News and Frontier Consciousness in the Late Roman Empire

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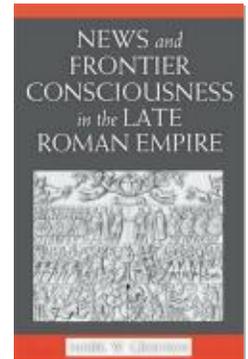➡ For additional information about this book
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A *Christian*
Imperium sine Fine?

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There is no vestal altar, no capitoline stone, but the one true God.
"He does set no limit of time or space
But gives there *imperium sine fine*"
                    —St. Augustine, *City of God,* quoting Vergil, *Aeneid*[1]

*H*ere, amid yet another indictment of the pagan gods, Augustine encour-
ages his fellow Romans to "lay hold now on the celestial country, which
is easily won, and in which you will reign truly and forever."[2] His message is
clear—replace your empty longing for a universal "earthly" empire, a so-called
imperium sine fine, for citizenship in the City of God, the true *imperium sine fine.*
Such calls, fairly clear in church writers after Augustine, struck a chord among
the civic-minded Romans.[3] They echo a Vergilian worldview/ideology that lay
at the heart of Roman expansion and subsequent identity throughout the Ro-
man world. Yet Augustine was also suggesting a new meaning for this founda-
tional Roman ideology. This passage hints at the role of Christianization in the
transformation of Roman frontier consciousness. And yet alongside these calls
to search for a "city beyond," the dream for the Roman Empire (albeit now offi-
cially Christianized) to realize its eternal victory in the here and now persisted.
There was a constant push by Christians to lay claim on the "sacred space" of
the Roman Empire and even to extend its frontiers. M. McCormick has argued

that this dream lay behind the dynamic of Late Antiquity as well as rulership in the medieval and Byzantine worlds.[4]

What was the effect of Christianization on official frontier ideology and with it frontier consciousness? Or, to put it another way, could a universal Christian empire really have frontiers? It powerfully has been argued that *the* defining characteristic of Late Antiquity is the conviction that the knowledge of one God both justified the exercise of imperial power and made it more effective. The Late Antique monotheisms of both Christianity and Islam were used by monarchies and empires in support of their aspirations to universal status. Monotheism, in effect, supplied the underpinnings for a universal empire.[5] If there was a continued striving for universal empire, an "ideology of world mastery," did frontiers then become irrelevant in Christian imperial ideology? The question is thorny but crucial to elucidating pagan and Christian frontier consciousness in Late Antiquity, a period animated by such tensions.

The dream of eternal victory, has, in fact, been well termed "the most potent of Roman myths,"[6] considering its long-term influence on the subsequent history of medieval Europe. Rome's rather swift rise to power had engendered this ideology, powerfully presented in Vergil's *Aeneid*. The Roman Empire's rule was, at one level, one of *aeternitas,* with no spatial or temporal limits.

This dream did not go away with the Christianization of the Empire. Rather, it seemingly became an intrinsic element of civic and Christian religious ceremony, especially as the two blended inextricably in Late Antiquity. It became couched in sermons, liturgy, and ecclesiastical art and architecture as well as games, imperial ceremonies, panegyric, and even legal depositions.[7] If Christianity justified the dream of empire, then it follows that it also became attached at some level to this age-old and potent myth; so much is already evident in the works of St. Cyprian, as noted in chapter 7.

At tension with the ideology of world mastery was the theme of *senectus mundi,* or the idea that the earth, and with it the Roman Empire, was growing old and decaying. Ammianus, although he most consistently defends the ideology of *aeternitas,* occasionally seems to explain some major problems in the Empire in terms of the language of *senectus mundi.* In a passage shot through with these tensions Ammianus writes,

> At the time when Rome first began to rise into a position of world-wide splendor, destined to live so long as men shall exist, in order that she might grow to a towering stature, Virtue and Fortune, ordinarily at variance, formed a pact of eternal peace; for if either one of them had failed her, Rome had not come to complete supremacy. Her people, from the very cradle to the end of their childhood, a period of

about 300 years, carried on wars about her walls. Then, entering upon adult life, after many toilsome wars, they crossed the Alps and the sea. Grown to youth and manhood, from every region which the vast globe includes, they brought back laurels and triumphs. And now, declining into old age, and often owing victory to its name alone, it has come to a quieter period of life.[8]

Ammianus read many of the problems in his own era in light of this model. Glory in his time was in name only, not in deeds. Rome would "live as long as men shall exist," yet the empire was in decline. J. Matthews reads this passage as showing that Ammianus truly believed in the eternity of Rome.[9] The *senectus mundi* theme was perhaps a topological reference to be understood more metaphorically.

