The origins of this paper lie in a question asked by Fergus Millar at a work-in-progress seminar I gave at the Institute of Classical Studies in London a few years ago. Among other questions, he asked what evidence there is for the existence of a filing cabinet containing intelligence briefing material in a provincial governor's officium (office). My answer at the time was that there was no direct evidence at all; and the assertion was accepted by the participants. It was, however, wrong, since evidence does exist (or at least appears to exist), and in a rather unexpected place.

The whole business of intelligence collection, that is before information reached an office, can be traced from evidence that does exist: there are the literary sources (particularly those authors who had military experience--Caesar, Tacitus and Ammianus), the technical handbooks (e.g. Arrian, Vegetius and Ps.-Hyginus), and epigraphic and papyrological material. This evidence deals with the actual collectors of intelligence, how the organisations they formed part of developed (and also failed to develop), where they operated, and with what techniques intelligence was obtained. My own work in the field therefore has been directed towards what went on on campaign and on the actual frontiers, and it is worth looking at this for a few moments as an introduction to the topic.

In all periods, the agencies that collect intelligence information are mainly the overt exploratores (scouting troops) and the more covert speculatores (spies), with occasional input from other Roman troops who encounter information in the course of their operations. The informants from the enemy side are mainly deserters, refugees and prisoners of war. There is varying emphasis placed on the value of all these groups, but in Caesar's time, for example, it is clear that a sophisticated intelligence operation was already working: in particular, Caesar demonstrates on many occasions processes of confirmation and cross-checking of one kind of source with another (e.g. BG 7.72.1), and also--a potent indicator of how highly valued intelligence was--indicates that post-operational debriefing is a regular occurrence, no doubt in order to evaluate success or failure and generally improve the efficiency of the system (e.g. BG 1.22.1). On campaign, Caesar collected intelligence from all kinds of sources, information of a tactical-battlefield nature and of a strategic-theatre kind, for which there is plenty of evidence throughout his work. In fact, Caesar's Commentarii are a model textbook of applied intelligence principles. But apart from designating certain types of cavalry 'exploratores' and certain unnamed individuals as 'speculatores', the Caesarian corpus shows that no formal corps of exploratores existed with any specific training or
expertise in the collection of intelligence. The Caesarian system, sophisticated as it was in the skilled analysis of information that good intelligence work requires, was largely an ad hoc, commander-driven, system. By this I mean that the quality of the general is reflected in the quality of the intelligence gained: an inadequate performance in the field is inevitable if the commander himself does not probe deeply enough into his intelligence information—witness Curio's defeat in Africa in 46 B.C. as an illustration (BC 2.37.1; 38.2).

The early imperial system, based on the post-Augustan fixed frontiers, is in many respects a development of the late-Republican one. One can trace developments in the field of systematisation: for instance, Ps.-Hyginus' handbook indicates that space in a legionary encampment was allocated for a body of 200 exploratores to be quartered right next to the commander and first cohort (de met. castr. 24.31). Immediately, this suggests a higher official profile for intelligence collection, and that access to the commander for speed of reaction was considered structurally essential. Taken in combination with the evidence from the Dura-Europos pridiana (annual strength returns), it seems that these exploratores are starting to look as though they are specialised troops assigned to the job for some period, and perhaps even receiving some kind of formal training (P. Dura 100; 101). Direct access to the commander for reaction is still very important—the evidence of Tacitus is a major indicator here (e.g. Hist. 2.41)—Germanicus' operations across the Rhine from bases on the river in the early books of the Annals show how the system worked (Ann. 1.50; 2.12); the failure of Vocula in the Civilis revolt shows that he did not use his exploratores correctly, and so did not have the chance to avoid confrontation and defeat (Hist. 4.34); and Agricola's Scottish campaigns exhibit all the features of quick access to the commander himself and then of immediate reaction (e.g. Agr. 26.1). All these are campaign material; on the frontiers, the static legionary fortresses (which contained the commanders and governors) can be seen growing as intelligence bases towards which information is directed.

This kind of arrangement worked quite adequately throughout the first, second and most of the third centuries on nearly all frontiers. There are of course local variations that can be identified occasionally when the state of the evidence allows: Roman administrative practice was by no means a monolithic uniformity applied throughout the empire.

