts of Arabia and Africa. [4]

[Footnote 2: Strabo, (l. xvi. p. 780,) Pliny the elder, (Hist. Natur. l. vi. c. 32, 35, [28, 29,]) and Dion Cassius, (l. liii. p. 723, and l. liv. p. 734,) have left us very curious details concerning these wars. The Romans made themselves masters of Mariaba, or Merab, a city of Arabia Felix, well known to the Orientals. (See Abulfeda and the Nubian

geography, p. 52) They were arrived within three days' journey of the spice country, the rich object of their invasion.

Note: It is the city of Merab that the Arabs say was the residence of Belkis, queen of Saba, who desired to see Solomon. A dam, by which the waters collected in its neighborhood were kept back, having been swept away, the sudden inundation destroyed this city, of which, nevertheless, vestiges remain. It bordered on a country called Adramout, where a particular aromatic plant grows: it is for this reason that we real in the history of the Roman expedition, that they were arrived within three days' journey of the spice country.--G. Compare Malte-Brun, Geogr. Eng. trans. vol. ii. p. 215. The period of this flood has been copiously discussed by Reiske, (Program. de vetusta Epocha Arabum, ruptura cataractae Merabensis.) Add. Johannsen, Hist. Yemanae, p. 282. Bonn, 1828; and see Gibbon, note 16. to Chap. L.--M.

Note: Two, according to Strabo. The detailed account of Strabo makes the invaders fail before Marsuabae: this cannot be the same place as Mariaba. Ukert observes, that Aelius Gallus would not have failed for want of water before Mariaba. (See M. Guizot's note above.) "Either, therefore, they were different places, or Strabo is mistaken." (Ukert, Geographic der Griechen und Romer, vol. i. p. 181.) Strabo, indeed, mentions Mariaba distinct from Marsuabae. Gibbon has followed Pliny in reckoning Mariaba among the conquests of Gallus. There can be little doubt that he is wrong, as Gallus did not approach the capital of Sabaea. Compare the note of the Oxford editor of Strabo.--M.]

[Footnote 3: By the slaughter of Varus and his three legions. See the first book of the Annals of Tacitus. Sueton. in August. c. 23, and Velleius Paterculus, l. ii. c. 117, &c. Augustus did not receive the melancholy news with all the temper and firmness that might have been expected from his character.]

[Footnote 4: Tacit. Annal. l. ii. Dion Cassius, l. lvi. p. 833, and the speech of Augustus himself, in Julian's Caesars. It receives great light from the learned notes of his French translator, M. Spanheim.]

Happily for the repose of mankind, the moderate system recommended by the wisdom of Augustus, was adopted by the fears and vices of his immediate successors. Engaged in the pursuit of pleasure, or in the exercise of tyranny, the first Caesars seldom showed themselves to the armies, or to the provinces; nor were they disposed to suffer, that those triumphs which their indolence neglected, should be usurped by the conduct and valor of their lieutenants. The military fame of a subject was considered as an insolent invasion of the Imperial prerogative; and it became the duty, as well as interest, of every Roman general, to guard the frontiers intrusted to his care, without aspiring to conquests which might have proved no less fatal to himself than to the vanquished barbarians. [5]

[Footnote 5: Germanicus, Suetonius Paulinus, and Agricola were checked and recalled in the course of their victories. Corbulo was put to death.

Military merit, as it is admirably expressed by Tacitus, was, in the strictest sense of the word, imperatoria virtus.]

The only accession which the Roman empire received, during the first century of the Christian Aera, was the province of Britain. In this single instance, the successors of Caesar and Augustus were persuaded to follow the example of the former, rather than the precept of the latter. The proximity of its situation to the coast of Gaul seemed to invite their arms; the pleasing though doubtful intelligence of a pearl fishery, attracted their avarice; [6] and as Britain was viewed in the light of a distinct and insulated world, the conquest scarcely formed any exception to the general system of continental measures. After a war of about forty years, undertaken by the most stupid, [7] maintained by the most dissolute, and terminated by the most timid of all the emperors, the far greater part of the island submitted to the Roman yoke. [8] The various tribes of Britain possessed valor without conduct, and the love of freedom without the spirit of union. They took up arms with savage fierceness; they laid them down, or turned them against each other, with wild inconsistency; and while they fought singly, they were successively subdued. Neither the fortitude of Caractacus, nor the despair of Boadicea, nor the fanaticism of the Druids, could avert the slavery of their country, or resist the steady progress of the Imperial generals, who maintained the national glory, when the throne was disgraced by the weakest, or the most vicious of mankind. At the very time when Domitian, confined to his palace, felt the terrors which he inspired, his legions, under the command of the virtuous Agricola,