The topos that the world and/or empire was growing old had an established history in Roman Imperial thought. Often, the imagery is idiosyncratic to the author. Florus, for example, in the early to mid-second century A.D., saw the Roman Empire "grown old and losing its potency," at a time that most historians now consider its height. Some have argued that such references in the earlier Empire were mere commonplaces.[10] In the later Empire, however, such references become more prevalent as many Romans begin to imagine the end.[11] Zosimus and pagans before him, even as early as the third century, put the blame for this decline on the Christians. This was the very type of accusation that Cyprian had claimed inspired "oft-repeated vengeances in behalf of the worshippers of God."[12] Under accusations that Christians had disturbed the relationship of the gods to the cosmos, the *pax deorum,* Christians had more incentive to "rediscover" the ideology of a senile earth—Cyprian could write "the world grows old, it rests not on the same strength as of yore nor has it the same robustness with which it once prevailed."[13] Augustine would likewise write about the aging earth, assuming that he lived in the sixth and last age of the world.[14]

The idea that the history of the world unfolded in a series of biological stages was given new life by Christian writers. One of the more popular images is that the history of the world unfolded as a series of kingdoms, usually four or five.[15] Identification of the final kingdom could reveal the coming end. The imagery here often blends, as seen with Cyprian, apocalypticism and *senectus mundi*; these, at one level, seem opposed to each other. Much of this thought was based on speculation regarding the meaning of the four kingdoms in the apocalyptic work ascribed to Daniel.

Assumptions of an organic model of the Roman Empire were prevalent among many writers of the later Roman Empire, pagan and Christian alike. If a vibrant empire assumed strong frontiers, then an old and feeble empire

should entail weak frontiers. Yet often it is difficult to distinguish imagery of an aging empire from that of an aging world. The ideology of world mastery often caused the two entities to blend inextricably. It also could lead to seeming contradictions—for in spite of what Ammianus says about the feebleness of the Empire, other passages suggest that Ammianus strongly believed in its *aeternitas*.[16] Some even have suggested that he intended his more depressing passages as a corrective, to promote Roman recovery after losses like Adrianople rather than to present affairs as he really saw them.[17] Therefore, he was borrowing images with which to inspire a return to the "good old days"—that is, his political commentary was a cover for a social agenda.

The later Empire also saw the emergence of a new topos, that of restoration or restitution of the world. This theme, prevalent from the middle of the third century onward, was commonplace on coinage by the late third century.[18] The historical facts of the third century crisis were behind the proliferation of this theme. Even if the effects of the third century perhaps have been exaggerated, its part in giving rise to an ideology of the restoration of the world in official media is unmistakable. But authors were not in any particular agreement as to how the process would work out or whether it was irresistibly fated. Behind such an ideology is the notion that Rome should be in control of the entire world, and if it is not, then it needs to be restored to its rightful position so that peace and harmony may predominate once again. Imperial pronouncements as well as abundant numismatic evidence attest clearly to the claims of emperors to have restored the Roman world to the glories that abounded in days of yore, essentially before the tumultuous third century. Historians used Trajan, for example, as a model in order to encourage emperors to restore the Roman world to its furthest limits.[19]

Amid the praise of these restorations one can see the manifold expressions of frontier ideologies, shaped subsequently, no doubt, by Christianization and its claims to universal empire.[20] Emperors who restored or pushed forward frontiers were particularly singled out for the title of "restorer of the world," thus again pointing out the late Roman connection of frontiers to overall stability.

Our key sources on the question of imperial and frontier ideology from the late third century onward are the panegyrics. Panegyric gives insight into the mind of Romans at many levels, but it does so by considering the past, *res gestae*, as opposed to the presentistic or sometimes futuristic emphasis of prophecy. For prophecy, the present moment often is revealed as the worst of all in the history of the empire if not of the world itself; the present moment of panegyric is seen as superior to all others. Hence, prophecy and panegyric, considered together, provide something of a rough balance. As might

be expected, the imagery referring to the solidification, defense, and/or eternal extension of the frontiers plays a major role in the rhetoric of pagan and Christian emperors. In prophetic texts and commentary as much as in panegyric, the frontiers could serve as a site of speculation for pagan and Christian, writer and receptor. The theme of indefinite expansion continues in this and subsequent panegyrics as emperors, pagan and Christian alike, are praised for extending or defending the frontiers.

