
A Comparison of Border Defense Between the Han Dynasty and the Roman Empire

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Abstract: From the 2nd century BC to the 2nd century AD, the Han Dynasty (East Asian agricultural civilization) and the Roman Empire (Mediterranean maritime commercial civilization) rose at Eurasia's two ends. To resist harassment from northern nomadic tribes like the Xiongnu, the Han established an inward-looking border defense system centered on the Great Wall. In contrast, the Roman Empire built an outward-looking system based on professional legions to address multi-front threats. This paper compares their core characteristics, analyzes the geographical, economic and political causes of differences, summarizes historical experiences, and provides reference for contemporary border governance.

Keywords: Han Dynasty; Roman Empire; Border Defense; Great Wall; Professional Legions

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1. Introduction

The Han Dynasty (202 BC — 220 AD) and the Roman Empire (27 BC — 476 AD) were the core civilizations in East Asia and the Mediterranean region respectively, shaping the East-West historical process profoundly; with the Central Plains as its core, the Han faced persistent threats from the Xiongnu and Qiang tribes, while the Rome, spanning three continents and controlling the Mediterranean, confronted multi-front challenges from Germanic tribes, the Parthian Empire and Berbers. However, academic research on ancient border defense has mostly focused on a single empire, with scarce systematic comparisons of the two systems, as existing studies only mention surface differences without exploring internal causes or universal laws of classical imperial border governance. Based on this, this paper focuses on the core differences between the two border defense systems and their formation causes, aiming to enrich relevant research and provide references for contemporary border governance.

2. The core composition of the border defense system of the han dynasty

The border defense system of the Han Dynasty was gradually improved in the long-term practice of responding to nomadic threats, and finally formed a complete inward-looking defense pattern with the Great Wall as its core, military colonies as important support, and flexible loose governance strategies as effective supplements. Based on the foundation of the Qin

Great Wall, the Han Dynasty carried out large-scale renovation and appropriate expansion according to the actual border situation, and built an integrated and hierarchical defense network consisting of main city walls, beacon towers, frontier forts and border towns, which effectively realized the efficient early warning and active defense against nomadic cavalry raids.

Beacon towers along the Great Wall were an important part of the early warning system. Soldiers stationed in the beacon towers could quickly transmit enemy information through smoke during the day and fire at night, ensuring that the central government and border troops could respond to threats in a timely manner. To safeguard the Hexi Corridor, a vital strategic link connecting the Central Plains and the Western Regions, the Han Dynasty specially established the “Four Commanderies of Hexi” — Jiuquan, Zhangye, Wuwei and Dunhuang. These four cities not only served as important military fortresses to resist foreign invasions, but also undertook the functions of border logistics supply and commercial trade hubs, providing a solid guarantee for the stability of the western border.

Militarily, the Han Dynasty implemented a mixed military system with conscription as the main body and voluntary enlistment as a supplement. According to the relevant systems of the Han Dynasty, adult men over 23 years old nationwide had to serve a certain period of military service, which laid a solid foundation for the stable source of border troops. At the same time, in view of the frequent border wars in the period of Emperor Wu, the Han Dynasty actively promoted the “military-civilian integration” military colony system, allowing border soldiers to garrison the border in wartime and engage in agricultural cultivation in peacetime.

This system not only achieved grain self-sufficiency on the border to a large extent, greatly reducing the logistical pressure of transporting grain from the inland to the border, but also effectively stabilized the border population and strengthened the defense foundation. In addition, the Han Dynasty also actively absorbed surrendered nomadic tribes to form auxiliary cavalry units. These soldiers were familiar with the grassland terrain and proficient in riding and shooting skills, which made up for the shortage of the Han cavalry’s combat effectiveness and significantly enhanced the overall defensive capability of the border troops.