Early in the second century there took place some developments which point a way forward in intelligence. The pridianum in P. Hunt (P. Brit. Mus. 2581) reveals a detachment of troops operating under their centurion across the Danube at the beginning of Trajan's Dacian wars, and these men are posted on specifically intelligence-collecting duties associated with the campaign (lines 29-32); Trajan's column shows
auxiliary troops in mounted units maintaining contact with Dacians throughout--here these units represent a combination of intelligence gatherers and instant-reaction troops. The representational evidence of the column is splendidly confirmed epigraphically by the inscription of Ti. Claudius Maximus, where the captor of Decebalus served as an explorator in a highly-decorated unit, the ala II Pannotiororum (AE 1969/70.583). Third, there is the evidence furnished by the career of M. Valerius Maximianus, who in the Quadic and Marcomannic wars of 170-175 led a special intelligence-gathering and reaction force in Pannonia; but this special ethnic unit is an emergency creation put together to operate in areas where Roman control had been lost. Even so it points a new direction (AE 1956.124). None of these however are particularly relevant to the defence of a fixed and fortified frontier--they merely show increasingly specialised performance in campaign conditions.

But on certain frontiers (the Rhine, the upper and middle Danube, Dacia, Mauretania, and later Britain), new types of troops begin to appear shortly before A.D. 150; after 160 these bodies develop substantially in number for the next 75 years or so into the Severan age and some of them continue in existence right to the end of the fourth century when the evidence runs out. These are the numeri exploratorum (bodies of scouting troops), bodies of around 200 men stationed permanently on the frontier line: where it is identifiable, they are nearly always based in little fortlets that are close to or actually physically attached to larger forts, and in some cases are even over the frontier itself, as at for example, Köln-Deutz, Miltenberg Ost-Miltenberg Altstadt, Welzheim, and two outpost forts north of Hadrian's Wall. At all these sites and at numbers of others, the epigraphic evidence attests a close relationship between the numerus exploratorum and a large body, and it seems reasonable to infer that the purpose of the association was to ensure that intelligence gained from the operations of the exploratores could be followed up much more speedily and in much more hardhitting fashion than was possible in the older systems. The range of such a numerus with its support would of course be also greatly enhanced because it could defend itself if it ran into trouble when away from base--perhaps 100 km from the frontier.

This development with its enormously improved operational capability is to be seen as just the military side of a very effective external policy on the part of the Roman government implemented after the 160s. That policy involved extensive activity on the diplomatic and economic fronts, and was directed towards the disruption and destabilisation of organised tribal life in the Germanic world in particular. Concurrent with the systematic gathering of intelligence on these frontiers were activities such as vigorous control of the frontier zone, of regular markets held in frontier settlements, and of tribal meetings...
of frontier peoples; and coupled with these can be seen the skilful targeting of subsidies and 'gifts' to selected groups within tribes in the Roman area of interest (e.g. Tac. Germ. 5.4; Dio 47.5.2.), and constant interference in tribal structures in order to create internal tensions (e.g. Tac. Germ. 42.2; HA, Hadrian 12.7; Amm. 29.4.7). None of these activities of course was new in itself: what was new was their combination and application in what appears to be a unified policy over a very long stretch of the frontier area.

The question now arises 'how did the Romans reach the stage where they could with any degree of accuracy identify points of support or opposition, and evolve an appropriate local or provincial response, whether of a diplomatic or economic or military nature?' The numeri with their quantitatively greater coverage of the area ahead of the frontiers created a commensurately greater amount of information to be processed and passed on to the relevant authorities. The same of course would apply to the reports of the political centurions appointed to supervise tribal meetings (e.g. Dio 72.2.4; cf. Tac. Ann. 4.72), of the market supervisors (e.g. Dio 71.11.3, 15, 16; Tac. Hist. 4.64), of interpreters (e.g. AE 1978.635) and other frontier officials as well as those derived from local diplomatic activity.

It is common sense to suppose that at the immediate local level of the frontier fort, the commander would react to the intelligence he received, in a police or military type of operation if necessary. However, many issues would have had to be reported back for decision to a higher authority, because of their complexity or implications, or even just as a matter of record. In any degree of urgency, speed and accuracy of reporting, collating material and editing it would of course be extremely important. Rome or the emperor's court would usually be much too far away in distance and time terms to be of any use, and so the provincial governor, the legate, would have to be the main decision-maker in his area.

Contemporary with the development of the numeri exploratorum as the agency by which intelligence is collected on the frontiers (i.e. after 160), there is identifiable a considerable parallel growth in the numbers and stations of a branch of provincial governors' staffs, the beneficiarii consularis (troops attached to a governor of consular rank). I am going to postulate a connection between these two developments now, and return in a moment to justify and explain the hypothesis.

