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News and Frontier Consciousness in the Late Roman Empire

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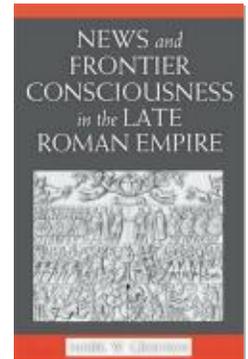
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PART 3



*Pagans, Christians,
and Frontiers*

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*Prophecy, Divination,
and Frontiers*



For without altering the boundaries of the empire [*imperii finibus*], Jesus Christ has proved himself able to drive [Terminus et al.] not only from their temples, but from the hearts of their worshippers.

—St. Augustine, *City of God* 4.29

Such triumphalist language is typical of fourth- and early-fifth-century Christian writing. Christianity had defeated its foes and revealed to pagan and Christian alike the emptiness of classical pagan culture. To take Christian sources at face value, the overthrow is complete. Even Terminus, the Roman god of boundaries, has been driven from his position as establisher and maintainer of Roman boundaries and frontiers.¹ In the context of speaking about a shifting eastern frontier, Augustine further challenges his audience: “It was thus signified, they say, that the people of Mars, that is the Roman people, would never surrender to anyone a place which they held; also that no one would disturb the Roman boundaries, on account of the god Terminus.”² As Augustine goes on to reveal that the eastern frontier in fact had been altered on several occasions throughout Roman history, the meaning of his polemic is clear. Terminus was not supposed to yield even to Jupiter, yet Terminus had yielded, and not to the *gentes externae* but, in effect, to Hadrian and, more recently, to Julian and Jovian. The reversal of Terminus’ role in Augustine’s rhetoric—Terminus should have yielded only to Persians

or Germans, not Roman emperors—further underscores the foolhardiness of the pagans. Augustine’s choice of the frontier as a site of the glorious battle between Christ and the classical gods is one of many ways he portrays the poverty of the pagan system.

The victory of Christianity complete, the classical world, “rustling with the presence of many divine beings,” was now “under new management,” to borrow metaphors from P. Brown.³ The loss of the pagan gods, of course, did not make the Roman world any less “holy.” The extent to which the loss challenged or altered existing worldviews is a bit more difficult to discern. Augustine’s rhetoric aside, worldviews are not so simple to dispose of, even as some external religious trappings might be. This interaction between pagan and Christian, two thought worlds, is one of enduring interest.⁴ Few historians now see Christianization as a one-way triumph such as that which supposedly drove Terminus from his sacred position. Explanations of what did happen when pagan and Christian worldviews met tend now to be more complex—and more interesting.

Analyses of the interaction of paganism and Christianity have differed considerably. It might help to visit, briefly, recent developments in order to situate this project’s treatment of the categories of “pagan” and “Christian” as well as the concept of Christianization. Until fairly recently, many historians have followed the enthusiasm of the Christian witnesses in imagining a “Grand Event” in which Christianity drove out all viable vestiges of paganism from the late Roman world. Such accounts essentially affirm the rhetoric expressed by Christian writers of the fourth century and beyond. They also place a particular emphasis on the growing corpus of antipagan legislation that proliferated from the late fourth century onward. Others have simply taken the message of pagans at face value as well. The historiographical distortions have been manifold because the opposite sides of debate often agree in exaggerating the extent of Christianity’s victory. Pagans can just as well overstate the victory in their morose dejection—they conveyed only scarce and weak bits of paganism clinging stalwartly to classical institutions after the Christian onslaught.⁵

Such pagans often presented themselves as a dying breed, nostalgically contemplating the “good old days” when they could have encountered other living, breathing pagans. One of many such pagans, a North African senator and correspondent of Augustine, sees his late-fourth-century world as devoid of coreligionists. Volusianus looks back wistfully at the good old days when he could have dined and discoursed with pagan friends; now he encounters them only in books.⁶ The motives behind both of these ancient pictures are, in retrospect, fairly obvious—Christians exaggerating their victory and pagans exaggerating their woes.

Recent writers have tried to see through the imagined drastic and distinct boundary separating the two. Such works have highlighted the accommodations of these two thought worlds. R. MacMullen, for example, recently extended his long-term quest to explain Christianization by arguing that Christianity gradually embraced paganism and incorporated it. The battle metaphor used by pagan and Christian writers to describe this conflict conceals, in MacMullen's view, a long-term accommodation behind the scenes, as one thought system achieved its final conquest by gradually incorporating the other.⁷ But how did this accommodation play out at the peripheries, the frontiers of the empire? Was there anything to the "defeat" of *Terminus* except a rhetorical trope concocted by a converted rhetorician?

Christianity was a vital intellectual and cultural force that did play a significant part in the changing thought world of Late Antiquity. This is not to say that all intellectual and cultural changes of Late Antiquity must be traced to Christianization. In fact, a general popularization of belief shaped the way pagans and Christians alike viewed their world. But Christianity approached perennial classical questions with some decidedly new, if multifaceted or even contradictory, answers. Christians, intentionally or not, answered these questions using established, classical methods. But at the same time, they proposed a new textual authority for intellectual culture, a new soteriological and eschatological meaning to life and history, a modified cosmology, and even new perspectives on geography and topography. In each of these ways, Christianity would reconstruct old structures, albeit on classical foundations.

And all of these structures contributed to Roman thinking on frontiers. For example, prophecy and panegyric, two of the major media of Late Antiquity, have long classical histories in terms of form and content. In a Christian context, however, the old forms are imbued with new content and meaning. The resulting configurations would have been, at some levels, foreign to the pagan mind. The question of belief in the worldview of the ancients is, of course, crucial to late Roman frontier consciousness. Christianity and paganism, comparatively, related to that consciousness. Did Christianization, however construed, cause a change in the way the Romans viewed or imagined their imperial frontiers?

The few variables used to test this question give hints to both change and continuity in Roman frontier consciousness. First, pagan and Christian prophecies and divination involving frontiers, in attempting to make sense of the present moment *vis à vis* a divine plan and to relay that sense to others, provide a crucial window into Roman worldviews. As media of mass communication, prophecy and divination provide news that is open to interpretation and

is often limited by historical factors surrounding its proliferation. At times, Romans viewed the placement or stability of frontiers as historical and tangible indicators of the stability of the empire, if not the cosmos itself.