In terms of border governance strategies, the Han Dynasty adopted flexible and adaptive measures according to the changes of national strength and border situation. In the early period of the Han Dynasty, due to the weak national strength after the war, the Han Dynasty adopted a relatively moderate appeasement strategy, such as concluding marriage alliances with the Xiongnu and presenting appropriate tributes, so as to gain valuable time for national strength recovery. With the continuous growth of national strength, especially in the period of Emperor Wu, the Han Dynasty changed its passive defense strategy to active counterattack, sending famous generals such as Wei Qing and Huo Qubing to lead large armies to campaign against the Xiongnu in the north, defeating the main force of the Xiongnu and expanding the border defense line northward.

After defeating the Xiongnu, the Han Dynasty implemented a loose autonomous policy for the surrendered nomadic tribes, retaining their original tribal structures, living customs and management methods, and appointing tribal nobles to govern their own tribes, which effectively reduced the resistance sentiment of the nomadic tribes. In 60 BC, the Han Dynasty officially established the Protectorate of the Western Regions in Wulei City, which was responsible for mediating conflicts between various states in the Western Regions, suppressing rebellions and protecting the smooth flow of the Silk Road, marking the formal inclusion of the Western Regions into the territory of the Han Dynasty and the realization of effective governance of the western border.

Economically, the operation of the Han Dynasty’s border defense system mainly relied on the highly developed small-scale peasant economy in the Central Plains. The Han government implemented a series of pro-agricultural policies, such as building water conservancy projects, encouraging agricultural cultivation and reducing agricultural taxes, which greatly promoted the improvement of grain output and provided sufficient material support for the operation of the border defense system. Inland grain transportation, as an important supplement, played a crucial role in ensuring the grain supply of border troops, especially in special periods such as wars and natural disasters.

In addition, the smooth flow of the Silk Road also brought indirect economic benefits to the border defense of the

Han Dynasty. The Han government levied appropriate taxes on the trade activities along the Silk Road, and the prosperity of border trade also promoted the development of border towns. The accumulated wealth was partially used for the maintenance of defense fortifications and the supplement of military supplies, further supporting the stable operation of the border defense system.

3. The core composition of the border defense system of the roman empire

Different from the inward-looking defense pattern of the Han Dynasty, the border defense system of the Roman Empire formed an outward-looking defense pattern with professional legions as the core, border fortresses as important nodes and imperial roads as communication links in the process of long-term external expansion. The Roman Empire did not build continuous linear defense projects like the Han Great Wall. Instead, according to the characteristics of its multi-front border and the types of threats, it adopted a scientific “stronghold defense” strategy, constructing solid stone fortresses in key border areas to form a dense and effective defense network.

These stone fortresses were mostly built in strategic locations such as river crossings, mountain passes and transportation hubs, with solid structures and complete defensive facilities. Hadrian’s Wall in Britain, as a representative linear defense project of the Roman Empire, was built during the reign of Emperor Hadrian. It stretched across northern Britain, connecting the Irish Sea and the North Sea, and was mainly used to resist the invasion of Picts and Scots in northern Britain. At the same time, it also served as a border customs to collect taxes on cross-border trade, which had both defensive and economic functions.

The professional legion system implemented by the Roman Empire was the core pillar of its border defense. Rome established a highly standardized professional legion system, requiring legion soldiers to serve for 25 years. After completing their service, soldiers could receive rewards such as land, pension or Roman citizenship, which effectively ensured the stability and professionalism of the legion soldiers. The Roman legions were well-equipped, strictly trained and had strong combat effectiveness. At the peak of the empire, Rome had more than 28 regular legions, which were mainly stationed in border provinces to undertake the important task of border defense.

In addition, the Roman Empire also recruited a large number of barbarian soldiers from border areas to form auxiliary legions, which not only made up for the shortage of regular legions’ manpower, but also gave full play to the advantages of barbarian soldiers who were familiar with local terrain and had special combat skills. The extensive imperial stone road network built by the Roman Empire was another important support for its border defense. These roads were wide, flat and durable, connecting the capital Rome with all border provinces, enabling the rapid mobilization of legions and the smooth transportation of logistical materials, and effectively solving the problem of multi-front defense response.