After the so-called Christianization of the imperial structures, such presentations begin to fuse with the language of the universal Christian empire, championed by Constantine and many of his fellow Romans. He and later emperors such as Theodosius have, according to panegyrists, "extended the realms of the East beyond the limits of things and the boundaries of Nature."[21] By the end of the fourth century, references to frontiers fused with the rhetoric of a universal Christian empire—an empire in which, at least on one ideological level, frontiers were meaningless.[22] At an earlier period, Tertullian, the self-proclaimed Christian "citizen of the cosmos," could rejoice that there were places "inaccessible to the Romans but subject to Christ"—that is, outside of the Empire. But that was in the early third century, at a time when Roman imperial ideology had not yet melded with Christian imagery.[23]

The Christianization of the Roman Imperial structure likewise infused the ideology of expansion with an unprecedented missionary vigor. D. Potter recently has argued that even a new sense of "Roman-ness" emerged with the spread of Christianity beyond the imperial frontiers. He writes,

> for if we allow that a definition of Roman-ness is the transformation of behaviors through contact with the institutions of the Roman Empire, then the church was gradually creating a new category of extraimperial "Roman" in cases where the local authorities were willing to accede to the message of the church.[24]

Specifically, Constantine's efforts at encouraging peoples outside of his frontiers—Goths, Armenians, Aksumites, Iberians—but in the faith formed perhaps a part of his efforts to expand Roman hegemony beyond established frontiers. It also serves as an interesting lesson in contrast to the restraint that Constantine showed among the pagan aristocracy within the Empire, of whose traditions he was more respectful.[25] Constantine was more eager, it appears, to convert *gentes externae* than to force the hearts and minds of a deeply rooted pagan establishment within his own realm. Or perhaps he was just being realistic: displacing Rome's pagan aristocracy would be a task for his descendants, and a fairly difficult one at that.

Beyond the eastern frontier in particular, Christians were well aware of coreligionists. Persian bishops had appeared at the Council of Nicaea, and Constantine even had declared himself "bishop of the Christians of Persia."[26] In a later century, Cosmas Indicopleustes would note "innumerable Churches" among the Persians.[27] Considering himself "a divinely ordained protector of Christians everywhere, with a duty to convert pagans to the truth," Constantine connected himself with these Christians of Persia, a group that had been growing since the second century, even though they were beyond his own imperial frontiers.[28] Their presence was known there, and thus late Romans knew that even if the frontier was the ultimate line of demarcation, for many it did not cut religious ties.[29]

This knowledge of Christians beyond Roman imperial frontiers did have some influence on the way that Constantine, at least, shaped frontier policy and perhaps even on the way that Christians would view frontiers. Yet whereas Constantine's apparent goal to spread the Gospel by advancing the frontiers was apparently successful in some instances, it simply fell flat in Persia, beyond Rome's eastern frontier.[30] Constantine appealed to this group of Christians during his warfare with Sapor II of Persia. To T. Barnes, this move was in tune with Constantine's earlier efforts to appeal to the Christians under his rivals, Maxentius in 312 and Licinius in 324.[31] But as with basically everything else Constantine did, his motives are far from clear to us. A passage records approximately Constantine's own words:

> on one occasion, when entertaining bishops to dinner, [Constantine] let slip the remark that he was perhaps himself a bishop too, using some such words as these in our hearing: "You are bishops of those within the Church, but I am perhaps a bishop appointed by God over those outside."[32]

Although the title "bishop of those outside" itself is a subject of much debate, some have argued that Constantine saw it as his license to "spread Christianity beyond as well as within his own frontiers—an entirely new understanding of the Roman Emperor's role, inconceivable except within the context of allegiance to a universalist religion."[33] Whatever interpretation one takes of this particular phrase, his title "bishop of the Christians of Persia" provides a useful corroboration. Constantine's expansion beyond his frontiers was thus to be through piety as well as conquest; as the fourth-century monastic writer Rufinus put it, "the more he subjected himself to God, the more God subjected to him the whole world [*universa*]."[34] And yet his possible notion of a clear border separating the Christians of Rome from those of Persia is but

another indication of the way a late Roman frontier consciousness informed his thought. Attempts to connect with Christian Persia would continue in subsequent centuries, as emperors brought together hostilities with Persia and efforts to Christianize the Persian Empire.[35]

In his famous letter to Sapor II, Constantine references these Christians across the frontier, exhorting Sapor at the letter's closing,

> With this class of persons—I mean of course the Christians, my whole concern being for them—how pleasing it is for me to hear that the most important parts of Persia too are richly adorned! May the very best come to you therefore, and at the same time the best for them, since they also are yours. For so you will keep the sovereign Lord of the Universe kind, merciful, and benevolent. These therefore, since you are so great, I entrust to you, putting their very persons in your hands, because you too are renowned for piety. Love them in accordance with your own humanity. For you will give enormous satisfaction both to yourself and to us by keeping faith.[36]

Clearly, Constantine is emphasizing his patronage over the Christians of Persia: to what extent that entailed dreams of political hegemony is a topic of much discussion. It is, though, doubtful that a Roman leader could ultimately separate religious and political patronage. Dreams of political hegemony through religious patronage, at all events, died soon after Constantine; Persia, after all, under Sapor II was making its own share of expansive moves against which Rome was having difficulty defending.