Second, Christians and pagans alike saw the hand of God (or gods) actively engaged at their frontiers. The formats for communicating divine activity reveal much about frontier consciousness because they demonstrate that military might was hardly imagined as the sole defender of frontiers.

Finally, the ideology of a universal empire influenced and/or reflected Roman thinking about frontiers. Constantine himself was well aware of fellow Christians beyond his frontiers, even as he championed the ideology of a universal empire. How did the ideology of a universal Christian empire, beginning with Constantine, relate to the age-old ideology of world mastery, *imperium sine fine*?

Working within long-standing Near Eastern and Mediterranean thought structures, the Romans relied on prophecy or related phenomena such as oracles, portents, and later apocalypses, particularly at times of intense threat or instability.⁸ By means of these phenomena, Romans were able to interpret their present moment or period of crisis, often reading the will or mind of divinity into history. In Late Antiquity, making sense of the present and past by means of the future became increasingly prevalent.⁹ As D. Potter has put it, “prophesies could describe and validate current conditions—the current state of affairs as part of a divine plan.”¹⁰

The relationship between prophetic elements and the frontiers is fairly clear in available sources, giving us clues about frontier consciousness. Prophecies, portents, and the like often dealt with the violation of frontier zones or the disastrous price of doing so. Historical circumstances served as indicators of problems or of the will or anger of deity. In effect, the frontier became a tangible site for prophetic speculation.

Pagans and Christians alike relied on prophecy as they sought to understand their place in the world. Moments of prophetic insight thus give clues to generally held beliefs. As such, prophecy is useful for understanding Roman thought even outside of the context of crisis. Prophecy can make explicit what Romans held implicitly. It can also show us Romans responding to news about problems, both by the format of the communication and in interpretation. A chief virtue of prophecy is its very flexibility in interpretation, reinventing itself as historical circumstances change. Nearly all Roman historians include material on oracles and prophecy; few reject common methods of divination outright, and most use them as legitimate historical proof within certain limits.¹¹

One of the key elements of prophecy is cosmological, as it served to connect the present moment with an eternal plan encompassing the whole of the universe. As Potter explains, “prophecy of all sorts enabled people to understand their relationship with the immanent powers of the universe.”¹² These glimpses into the perspective of deity can give insight into tacit dimensions of worldview. Reliance on divination often became much more pronounced and probably more central to the worldview of Romans of the late Empire. Historians writing during the late Empire consistently recorded examples of prophetic utterances and/or divination; and they do so even more approvingly than did their early Imperial predecessors.¹³ A. Momigliano notes that the intervention of gods as such was once confined in Roman historiography to “digressions and excursions,” the upshot being that they were not central to the historian’s real business. Earlier Roman historians, like their modern counterparts, consistently distanced themselves objectively from the miraculous as much as possible. Writers of the later empire, however, began to put religious beliefs and practices at the center of their historiography. The change is apparent both in the pagan and the newly emerging Christian historiography.

The trend was thus to locate divination in a more central place in historical writing. If prophecy and divination formed a crucial part of Late Roman historiography, it was not, then, at the fringes of learned discourse, pagan or Christian. To ultimately understand the meaning and significance of history to the Late Antique person, one could not ignore the perceived role of the gods in historical causation. The trend was part of what Momigliano and MacMullen call a “popularization of belief.”¹⁴ Prophecy thus becomes a convenient tool for reading worldview at a time of marked change.

Another key factor in understanding prophecy is to appreciate the assumptions it makes about nature, or Nature. To the late Roman mind, nature was intrinsically related to divinity. In the earlier Empire, many studious, elite Romans sought to study nature in a way hardly or at least only distantly connected to divinity. Pliny, for example, could pursue his naturalism with a view that the gods existed on the outer fringes of earth, generally unconnected with or disinterested in the natural realm. In fact, he mocked beliefs that by rejecting “rational” modes of explanation strove instead to see divinity behind all natural occurrences.¹⁵ Earthquakes and volcanoes (one of which he explored to his own demise) could be understood as phenomena of nature rather than the deliberate actions of the gods. This was not so for the educated elite in the later empire. “Habits of mind discoverable in the empire’s elite of Pliny’s day, even of Plotinus’, were thus overwhelmed and lost among others quite different, more ‘popular.’ The spectrum of belief lost its sceptical and empirical-thinking extreme.”¹⁶

This retreat from empirical thinking is clearly discernable in Ammianus, for whom prophecy and divination often are connected to observable reality.

There is an essence of life present within all the elements which, surely because they are eternal bodies, is always in motion between them and everywhere strong in its capacity to indicate future events. When we bring knowledge from various sources to the task of analyzing these elements, this spirit shares with us the gifts of divination. And the powers of natural substances, when men please them with various rituals, bear prophetic words as if along ever flowing streams. The divine being which presides over these powers is called Themis, for she publishes beforehand those decrees fixed by the law of Fate.¹⁷

This passage reveals, first of all, that the function of prophecy was news communication—in this case, news from divinity. The gods pull together the “eternal elements” while “dispersing a network of communication.”¹⁸ They reveal this news through the natural elements. Thus, when Ammianus describes portents, he is giving insight into this divine world, a world that communicates to humans through nature.

This is a foundational element of his worldview, and one no doubt shared by many of his fellow Romans. Unlike Pliny, Ammianus argues that only “silly commoners [*vanities plebeia*]” can possibly doubt, in their ignorance, that the gods are actively revealing themselves through prophetic signs in nature.¹⁹ In a sense, learned culture has reversed its early imperial stance here. At one time, the *vanities plebeia* would have been those who looked for divine explanations for everything.

