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News and Frontier Consciousness in the Late Roman Empire

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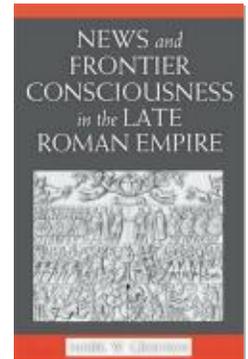
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Conclusion



From the conditions of frontier life came intellectual traits of profound importance.

—Frederick Jackson Turner,
“The Significance of the Frontier in American History”

It is de rigueur in frontier studies, at least for those in English, to invoke Frederick Jackson Turner, explicitly absent from this study thus far. Recently, the invocation often is to rebuke him as essentialist, imperialist, or even “orientalist.”¹ But Turner might well have been one of my muses all along. While my foci and conclusions are very different from his—I am not concerned much here with the actual character of life on the Roman frontier, and I am interested in a static frontier as opposed to his “outer edge of the wave”—I do likewise see the frontier as a “vital force” in shaping a society.² The frontier is a site where identities of whole societies can be negotiated. Turner can still remind us that the frontier has cultural and intellectual significance.

Above all else, perhaps, Turner continues to teach us that the history of the frontier is about change. There was, I have argued, a distinct frontier consciousness that arose with the heightened proliferation between the third and fifth centuries of news from and about the peripheries. By the end of our period, that news had come to shape the center’s image of itself and its frontiers. The perceptions did shape and thereby change the Roman reality. As the Roman Empire decreased in relative power, the consciousness of its

frontiers increased. The later Empire did not merely freeze in place or replicate previous conditions.

I have argued this basic point from a variety of angles. A major goal has been to view the late Roman frontiers, as much as possible, on late Roman terms. If this picture succeeds, it is because we defensibly have come to see the world through the eyes of the folks who have been our primary guides along the journey—a “Spanish” pilgrim nun, a group of North African church fathers, a set of pagan Antiochene intellectuals, several panegyricists from the East and West, and anonymous apocalyptic speculators. Compositely, these guides, with help from fellow Romans, have revealed a certain image of frontiers in the late Roman Empire.

The simple fact that news proliferated from and about frontiers, thereby shaping perceptions, often is only implicit in the writings of our guides. These folks generally were not policymakers or government functionaries, although some were not divorced from centers of political power. They came from a variety of social and cultural backgrounds. Yet it is certain that they shared assumptions about the world with Romans of all types. In the main, then, their writings reveal a generally held Roman worldview. Most were not writing in any strictly official capacity, and hence they give a picture of news sharing that cannot be analyzed merely as propaganda. Emperors and their functionaries were loath to admit that frontiers had shifted when that meant the actual loss of territory. Yet news of shifts in late Roman frontiers did proliferate widely. It found its way into philosophical treatises, orations, personal letter exchanges, historical writings, apocalypses, scriptural commentary, and the like.

The comparative element here underscores the generalized “Roman” nature of this frontier consciousness. There is, to be sure, a difference in volume and character of material for each region. Those writing on the eastern frontier produced far more material, partly because of more newsworthy events along it and partly because of civic culture located near them—more people lived along, visited, and wrote about this frontier. Firm comparisons are difficult, and pushing the evidence further might risk simply comparing silence to eloquence. Occasionally, though, we do get glimpses of ways in which Romans expressed frontiers differently. Accounts of the North African frontier, as we have seen, do use a different idiom at times than those presenting the eastern frontier. Yet there does appear to be a sense in which late Roman frontier consciousness was unitary.

The argument here is in tune with historiographical trends that emphasize a Roman imperial identity that supersedes local identities and cultural expressions. This need not imply that local and regional identities were nonexistent or that they lacked significance. Our diverse group of guides to late Roman

frontier consciousness hail from all over the Roman Empire—it is, then, not a localized picture that emerges from this study. From the anonymous author of the Thirteenth Sibylline Oracles, arguably a Christian “person on the street,” to the pagan emperor Julian, scattered and subtle hints point to a worldview shared by millions throughout the Roman world. To raise a different set of questions and issues might well suggest ways in which the Roman Empire was intellectually and culturally heterogeneous. Yet this study does not conclude that this homogeneity was merely a function of the dissemination and internalization of Roman ideology and values as put forth by the central regime. Worldview analysis and media studies have helped prepare a picture that allows individuals more agency—the Romans were not merely passive regarding value systems trickling down from a political center.

Late Roman frontier consciousness did not disappear with the western Roman Empire. Long after the political structures around it had collapsed or transformed, this powerful ideological model would continue to be invoked in changing historical contexts. There are curious homologies in the Mediterranean, European, and Middle Eastern worlds in subsequent centuries, as empires and kingdoms expressed territoriality in both spiritual and political terms. For each of them, the highest political ideals were universalist ones; yet each recognized, voluntarily or involuntarily, that there were limits, frontiers. When expansion stops, discourse highlighting frontiers gets more intense. As these polities shaped their own systems vis à vis unique historical circumstances, similar patterns emerge across space and time. Wherever the model is appropriated (or at least echoed), familiar dynamics and ambiguities emerge, the type of which make Late Antiquity such an interesting and, dare I say, relevant period. The universal rise of the modern state has presented a whole new set of variables, to be sure, yet it has not ultimately erased the late Roman frontier consciousness. For even in our modern world of barbed-wire borders and mapped nations, the tensions inherent within a bounded state housing a universalist ideology are still very much alive.