Eusebius expands on this letter as an example of Constantine's world mastery. Eusebius' language hints at the attitude behind Constantine's letter to Sapor.

> Thus finally, all nations of the world being steered by a single pilot and welcoming government by the Servant of God, with none any longer obstructing Roman rule, all men passed their life in undisturbed tranquility.[37]

Eusebius had no problem identifying the Roman Empire as God's kingdom, and, as he claims elsewhere, it "already united most of the various peoples, and is further destined to obtain all those not yet united, right up to the very limits of the inhabited world."[38] This aspect of Eusebian thought has been well explored, as have similar notions in the writing of such churchmen as Lactantius, Jerome, Ambrose, and Orosius. The variety of Christian analyses

of the phenomenon of Christianization, however, need not distract us from the fact that all share some basic imperial ideologies highlighting frontiers as symbols, if not literal *eschata,* held in place by God himself. Through Christianity and the Christian God, therefore, the frontiers of the Roman Empire could be pushed forward indefinitely.

North Africa provides some interesting contrasts to the eastern frontier. In general, here there is a more stringent attitude of inherent difference toward those on the other side of the frontier. In St. Augustine's letter written concerning "the end of the world [*de fine saeculi*]," we get a glimpse of such frontier consciousness. When arguing for the absence of any Christians beyond North Africa's frontiers in his own day, he writes of the evidence he gets from seeing actual captives from there regularly.[39] Interestingly, he does so in a letter answering questions about the end of the world. In the process, he tells us that there were no Christians beyond North Africa's frontier. But, Augustine writes, this does not mean that "the promise of God does not extend to them." One of the chief indicators of the end would be that all of the world had heard the Gospel.[40] However, there were no organized missionary efforts to reach beyond the frontiers of North Africa. Thus, the Roman Imperial frontier also served as a frontier of Christianity there. North African Romans, then, did not experience the tensions of knowing that coreligionists were beyond their frontiers.[41] Perhaps Constantine and others had no ulterior motives that would cause them to claim "subjects" beyond North African frontiers. Perhaps this also shows the limits of universalism—did Romans really care to put distant desert tribes under their sway? It seems that Constantine and others were willing to incorporate the Goths and even make attempts at the Persians in this way, but the perceived cultural contrast with those beyond the North African frontiers was perhaps too much for them.

The further expansion of Christianity, particularly in Western Europe, beyond the scope of this study, might hold some additional clues to an ideology of universalism. The famous mission of Ulfila, the "bishop of the Christians in Getic lands," might well have been initiated during Constantine's own lifetime or at least following imperial ideologies that may be traced to Constantine's Christian universalism.[42] Whether such a move was a political strategy simply to co-opt the Goths or a sincere desire to spread the Christian faith will probably be debated as long as the conversion of Constantine himself. It does, to be sure, highlight the strong tension between Christian universalism and a bounded territory, a tension central to political thought in subsequent centuries.

Glancing back at the classical world, J. M. Wallace-Hadrill writes about the western barbarian conversions,

> The conversion of the Germanic peoples bordering the Frankish world is something that could never have happened in Antiquity. The concept of a barbarian hinterland, so essential to the thinking of the Later Empire, was gone; and in its place was born the conviction that those outside should be inside. The Christian world should be one, its frontiers bounded only by the reach of missionaries.[43]

Perhaps what medievalists like Wallace-Hadrill miss is that these ideologies were born in a Christian Roman Empire, not the Frankish. A universal Christian empire had already begun to imagine that those outside—or at least some of them—should, in fact, be inside, united under one God, one empire, and one emperor. Ideology, especially that which combines such potent forces as political and Christian universalism, is neither static nor monolithic. What is defined here as medieval is, in a sense, late Roman—the idea Wallace-Hadrill describes is one that arose with the Christianization of the Roman Empire; it is, in fact, a baptized version of *imperium sine fine*. It produced, in time, a creative tension between a religiously inspired universalism and frontier consciousness that thought in terms of literal boundaries.

The hope of universal imperial hegemony, though, died soon in the West. Although ideas and images of eternal victory certainly persisted, Roman power did meet its *finis*. A power vacuum was filled by multiple "barbarian aristocracies" as well as by Christian bishops. The collapse of power probably surprised few—Romans, at least those in tune to the discourse reflected by prophecy and apocalyptic, had been well prepared. In the end, the medium of prophecy did, in a sense, give a true report. Its use of frontier information struck a chord among Romans, who saw their frontiers and their imperial power rendered meaningless. But inhabitants of what was once the western Roman Empire were not left hopeless—their prophets had unwittingly prepared them for their new world, a catholic or universal world lacking a frontier even with heaven itself. The best possible situation for humans was seen as an *imperium* not limited by time or space—those eminent Romans Vergil and St. Augustine could, in a certain sense, at least agree on that.