Ammianus defends his views against skeptics as well. Against accusations that prophecies have been wrong in the past, Ammianus appeals to the “exception that proves the rule” argument: grammarians sometimes speak ungrammatically, and even musicians sometimes play out of tune. He then quotes Cicero to show that incorrectness comes from faults in interpretation rather than faults with the gods. Ammianus points to the pronouncement of the Sibyls as “the means of knowing the future; and courses of action, what will happen.” Such sibylline pronouncements extended to keeping emperors within their own frontiers.²⁰

St. Augustine likewise discusses frontiers while connecting nature and divinity. In spite of polemical language, he reveals a worldview similar to that of Ammianus. Augustine claims that the “more intelligent and responsible Romans”²¹ saw the weakness of Terminus and especially the vanity of the “augur” when he yielded to Roman emperors. Augustine rebukes those, even

Christians, who, unable to resist the customs of the day, still offered up their worship to Nature. But Nature, he implies, now lies instead under the rule and governance of the one true God. The *termini* of the empire were related to nature—and the crucial mistake of Julian and his type is that they had developed nature worship as a religion rather than submitting to the Almighty God. It is this connection that makes frontiers relevant to prophecy and all types of divination.

Such analyses of prophecy have been made for other historical contexts. In a study of prophecy in Renaissance Italy, O. Niccoli argues that prophecy constituted a “unifying sign” connecting nature to religion and religion to politics.²² A key point in her argument is that prophecy can connect the natural order and even geography to the religious and political orders. Particularly, prophecy can be linked to political stability in very specific times of perceived crisis. Furthermore, prophecy links a divinely controlled nature, however construed, to the events of the day. It reveals the ways in which people viewed the integral connection between their own world and nature itself. “Boundariness” was a part of the natural order and so related to the control of divinity over the cosmos. Late Roman prophecy likewise connected nature to religion. To disturb, violate, or even cross frontiers at the wrong moment was to disturb the cosmic order.

In a medieval context, R. Lerner traces mentalities revealed by medieval prophecies. Unlike Niccoli, who studies the moment of a novel prophecy as a reflection of contemporary concerns, Lerner looks at persistencies expressed in one prophecy as it transformed over time. Lerner’s work exhibits the possibilities of prophecies as a rich source of information that reveals some “deeply imprinted mental patterns.”²³

Prophetic utterances did not just serve as divine media for relaying messages from God or the gods. Prophecies also served as a human media, connecting individuals with information. As such, it was one of the important communication tools in the late Roman world. It had the advantage of being able to report on sensitive political events in a less direct and thus less incriminating and dangerous way. It could relay news that might not otherwise have seen the light of day. Potter has noted in his studies of the phenomenon of prophecy that the importance of oracular books “stems from the fact that they provided a format for the communication of difficult, interesting, and, at times, dangerous ideas in such a way that people who lived in a world where the constant intervention of divine powers was taken as a fact of life could relate to them.” Prophetic books and commentaries served a significant and sometimes vital task of communicating news as well as providing a consistent format for the interpretation of present events within larger patterns or

schemes.²⁴ At other times, prophesies could be used to interpret current events with reference to long-term perceived realities. Prophecy could refer to events or historical arrangements long anticipated or assumed in an effort to ground a certain piece of news in the historical consciousness of the receptors.²⁵ As sociologist D. McQuail has argued, a key element of effective media is that it corresponds to rather than challenges the realities of a given society.²⁶

Prophecy was caught up in the general shift in modes and methods of communication in Late Antiquity. Political, cultural, and intellectual changes from the mid-third century onward put prophecy to the fore as a mode of communication. In the later Empire, a more popular media format came to predominate across the board. Part of this shift was due to the rise in status of a nonsenatorial military elite over the traditional landed aristocracy, a shift that affected even ways of communicating. “Modes of popular communication replaced at every level the more literary, philosophical debates about freedom and political rights which, within a much narrower milieu, had characterized these relations in the early empire.”²⁷ Military news and news about frontiers assumed a new format, appearing more often in prophetic texts of a popular nature or referring to prophetic texts in getting their messages across.

The question of the audience for the prophesies is an intriguing one as well. Who was actually reading or hearing these prophesies? At best, probably not much more than 10 percent of the Roman population could read, by recent estimations.²⁸ However, this number does not mean that the majority of the inhabitants of the Empire were completely untouched by the elite circle of the literate. The Roman Empire was an “empire of the written word,” and the influence of that written word was felt far outside of the ranks of the literate 10 percent.²⁹ Furthermore, with the intellectual distinctions between the elite modes of communication and others being eroded with the aforementioned popularizing of belief, the notion that prophesies mattered only to a small circle is untenable and unlikely.

Sibyls and Oracles

Oracles had long played a critical role of self-definition and reassurance in the classical world. By the late Empire, they were more prevalent among the Greek-speaking areas of the Empire, a testimony to a strong continuity of a “native” Greek tradition.³⁰ By the third century, a veritable “industry grew up in oracles.”³¹ In the fourth century, the emperor Julian even directly connected the existence and action of the Sibyls to the formation and maintenance of the empire itself; they “made it easier for the world to be governed by Romans.”³² Official sibylline books continued to be consulted well after

Constantine.³³ Ammianus records that the books were consulted in 363 at the order of Julian. They revealed, incidentally, that “the emperor must not that year leave his frontiers,”³⁴ suggesting the fate of one who would violate frontier zones. A loose collection of the sibylline pronouncements, of which fourteen survive, played a crucial role in interpreting and disseminating information at moments of crisis, when news was craved.

The long history of copying out, modifying, and inventing things sibylline continues well into the “Christian Empire,” under the auspices of Christians and Jews.³⁵ Pagans, such as the emperor Julian, knew that the sibylline books were still around and where to find them, but even Christians were working with them as well, albeit in a different way. A series of the books was revised by Christian and/or Jewish writers to take account of history as it unfolded, specifically in relation to biblical prophecy. Current events were read into biblical texts and presented in a sibylline format.

The interaction between pagan and Christian thought on the oracles provides a fascinating window into Late Antique thought. Although opinion was divided, many Christian writers were eager to use pagan oracles to “prove” the truth and superiority of Christianity.³⁶ Especially with the development of the apologetic tradition, the sibylline oracles, even those not edited by Jewish or Christian thinkers, became a ready repository of polemical material. The church fathers often embraced their use, so long as they established the truth of Christianity.³⁷ Lactantius, a strong Christian polemicist, puts this type of defense succinctly.