defeated the collected force of the Caledonians, at the foot of the Grampian Hills; and his fleets, venturing to explore an unknown and dangerous navigation, displayed the Roman arms round every part of the island. The conquest of Britain was considered as already achieved; and it was the design of Agricola to complete and insure his success, by the easy reduction of Ireland, for which, in his opinion, one legion and a few auxiliaries were sufficient. [9] The western isle might be improved into a valuable possession, and the Britons would wear their chains with the less reluctance, if the prospect and example of freedom were on every side removed from before their eyes.

[Footnote 6: Caesar himself conceals that ignoble motive; but it is mentioned by Suetonius, c. 47. The British pearls proved, however, of little value, on account of their dark and livid color. Tacitus observes, with reason, (in Agricola, c. 12,) that it was an inherent defect. "Ego facilius crediderim, naturam margaritis deesse quam nobis avaritiam."]

[Footnote 7: Claudius, Nero, and Domitian. A hope is expressed by Pomponius Mela, l. iii. c. 6, (he wrote under Claudius,) that, by the success of the Roman arms, the island and its savage inhabitants would soon be better known. It is amusing enough to peruse such passages in the midst of London.]

[Footnote 8: See the admirable abridgment given by Tacitus, in the life of Agricola, and copiously, though perhaps not

completely, illustrated by our own antiquarians, Camden and Horsley.]

[Footnote 9: The Irish writers, jealous of their national honor, are extremely provoked on this occasion, both with Tacitus and with Agricola.]

But the superior merit of Agricola soon occasioned his removal from the government of Britain; and forever disappointed this rational, though extensive scheme of conquest. Before his departure, the prudent general had provided for security as well as for dominion. He had observed, that the island is almost divided into two unequal parts by the opposite gulfs, or, as they are now called, the Friths of Scotland. Across the narrow interval of about forty miles, he had drawn a line of military stations, which was afterwards fortified, in the reign of Antoninus Pius, by a turf rampart, erected on foundations of stone. [10] This wall of Antoninus, at a small distance beyond the modern cities of Edinburgh and Glasgow, was fixed as the limit of the Roman province. The native Caledonians preserved, in the northern extremity of the island, their wild independence, for which they were not less indebted to their poverty than to their valor. Their incursions were frequently repelled and chastised; but their country was never subdued. [11] The masters of the fairest and most wealthy climates of the globe turned with contempt from gloomy hills, assailed by the winter tempest, from lakes concealed in a blue mist, and from cold and lonely heaths, over which the deer of the forest were chased by a troop of naked barbarians. [12]

[Footnote 10: See Horsley's Britannia Romana, l. i. c. 10. Note: Agricola fortified the line from Dumbarton to Edinburgh, consequently within Scotland. The emperor Hadrian, during his residence in Britain, about the year 121, caused a rampart of earth to be raised between Newcastle and Carlisle. Antoninus Pius, having gained new victories over the Caledonians, by the ability of his general, Lollius, Urbicus, caused a new rampart of earth to be constructed between Edinburgh and Dumbarton. Lastly, Septimius Severus caused a wall of stone to be built parallel to the rampart of Hadrian, and on the same locality. See John Warburton's Vallum Romanum, or the History and Antiquities of the Roman Wall. London, 1754, 4to.--W. See likewise a good note on the Roman wall in Lingard's History of England, vol. i. p. 40, 4to edit--M.]

[Footnote 11: The poet Buchanan celebrates with elegance and spirit (see his Sylvae, v.) the unviolated independence of his native country. But, if the single testimony of Richard of Cirencester was sufficient to create a Roman province of Vespasiana to the north of the wall, that independence would be reduced within very narrow limits.]