In terms of border governance, the Roman Empire adopted a governance strategy combining military conquest with direct provincial rule. After conquering a region, Rome would usually set up a province in that region and appoint a governor directly appointed by the central government to take charge of the administrative, military and judicial power of the province, realizing direct and effective control over the border area. At the same time, the Roman Empire actively promoted the “Romanization” policy in border provinces, vigorously popularizing Roman law, Latin, Roman culture and lifestyle, encouraging intermarriage between border residents and Romans, and granting Roman citizenship to some outstanding border nobles.

This series of measures effectively enhanced the cultural identity and sense of belonging of border residents to the Roman Empire, and laid a solid foundation for the long-term stability of the border. In addition, the Roman Empire also adopted the flexible strategy of “governing barbarians through barbarians”, appropriately supporting the leaders of local barbarian tribes, and using their influence to manage local residents, which greatly reduced the cost of border governance and improved the efficiency of governance.

Economically, the border defense of the Roman Empire mainly relied on three major sources: Mediterranean trade profits, border provincial taxes and colonial plunder. As the “inland sea” of the Roman Empire, the Mediterranean had

convenient maritime transportation. Rome relied on its powerful naval forces to monopolize the east-west trade routes of the Mediterranean, and the huge trade profits brought by commodity trade became an important economic source for border defense.

The Roman Empire implemented a strict tax system in border provinces, including land tax, poll tax and trade tax, which provided stable financial support for the operation of border legions and the maintenance of defense facilities. Colonial plunder was another important economic supplement. In the process of external expansion, Rome plundered a lot of wealth, land and slaves from conquered areas, which not only enriched the imperial treasury, but also supported the development of the slave manor economy, further providing material guarantee for border defense. Unlike the Han Dynasty, the Roman Empire did not implement large-scale military colonies, and its border grain supply mainly depended on the tax revenue of border provinces and the transportation of grain from major grain-producing areas such as Egypt and North Africa.

4. Commonalities and differences between the border defense systems of the han dynasty and the roman empire

4.1. Commonalities

As two major classical empires in the world, the border defense systems of the Han Dynasty and the Roman Empire had several obvious common characteristics despite their great differences. First of all, both empires took well-trained professional military forces as the core support of their border defense, and attached great importance to the improvement of military equipment and the strictness of military training. For the Han Dynasty, crossbows with long range and great power were the core weapons to resist nomadic cavalry, while the Roman legions were famous for their standardized short swords, spears and strict formation tactics, which laid a solid foundation for the effectiveness of border defense.

Secondly, both empires attached great importance to the construction of defense fortifications and transportation networks, and regarded them as important means to improve border defense efficiency. The Han Dynasty built the Great Wall and border traffic lines, while the Roman Empire built legion fortresses and imperial roads, both of which effectively improved the ability of border defense and response. Thirdly, both empires adopted a dual strategy of combining military defense with political appeasement in border governance, realizing the organic combination of hard power and soft power, and striving to pursue long-term border stability.

Fourthly, the border defense systems of both empires were highly dependent on the overall economic strength of the empire. When the national economy was prosperous, sufficient resources could be invested in border defense to ensure the effective operation of the system; when the national economy declined, the investment in border defense was reduced, and the defense capacity was also weakened accordingly. Finally, the collapse of the border defense systems of both empires was closely related to the decline of the core ruling area of the empire and the intensification of internal contradictions, which was an important historical lesson for later generations.

4.2. Core differences

Affected by different historical, geographical and economic conditions, the border defense systems of the Han Dynasty and the Roman Empire had significant core differences in four aspects. In terms of defense form, the Han Dynasty adopted a continuous linear defense model mainly focused on the north, with the Great Wall as the core, which was mainly used to block the large-scale concentrated raids of nomadic cavalry; the Roman Empire adopted a multi-front stronghold network defense model, with legion fortresses as nodes, which was mainly used to respond to scattered border threats from multiple directions.