Since all these things are true and certain, foretold by the harmonious prediction of the prophets, since Trismegistus, Hystaspes and the Sibyl all uttered the same things, it is impossible to doubt that hope of all life and salvation resides in the one religion of God.³⁸

St. Augustine even defends the Erythraean Sibyl who “wrote some things concerning Christ which are quite manifest.” He claims that she actually speaks against the worship of false gods; as such, “we might even think she ought to be reckoned among those who belong to the city of God.”³⁹ Other collections of prophetic pronouncements proliferated as well, suggesting a strong and unbroken continuity of prophetic thought into Late Antiquity and beyond.⁴⁰

The defense of the Sibyls was voiced most strongly in Late Antiquity by pagans. Zosimus, a stalwart pagan, gives stories of divination throughout his history—so much so that most recent evaluations of him as a historian have been somewhat unjustly negative.⁴¹ Earlier analyses of Zosimus downplayed religious aspects. Divine intervention was alive and well as a belief in Zosimus’

own day, although the intensity of stories had died down, “because our generation has rejected belief in any divine benevolence.” In one reference to the sibylline oracle, Zosimus gives a decidedly pagan view of a failing empire. He quotes the Sibyl to prove that as long as Rome maintained a certain pagan ceremony, the “Empire was safe and Rome remained in control of virtually all of the inhabited world.”⁴²

For pagans as well as many Christians, the solvency of the Roman world required a relationship with deity. Fourth-century Christian writers in particular made this connection explicit, Eusebius foremost among them. The culmination of Eusebius’ thought on this occurs in book 10 of his *Ecclesiastical History*. The last chapter crescendoes into a proclamation of how Constantine’s rule has brought an abundance of blessings to the Roman Empire. St. Augustine dismisses these notions throughout his *City of God* as simplistic but nonetheless sees a great deal of significance in weakened frontiers.

During the later Roman Empire especially, the connection of divinity and imperial stability was, moreover, directly related to the Roman frontiers. In one of his more famous passages, Zosimus accuses Constantine, the desecrater of “his ancestral religion,” of creating a specific frontier policy that weakened and eventually destroyed the Roman frontiers.

And Constantine did something else which gave the barbarians unhindered access to the Roman empire. By the forethought of Diocletian, the frontiers of the empire everywhere were covered, as I have stated, with cities, garrisons and fortifications which housed the whole army. Consequently it was impossible for the barbarians to cross the frontier because they were confronted at every point by forces capable of resisting their attacks. Constantine destroyed this security by removing most of the troops from the frontiers and stationing them in cities which did not need assistance, thus both stripping of protection those being molested by the barbarians and subjecting the cities left alone by them to the outrages of the soldiers, so that thenceforth most have become deserted. Moreover, he enervated the troops by allowing them to devote themselves to shows and luxuries. In plain terms, Constantine was the origin and beginning of the present destruction of the empire.⁴³

I quote this passage at length not to enter the familiar and heated debates over Constantine’s versus Diocletian’s frontier policies but rather to highlight that, in Zosimus’ mind, the will of the gods, revealed specifically through sibylline prophecy, determined the outcome of political and military decisions.

Constantine's "failure" as a military strategist, according to the whole of Zosimus' account, cannot be separated from the prophesied wrath of the gods, who played out their fated anger at his crucial frontier zones; Constantine's "frontier policies" were part of the gods' vengeance. The statement that Constantine's frontier policies were "the origin of the destruction of the empire" should be read in light of the Sibyl's proclamation—a specific indication of divine wrath. The solvency of the empire, especially its crucial frontiers, is here strongly connected to pagan ceremony. To ignore this aspect is to miss a valuable connection between frontiers and divinity. By his conversion to Christianity, Constantine, to Zosimus' mind, destroyed the pagan ceremony that put the gods in favor of the Roman project. His "frontier policies" and their subsequent failures were a tangible way of enacting and/or making concrete sense of his violation of the will of the gods, clearly revealed through prophecy. Thus, problems at the frontiers became the means by which the gods would visit the Roman world with calamities and destruction.

Portents and Prodigies

Portents and prodigies, found in many writings from the premodern world, are a conspicuous feature in the works of Ammianus, Zosimus, and Libanius as well as Christian writers. Within the Roman Empire, they are more characteristically an indigenous Roman tradition, as opposed to Sibyls and oracles, which tended to be more Greek. Ammianus writes as a Roman, showing much more propensity toward portents and prodigies than toward oracles. Like other types of divination, these also reveal a connection between nature and divinity.⁴⁴ Divine judgment could be read into physical occurrences or events, particularly those that went against the normal patterns or cycles of nature. Their "occurrence signified to the Roman mind a rupture of the *pax deorum*."⁴⁵ Often, portents were visible signs that indicated the future. Although often interchangeable with *portent* (*portentium*), a more ambivalent concept, the term *prodigy* (*prodigium*) specifically indicates divine wrath.

Portents have long been recognized, for various periods, as a venue for studying how anxieties and stresses register within a populace. During the Roman Republic, portents were signs of internal problems, and their occurrence naturally intensified around periods of crisis. Reportage of portents had died down during the late Republic, though, and had become relatively rare by the first century B.C. Thereafter they appear during the early and high Empire solely at moments of intense crisis, such as in A.D. 69, the so-called Year of the Four Emperors.⁴⁶ The problems of the later Empire provoked,

it seems, a reassertion of the prodigy as a mode of divine communication. While modern historians have long disagreed on whether primarily to read portents as signs of imperial control (subtle or not-so-subtle messages being sent out by the central government) or of hysteria in the Roman populace, the portents recorded for the later Empire are a bit more difficult to interpret in terms of the former.⁴⁷

At one time in Roman historical writing, portents were more often than not confined to “digressions and excursuses,” almost as curiosity pieces, far from the central concern of early and high Imperial historians, designed often to demonstrate the author’s literary or stylistic elements.⁴⁸ This is not to deny that Tacitus, Suetonius, and Plutarch were religiously minded but rather to affirm that they imagined practical limits in their observations of things historical.

There is a distinct change in late Roman writings, revealing late Roman worldview. Failure to acknowledge this shift has caused many to overlook the centrality of portents to later Roman historical writings. Historians like Ammianus were more reluctant to “draw a sharp distinction between religion and superstition,” *religio* and *superstitio*.⁴⁹ At one time, more skeptical historians would have imagined a rather clear demarcation between these two. Ammianus has already been shown to have put full stock in miraculous and portentous elements, even those of a popular nature.⁵⁰ In one particular episode, he reveals much about Roman frontier consciousness in a way that is completely missed if he were read as one would read Tacitus, for example. The contestation of the late Roman frontiers provides just such an opportunity for the prodigy to reemerge in the historiography. This particular episode is worth exploring at length.