[Footnote 12: See Appian (in Prooem.) and the uniform imagery of Ossian's Poems, which, according to every hypothesis, were composed by a native Caledonian.]

Such was the state of the Roman frontiers, and such the maxims of Imperial policy, from the death of Augustus to the accession of Trajan. That virtuous and active prince had received the education of a soldier,

and possessed the talents of a general. [13] The peaceful system of his predecessors was interrupted by scenes of war and conquest; and the legions, after a long interval, beheld a military emperor at their head. The first exploits of Trajan were against the Dacians, the most warlike of men, who dwelt beyond the Danube, and who, during the reign of Domitian, had insulted, with impunity, the Majesty of Rome. [14] To the strength and fierceness of barbarians they added a contempt for life, which was derived from a warm persuasion of the immortality and transmigration of the soul. [15] Decebalus, the Dacian king, approved himself a rival not unworthy of Trajan; nor did he despair of his own and the public fortune, till, by the confession of his enemies, he had exhausted every resource both of valor and policy. [16] This memorable war, with a very short suspension of hostilities, lasted five years; and as the emperor could exert, without control, the whole force of the state, it was terminated by an absolute submission of the barbarians. [17] The new province of Dacia, which formed a second exception to the precept of Augustus, was about thirteen hundred miles in circumference. Its natural boundaries were the Niester, the Teyss or Tibiscus, the Lower Danube, and the Euxine Sea. The vestiges of a military road may still be traced from the banks of the Danube to the neighborhood of Bender, a place famous in modern history, and the actual frontier of the Turkish and Russian empires. [18]

[Footnote 13: See Pliny's Panegyric, which seems founded on facts.]

[Footnote 14: Dion Cassius, l. lxvii.]

[Footnote 15: Herodotus, l. iv. c. 94. Julian in the Caesars, with Spanheims observations.]

[Footnote 16: Plin. Epist. viii. 9.]

[Footnote 17: Dion Cassius, l. lxviii. p. 1123, 1131. Julian in Caesaribus Eutropius, viii. 2, 6. Aurelius Victor in Epitome.]

[Footnote 18: See a Memoir of M. d'Anville, on the Province of Dacia, in the Academie des Inscriptions, tom. xxviii. p. 444--468.]

Trajan was ambitious of fame; and as long as mankind shall continue to bestow more liberal applause on their destroyers than on their benefactors, the thirst of military glory will ever be the vice of the most exalted characters. The praises of Alexander, transmitted by a succession of poets and historians, had kindled a dangerous emulation in the mind of Trajan. Like him, the Roman emperor undertook an expedition against the nations of the East; but he lamented with a sigh, that his advanced age scarcely left him any hopes of equalling the renown of the son of Philip. [19] Yet the success of Trajan, however transient, was rapid and specious. The degenerate Parthians, broken by intestine discord, fled before his arms. He descended the River Tigris in triumph, from the mountains of Armenia to the Persian Gulf. He enjoyed the honor of being the first, as he was the last, of the Roman generals, who ever navigated that remote sea. His fleets ravaged the coast of Arabia; and

Trajan vainly flattered himself that he was approaching towards the confines of India. [20] Every day the astonished senate received the intelligence of new names and new nations, that acknowledged his sway. They were informed that the kings of Bosphorus, Colchos, Iberia, Albania, Osrhoene, and even the Parthian monarch himself, had accepted their diadems from the hands of the emperor; that the independent tribes of the Median and Carduchian hills had implored his protection; and that the rich countries of Armenia, Mesopotamia, and Assyria, were reduced into the state of provinces. [21] But the death of Trajan soon clouded the splendid prospect; and it was justly to be dreaded, that so many distant nations would throw off the unaccustomed yoke, when they were no longer restrained by the powerful hand which had imposed it.

[Footnote 19: Trajan's sentiments are represented in a very just and lively manner in the Caesars of Julian.]

[Footnote 20: Eutropius and Sextus Rufus have endeavored to perpetuate the illusion. See a very sensible dissertation of M. Freret in the Academie des Inscriptions, tom. xxi. p. 55.]

[Footnote 21: Dion Cassius, l. lxviii.; and the Abbreviators.]