First, the physical presences of both organisations. When the epigraphically-attested stationes (posts) of these beneficiarii consularis (bb.ff.cos) are superimposed on a map of known stations of exploratores, two interesting and suggestive features emerge. The first is that there is an exact overlap on the line of the frontiers--in the majority of places bb.ff.cos. are evidently stationed with or in the
immediate vicinity of numeri exploratorum, and this only occurs in those provinces where the new frontier developments are taking place (e.g. in Germania Superior at Niederbieber, Feldberg, Stockstadt; in Noricum/Raetia, Boiodurum-Passau; in Britain, Risingham). The second physical feature is that along the main roads that lead back from the frontiers to the provincial capitals, and between the provincial capitals, at regular intervals of between 20 and 40 km, bb.ff.cos. are stationed in posts (e.g. on the Rhine limes (frontier defences), Friedberg-Hedderheim-Mainz; in northern Britain, High Rochester-Risingham-Lanchester-Binchester-Catterick-York). So much for the physical evidence.

Who then were these bb.ff.cos.? Older theories, based on the examination of the Egyptian cadre of prefect's beneficiarii, suggested that these functionaries were a mixture of judicial and police officials, and, extrapolated to other provinces, would have been a kind of inspectorate of traffic, thus (effectively) duplicating the role of frumentarii (internal security police). The most recent and most substantial complete re-examination of the role of bb.ff.cos. (that of Rankov) rejects this view in favour of one which sees their development and stationing as a special kind of super-messenger corps in response to the great military crises of the 160s onwards faced by Marcus Aurelius and his successors in the western provinces. The men themselves were always men of long military experience in the field, many of them ex-security police, and their function, while routine, required exactness and a considerable sense of responsibility: it was to co-ordinate the transmission of the increased volume of intelligence back to the governor and his office, and to handle the increased volume of instructions and orders going forward to the frontier forts. Beneficiarii were regularly rotated between the governor's headquarters and their posts, a procedure which ensured regular contact with both ends of the process, and thus made these men invaluable for their experience of policy discussion and of actual conditions in the field, able then to brief the officium or the frontier fort commander. (For full references on the bb.ff.cos., see my collaborator Boris Rankov's The Beneficiarii Consularis, unpublished Oxford D.Phil. thesis, 1986). Here then is the missing filing cabinet of a provincial governor--as you would expect, in his officium and staffed by his own experienced specialist staff officers.

I want to end by putting the two important developments back into a historical context, and briefly explaining why the numeri exploratorum and beneficiarii consularis came into being. I mentioned in passing the date of 160 as being important for this survey. The reason is that after a full half-century of moderately stable peace on the northern frontiers under Hadrian and Antoninus Pius, it was in the 160s that the Romans were disastrously caught out, and in a much more serious way than had been the case in Mauretania...
under Antoninus some 15 years earlier. There was a breakthrough by the Chatti in 162 into Germania Superior and Raetia (HA, Marcus 8.7f); in 170 they attacked again, and in 172 the Chauci struck into Belgica (HA, Didius Iul. 1.6-8). In the early 160s there was a threat to Noricum, Pannonia and Dacia from the Marcomanni; diplomacy averted war until 168 when several tribes crossed the Danube en masse, plundered Pannonia and reached as far south as Aquileia on the northern Adriatic coastline (HA, Marcus 12.13; Dio 71.3.1). In 170 the Costoboci broke into Thrace, Macedonia and Achaea (HA, Marcus 22.1; cf. e.g. ILS 1327). All this, you will be aware, happened at the same time as Verus was attempting to reach at the sources of Parthian power, and was using large amounts of manpower resources normally stationed on the Rhine and Danube to do it. Manpower had become a serious problem following the plague of 165 and subsequent years (HA, Marcus 21). Since the older early-warning systems had failed, and in concert with an urgent need to conserve all manpower reserves, it meant that a much more deliberate and positive system had to be evolved--thus the development of an integrated approach in diplomacy, the collection of military intelligence and communications. The policy was later amplified to include Britain by Septimius Severus for the campaigns into Scotland.

Taken as a whole, the new policies were extremely successful until the later third century, when even greater pressures on the frontiers weakened by administrative chaos and civil war required new defence strategies and new reliance on effective intelligence work. The former were successful, the latter failed to develop.