In A.D. 363, Jovian was traveling back from his disastrous concession of Nisibis and other eastern frontier cities. As the newly proclaimed emperor made his way toward Ancyra, Antioch witnessed a series of prodigies. Ammianus, not the only Roman to speak of divine signs following from this ill-fated campaign, records that, “for successive days,” these prodigies seemed to indicate “the wrath of divinity.”⁵¹ Among generic signs such as creaking beams in a council hall and comets “in broad daylight,” one stands out for its specificity: “The statue of the Caesar Maximianus [Galerius], which is located in the vestibule of the palace, suddenly lost the brazen ball, in the form of a sphere of heaven it was holding.”⁵² All these prodigies seem to have followed, in Ammianus’ presentation, from Jovian’s abandonment of “the barrier [*murus*] of the provinces whose bulwarks had remained unharmed even from earliest times.”⁵³ The statue prodigy in particular holds potential insight into Late Antique frontier consciousness. Statues of emperors had long been

treated as objects of fear and veneration.⁵⁴ In this brief communication, then, Ammianus reveals a late Roman worldview, gives hints of a prevalent Roman cosmology, and imparts news about the importance of frontiers from any perspective, even that of the great beyond.

Ammianus is, moreover, communicating news to his audience, news relating to a shifting eastern frontier. The relaying of such portents points again to the ways in which the whole of the cosmos was seen as interrelated, the natural visible world as well as the invisible.⁵⁵ His narration of the Nisibis episode gives subtle hints of this “cosmic” and celestial dimension to Roman frontiers. Ammianus implies that even as the bronze sphere, symbolic of a stable cosmos and universal dominion, fell from Galerius’ steady hand, so the order that he had established during his campaign of 298 on the eastern frontier was now overturned. Jovian’s withdrawal from frontier cities such as Nisibis upset an order once established through the Caesar Galerius—a political order, yet inseparable from the cosmic order, as the globe prodigy suggests.

It is also crucial to Ammianus’ prodigy passage that the statue is of Galerius. Sprinkled throughout Ammianus’ narrative of the disastrous Persian campaign of 363 are references to the successful campaigns of Galerius beyond Rome’s eastern frontier sixty-five years earlier. Many of these references throughout the *Res Gestae* and elsewhere contrast Galerius’ successful campaign and the disastrous one now facing the Romans.⁵⁶ Galerius was the one who, according to Ammianus and others, defended against the attack of the Persian king Narses, the “first” to make an “inroad into Armenia, a country under Roman jurisdiction.” This same Persian king “forgot that destruction was portended to the one who invades another’s dominions.”⁵⁷ In many other passages, Galerius is further directly connected to frontier maintenance, defense, or expansion.⁵⁸ He was responsible for the reestablishment of the Roman *limes* beyond the Tigris and the creation of the five *gentes* across the Tigris.⁵⁹

Galerius thus officially had established the Roman frontier at the Tigris. The importance of his action is reflected in the fact that his treaty “defined Roman-Persian relations for the next 60 years.”⁶⁰ Galerius is applauded for “trampling the bows and quivers of the Persians beneath [his] feet.” In a famous panegyric, an orator praises Galerius by presumably pointing to a map of some sort and saying, “now, now at last it is a delight to see a picture of the world, since we see nothing in it which is not ours.”⁶¹ This all-encompassing Roman world, *sine fine*, had now been overturned by the death of Julian and the surrender of eastern frontier cities by Jovian. Thus the significance of the sphere falling from the hands of Galerius’ statue.⁶²



Fig. 10. Standing emperor (Valentinian?) with globe. (Courtesy of Richard Delbrueck, *Spätantike Kaiserporträts von Constantinus Magnus bis zum Ende des Westreichs* [Berlin: Verlag von Walter de Gruyter, 1933].)

Ammianus, in the same context, records a set of prodigies that not only further connects the campaigns of Galerius and Julian but also underscores the cosmic dimension of Roman frontiers. Ammianus reveals that the series of calamities had been foreshadowed by omens and portents. For example, as Julian was on his way to Dura, a frontier town (deserted at this time, Ammianus tells us), the emperor met a troop of soldiers who presented him with a “lion of immense size.” The soldiers related how they had killed the beast when it attacked their line. Julian interpreted the omen to mean that he would kill the Persian king—“for the death of a king was foretold.” Making a direct comparison to the famous Delphic oracle that told Croesus that he “would overthrow a mighty kingdom,” Ammianus tells how Julian misread the prodigy; for, in fact, Julian was the lion who was pierced with arrows.⁶³

In another instance, in spite of the direct and persistent warnings of Etruscan diviners to call off the campaign to avoid “invading another’s territory,” the campaign continued. Others, meanwhile, provided Julian with a different interpretation of the prodigy, arguing that in the earlier campaign, Galerius was just about to attack Narses when a lion and a large boar were delivered to him in the same manner as Julian had received the lion. They argued that Galerius had come back safely and had in fact “made an inroad into Persian territory.” A group of “philosophers,” Ammianus records, denied that, in Julian’s case “the portent threatened destruction to the invader of another’s territory.” Here one may detect in Ammianus’ tone a dislike for these types, who were opposed to popular divination. A further lightning prodigy was also misinterpreted and ignored, and the campaign continued.⁶⁴

Libanius, an Antiochene rhetorician and perhaps even the teacher of Ammianus, likewise records prodigies during the eastern campaign. He connects events surrounding the death of Julian and the subsequent redrawing of the eastern frontier—Earth (Terra) sent earthquakes and the like to show that Fate had begun afflicting the Roman Empire. Even before the death of Julian, the famous earthquakes of 363 were portents of the disaster of Julian’s death, according to Libanius.⁶⁵

Another form of portent was the birth at critical historical moments of misshapen humans or animals.⁶⁶ Ammianus records one such prodigy, from a few years before Julian’s expedition.