In terms of military system, the Han Dynasty implemented a mixed conscription system combining conscription and voluntary enlistment, and matched it with the military colony system of “military and agriculture integration”, which was closely combined with the small-scale peasant economy; the Roman Empire implemented a full-time professional legion

system, with soldiers serving for life, and the military force was closely related to the commercial economy and slave economy, which brought a certain financial burden to the empire.

In terms of border governance, the Han Dynasty implemented a flexible loose autonomous policy for border nomadic tribes, respecting their original customs and living habits, and pursuing the goal of peaceful coexistence; the Roman Empire implemented direct provincial rule for conquered border areas, and actively promoted the Romanization policy, striving to achieve cultural assimilation and political unification of border areas.

In terms of economic support, the Han Dynasty relied on the self-sufficient small-scale peasant economy in the Central Plains, supplemented by border military colonies and inland grain transportation, with strong independence and stability; the Roman Empire relied on Mediterranean trade profits, border provincial taxes and colonial plunder, with obvious dependence and predatory nature, and its stability was easily affected by external factors.

5. The underlying causes of the differences

The core differences between the border defense systems of the Han Dynasty and the Roman Empire were not formed accidentally, but were jointly shaped by three key factors: geographical environment, economic foundation and political system, among which the economic foundation was the core driving force, the geographical environment was the basic premise, and the political system was the important institutional guarantee.

Geographically, the Han Dynasty was located in inland East Asia, surrounded by natural barriers such as mountains and oceans. The only open border was the northern Eurasian grassland, where powerful nomadic tribes such as the Xiongnu gathered, forming a single and concentrated border threat. This geographical environment determined that the Han Dynasty had to build a linear defense project like the Great Wall to resist nomadic raids. In contrast, the Roman Empire was located along the Mediterranean coast, with its territory distributed around the Mediterranean Sea, forming an open geographical pattern. Its border line was long and scattered, and threats came from multiple directions, which determined that Rome could only adopt a stronghold network defense model.

Economically, the economic foundation of the Han Dynasty was a highly developed small-scale peasant economy, which took land as the core means of production and pursued stability and self-sufficiency. This economic model determined that the core goal of the Han Dynasty's border defense was defensive self-protection, focusing on safeguarding the stable development of agricultural production. The economic foundation of the Roman Empire was the Mediterranean commercial economy and the slave manor economy, which relied on trade profits and colonial plunder for development. This economic model determined that the core goal of Rome's border defense was expansion and control, focusing on safeguarding trade routes and plundering wealth and resources.

Politically, the Han Dynasty implemented a highly centralized prefecture-county system. The central government had absolute control over local areas, which enabled the Han Dynasty to concentrate national human, material and financial resources to build a unified and complete border defense system and flexibly adjust governance strategies according to the border situation. The Roman Empire implemented a provincial decentralization system under the principate. Although the emperor was the supreme ruler, the border provincial governors had great power, which led to the lack of unity in border defense strategies and difficulty in forming a joint defense force, affecting the overall defense efficiency.

6. Conclusion

The inward-looking border defense system of the Han Dynasty (centered on the Great Wall) and the outward-looking system of the Roman Empire (based on professional legions) were typical models of classical imperial border governance, each adapting to their own geographical, economic and political conditions with respective strengths and weaknesses. The Han system effectively protected its agricultural civilization from nomadic harassment but was passive and financially

burdensome. The Roman system promoted territorial expansion and cultural integration but was overly dependent on external expansion and trade, leading to its eventual collapse.

Their practices offer valuable enlightenment for contemporary border governance: formulate strategies based on national conditions, combine military defense with political appeasement, balance national defense and economic development, and improve central-local coordinated governance. This study has limitations in exploring grassroots operational details of the two systems, which merits further research with more in-depth historical materials in the future.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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