At that same time in Daphne, that charming and magnificent suburb of Antioch, a portent was born, horrible to see and to report: an infant, namely, with two heads, two sets of teeth, a beard, four eyes and two very small ears; and this misshapen birth foretold that the state was turning into a deformed condition. Portents of this kind often see

the light, as indicators of the outcome of various affairs; but as they are not expiated by public rites, as they were in the time of our forefathers, they pass by unheard of and unknown.⁶⁷

It is difficult to interpret such a revelation as pure metaphor, for the shape of the empire was changing for the worse, according to Ammianus and others. There is a strong connection between the misshapen infant and the shrinking state. To Ammianus, anyway, Christianity had brought about a change in the culture of portents. Perhaps he overstates. Portents did continue to be observed, but Ammianus' statement does coincide with a reduction of their number in available sources.

The Christian approach to portents could differ little from the pagan in substance despite differing in form. References to portents decrease somewhat with Christian writings, yet when such references do appear, they exhibit some of the same characteristics. Toward the end of antiquity in Anatolia, the *vita* of St. Theodore of Sykeon (fl. mid-sixth century) records an episode in which a procession became troubled by portentous signs.

While the folk of the towns and villages round about went in procession singing their litanies the little crosses that they carried in the procession began to jump about and make a rattle; it was a terrible and piteous sight to see.

When immediately asked for an explanation, Theodore responds, "Pray, my children, since great afflictions and disasters are threatening the world." When begged later by the local patriarch what those might be, Theodore blends in his explanation apostasy from the faith, inroads of barbarians, captivity, the destruction of churches, "the fall and perturbation of the Empire and perplexity and critical times for the State," and even the "coming of the Adversary."⁶⁸ The threat to frontiers, just as much as the desecration of churches, was tantamount to a threat to the cosmic order in this view. Again, nature, natural order, religion, and the divine order of the cosmos are all blended together by the portent itself, which constitutes "a unifying sign connecting nature to religion and religion to politics."⁶⁹

The decline in references to portents in Christian writings reveals a definite shift in focus and energies for communicating news through divine channels. This was not a real transition in frontier consciousness so much as a shift in format of communicating news. Much of the energy of interpreting Christian portents seems to have gone into apocalyptic, a media format initially foreign to the classical Roman mind.

Biblical Prophecies

In a Christian context, another prevalent way of making sense of the current circumstances was to interpret them in light of biblical prophecies. Many writers used current news and information, especially from the peripheries, to make sense of biblical prophecies, and vice versa. The Hebrew and Christian Scriptures gradually came to be seen as a ready repository of prophecies to be mined for answers to current problems or outstanding questions. The transition from a pagan to a Christian basis for interpreting the various types of prophecies is a fascinating one. And the threats to frontiers from the third century onward provided just the type of current problem to inspire age-old prophetic imaginings, now imbued with eschatological meaning.⁷⁰

One perennial favorite was the reference to Gog and Magog in Ezekiel 38:14–15. Ezekiel had prophesied that “Gog” would come out of the north “riding upon horses, a great company, and a mighty army.” The third century crisis and invasions (coupled with a bit of folk etymology) clearly convinced some Romans that the Goths, who consistently challenged frontier zones in the north and east, were, in fact, “Gog.” Connecting Gog—as Goth—with other prophecies in Ezekiel and Daniel in a long mystical poem, Commodianus, probably in the late third century, predicted the complete annihilation of the Empire in the seventh year of the emperors Valerian and Gallienus.⁷¹ Roman imperialism was waning, and with its passing was coming what Christ predicted as the “abomination of desolations spoken of by Daniel the Prophet.”⁷² And the frontiers were an indicator, ready at hand, for reading the dissolution of the cosmos.

Many fourth-century writers continued to make this same type of connection. St. Ambrose, responding to the Battle of Adrianople, quotes Ezekiel 38 in the midst of an exposition written in the winter of 378–9—“For Ezechiel already prophesied in that time both our future destruction and the wars of the Goths. . . . That wretched Gog is the Goth whom we now see to have come forth.”⁷³ St. Augustine criticizes such explicit connections of history to scriptural prophecy in his exposition on Gog and Magog in the *City of God*: “For these nations which he names Gog and Magog are not to be understood of some barbarous nations in some part of the world, whether the Getae [Goths] or the Massagetae, as some conclude from the initial letters, or some foreign nations not under the Roman government.”⁷⁴ His reference here suggests that this identification was prevalent among Christians of his day. St. Jerome likewise objected to such a specific eschatology, again showing that he was opposing a popular viewpoint.⁷⁵ That Augustine and Jerome were not ultimately successful in eliminating this connection is demonstrated by

the ethnography of Isidore of Seville's "Historia Gothorum," which continues to pass it on.⁷⁶ The "fulfillment" of the Gog and Magog prophecy continued on into the following centuries as Huns, Alans, Khazars, Magyars, Turks, and Mongols all took their turn playing the prophesied part.⁷⁷

Apocalypticism

The tradition of apocalyptic literature began in the Near East well before the Roman period and culminated in Judaic literature, especially of the Hellenistic and diaspora periods.⁷⁸ Apocalyptic literature explores God's dealings within history, particularly as he brings about the end or consummation of the age, and as such it has had a decided impact on Christian historical thought. There are no Roman or Greek pagan parallels in form to apocalyptic, although the content and message can at times reflect age-old classical themes connecting deity to human history.⁷⁹ J. J. Collins, a leading scholar of apocalypticism, provides the following definition:

a genre of revelatory literature with a narrative framework, in which a revelation is mediated by an otherworldly being to a human recipient, disclosing a transcendent reality which is both temporal, insofar as it envisages eschatological salvation, and spatial insofar as it involves another, supernatural world.⁸⁰

Common features of Jewish and Christian apocalyptic writing include a claim to be esoteric, with its substance revealed to a noteworthy person from the Jewish past, such as Enoch or Elijah; pseudonymity; the use of Old Testament or, increasingly among Christian writers, New Testament prophetic literature as its base; and a concern with the end or consummation of history.⁸¹

Apocalyptic literature assumed a definite plan to history that would culminate in the telos—the end or suspension of the present cosmos and the establishment of the eternal kingdom of the Messiah.⁸² It also presented its "prophecies" *ex eventu*, "predicting" events that had already happened from the standpoint of one seeing future visions of them, often from a celestial or planetary vantage point. Classical pagan theories of history did not ascribe such an all-encompassing, realizable plan to the diverse will of the gods.⁸³

Problems along the eastern frontier during the third century aroused apocalyptic imaginations or at least expressions. In many historical contexts, apocalypticism has arisen when a political entity is threatened; issues of territoriality or threats to claims on space form a critical part of this discourse. Real or perceived threats to imperial and community stability inspired Christians and

Jews to make sense of them in terms of their own eschatological systems.⁸⁴ Apocalypticism thrives in times of perceived crisis because it offers a decided resolution. “Apocalyptic is literature of despair. . . . [W]ith equal appropriateness it can be described as a literature of hope. God would vindicate his people once and for all and bring to its consummation his purpose and plan for all the ages.”⁸⁵ During the third century, Christians clearly detailed their views of political crisis. In response to political and social upheaval, some Christians saw universal chaos and the impending suspension of the cosmos that many thought would precede the establishment of an eternal kingdom. This Christian response to disaster news was channeled in specific directions with apocalyptic literature. In substance and content, the Christian response differed little from the pagan, although it did in form.⁸⁶

Much of these apocalyptic associations with the Roman eastern frontier borrow images directly from Revelation of St. John (The Apocalypse) and apocalyptic references in the Gospels (especially St. Matthew) as well as the Old Testament books of Daniel and Ezekiel and intertestamental Jewish apocalyptic literature. They increase, not surprisingly, during the infamous third century and reveal how Christian minds, heavily steeped in Judaic thought, encountered historical problems and disasters. Apocalypticism worked well in the cultural context of Late Antiquity because it helped make sense of rapid change. In the context of perceived catastrophe, it captured the spirit of the age and helped express deeply entrenched worldviews, giving crucial insight into the Christian mind of the Late Antique world. Its primary concern is the end of history, the time when ultimately the righteous would be vindicated and the wicked judged. This moment imparts meaning to the historical events it describes or explains. Meaning in history, then, comes from an understanding of the telos and the human’s relationship to it. Although apocalypticism often reacts at some level to success or failure of the ubiquitous military campaigns, it points out, again, that the military/political world and the divine cosmos past, present, and future are part of an inseparable continuum. Hippolytus of Rome (ca. 170–236) was one of the first extrabiblical writers to directly relate the Roman Empire to visions in apocalyptic literature. He ties the Roman Empire into one of the visions recorded in the Old Testament book of Daniel, attempting to explain the decline of the Empire.⁸⁷

One of the earliest systems of Roman apocalyptic thought appears in the writings of St. Cyprian. Writing from Carthage, far from any frontiers endangered in the mid-third century, he saw the challenge to and collapse of certain frontiers as a sign of apocalyptic catastrophe.⁸⁸ Much of his apocalyptic speculation is inspired by news coming from frontiers. His surviving letters provide insight into his news-gathering methods. For example, in the

mid-third century, he had gathered news on Decius' defeat by the Goths on the northern frontier as well as some secret orders for persecution by the emperor Valerian—the latter he knew about even before the provincial governor, he implies.⁸⁹ To Cyprian, the moment of Gothic invasions in the north was a sure sign of catastrophe and cataclysm. News from distant frontiers could be constructed as apocalyptic indicators, and apocalypse signaled the suspension of cosmos, a distinct element of worldview. Apocalyptic thought was behind both the reception and dissemination of disaster news. Current news demonstrated all too clearly that the world “has begun to fail”; in fact, it was “already in decline and at its end.”⁹⁰

In one treatise to a Roman official, Cyprian reflects that one does not even need to point to the “oft-repeated vengeance in behalf of the worshippers of God”; recent news shows the impending end of the world. News of a “recent event” is enough to reveal a host of problems, including a “decrease of forts.”⁹¹ The anger of God, in effect, was behind the problems of the state, even the decline of frontier defense. In a series of his letters, Cyprian specifically ties together the defeat of Decius, a dying earth, famine, barren fields, a lack of rain, and the imminent end of the world. Although his letters include details of problems at the center and not just the peripheries, news of problems on distant Roman frontiers could portend, in part, the end of the Roman Empire and with it the end of the world.⁹²

Cyprian's own eschatological views vacillated over his tenure as bishop of Carthage—at times the telos was imminent and thus apocalyptic; at times it was far off and more gradual.⁹³ However, he consistently interpreted news, ever changing, in terms of his own view of the decaying or ending cosmos. The crucial point of contact between the cosmos and the forces of disruption was the Roman frontier. To a Roman mind, this demarcated the civilized Roman from the uncivilized barbarian. A full-fledged Roman, Cyprian accepted tout court the classical perception of the Other.

Later problems and disasters continued to provoke apocalyptic imaginations. One such key moment was the battle of Adrianople in 378. About a decade after the infamous battle, St. Ambrose used the apocalyptic passage in Luke (21:9) to suggest that not only was the end of the Roman Empire coming quickly but so was the end of the world itself. His exposition also echoes apocalyptic passages in the Gospels of Matthew (24:6) and Mark (13:7):

None are witnesses to the heavenly words more than we, whom the end of the world has found. Indeed, how great the battles and what rumors of battles have we heard! The Huns rose against the Alans, the Alans against the Goths, the Goths against the Taifals and Sarmatians,

and the exile of the Goths made us even in Illyricum exiles from our fatherland and there is not yet an end. . . . Therefore, since we are at the end of the age, certain sicknesses of the world must go before us.⁹⁴

Such language occurs elsewhere in Ambrose's writings. In reference to the same event, he notes that "with the whole world having fallen, it is the end of the universe."⁹⁵ The barbarian invasions across Roman frontiers are a sign of the coming end. Not all of Ambrose's contemporaries shared such apocalyptic readings of the invasions, but many, no doubt, did.⁹⁶

The invasions of the early fifth century provoked similar reactions and again reveal deeply embedded worldviews. One of the many apocalyptic accounts referring to imperial frontiers is the *Chronicle* of Hydatius, a little-known bishop from Gallaecia in northwestern Spain, who continued a history of the world begun by St. Jerome. Hydatius was not nearly as cautious as Jerome in his eschatology. Hydatius' history, notable for its apocalyptic and eschatological language, refers specifically to the "frontiers of the narrowly-confined Roman Empire that are doomed to collapse."⁹⁷ In short, the collapse of the earthly frontiers of the Roman Empire signaled not only the end of its imperial power but also the *consummatio mundi*, the end of the present world itself and the beginning of a new.

Like his Christian brothers of the third century, Hydatius mined the books of Ezekiel and Daniel as well as the Revelation of St. John for up-to-the-minute commentary on that collapse. He points, for example, to four plagues of his day as the fulfillment of Ezekiel 5:17, 14:21, and 33:27–29 and the first four seals in Revelation; the marriage of two prominent barbarian nobles becomes that of the king of the North and daughter of the South mentioned in Revelation 6:8; and the handing over of churches to Arian barbarians as a fulfillment of Daniel 9:27, 11:31, and 12:11.⁹⁸ But all of these prophecies are contingent on the collapse and transgression of Roman frontier zones, which to Hydatius set into motion a process that signaled not only the end of Roman Imperial power but ultimately the end of the present world.

Part of apocalypticism's place in the currency of Late Antique ideas can be seen in a series of apocalypses loosely based on Hellenistic and Roman oracles. Two of the most fascinating collections are the revised Sibylline Oracles and the Oracle of Baalbek. The Sibylline Oracles were legitimized in Christian discourse by the writing or rewriting of a series of books, thirteen or fourteen in number, that became known simply as the Sibylline Oracles. Written or rewritten during the third century or later—the textual tradition of the works is extremely tenuous—some of these books present distinctively Christian viewpoints regarding the problems facing the empire. Books 1 and 2, for example,

give a history of the world from Creation to the Last Judgment, and other books provide eschatological explanations of the crisis of the third century and later.⁹⁹ The actual form of the sibylline books is difficult if not impossible to ascertain today since they underwent heavy Christian and Jewish emendations and additions during the fourth and fifth centuries. As such, they actually reflect the change in form of worldview even while dealing with the same types of concerns.

These texts were pseudonymous and widely circulating, composed from the perspective of the person on the street.¹⁰⁰ As a format of communication, the sibylline books were crucial for relaying information that was difficult, interesting, and dangerous “in such a way that people who lived in a world where the constant intervention of divine powers was taken as a fact of life could relate to them.”¹⁰¹ Their role as media and as a vehicle of reporting on the frontiers give rare glimpses into the context of center-periphery information interchange in Late Antiquity. An important aspect of apocalyptic is that it tended toward a universal or universalizing language; rulers and peasants alike participated in apocalyptic discourse in understanding the meaning of history.

Furthermore, some of them were written by inhabitants of frontier zones. The Thirteenth Sibylline Oracle, for example—one of the crucial sources for third-century history of the eastern Roman Empire—was written near that frontier. As such, it gives valuable insight into perceptions of the frontier from the periphery.

As media of news, the Sibylline Oracles also give helpful insight. They were continually revised and circulated in response to changing historical circumstances. Thus, in them one can see how new developments shaped the presentation of older historical material. Their textual emendations reflected both changing historical circumstances and audience demand. “Audience reaction and expectation are therefore points of central importance for evaluating the information given by the oracles about historical events.”¹⁰²

The content of the oracles was almost limitless, shaped by the events of the times. Potter claims that “the only control on the content of the oracles was the learning of the reading public, and this varied greatly depending on geographic proximity to the location of events, and the chronological relationship of the compilers and the extant texts to the material they included.” The occurrences recorded in the Sibylline Oracles thus give clues to the ways that inhabitants of the “Greek world interpreted the messages they were receiving from the central government.”¹⁰³

The Oracle of Baalbek was written, presumably, at Heliopolis, and its focus is on the eastern frontier. One of the sites it focuses on is Hierapolis,

located about fifteen miles west of the Euphrates and a crucial frontier city during the Persian Wars of the fourth century and beyond¹⁰⁴ since it served as a gathering point for Roman troops.¹⁰⁵ The oracle's perspective and view is that of an inhabitant of the particularly active eastern frontier zone. Its chief textual scholar, P. J. Alexander, dates the autograph (not extant) between 378 and 390. Alexander claims that it was translated into Latin (from Greek) before 390. Later the text was heavily emended, but most agree that there was a fourth-century text underlying it.¹⁰⁶ As with the Sibylline Books, its content was rewritten or reinterpreted in light of news of changing historical circumstances.¹⁰⁷

The author of the Oracle of Baalbek focuses on "Romania" and particularly on the "*pars Orientis*." He appears very familiar with "Anatole," which he defines as western and central Asia Minor.¹⁰⁸ As background material, the author uses a variety of apocalyptic literature including the Apocalypse of Elijah, the Apocalypse of John, and the Seventh Vision of Daniel. The oracle gives a rare glimpse of information flow both from Anatolia and points further eastward along the Euphrates. Focusing on Anatolia, the oracle predicts the coming of the Antichrist along with a host of other problems.

Apocalyptic language infuses the Oracle of Baalbek's explanations of the invasions from the East. For example, echoing concepts from the Revelation of St. John 14:19–20 ("And the winepress was trodden without the city, and blood came out of the winepress, even unto the horse bridles"), the oracle records, "And there will be much shedding of blood, so that the blood will reach the chest of horses . . . and they will capture and set on fire the cities and despoil the east."¹⁰⁹

Some of this material could well have been borrowed from the Revelation of St. John via other writings as well. The Third Sibylline Oracle, for example, also records blood reaching a certain height on a horse during such a siege. Other Jewish apocalyptic writings contain comparable images.¹¹⁰ Also, the Baalbek formula, "Woe to women with child and to those who suckle [their babes] in those days!" is borrowed from apocalyptic language of the Gospel of St. Matthew (24:19) to show the problems of the times when the "cities of the East will become deserts."¹¹¹

Apocalyptic language links distinct historical circumstances such as ruined eastern cities with the cosmos, which the apocalypse would suspend or end. In attempting to interpret current circumstances with venerated texts, the oracle reveals much about the thought of the people writing, reading, and hearing these "prophecies." The emphasis on the eastern frontier cities is highlighted here by the way that scriptural passages are decontextualized. The city spoiled in most of the biblical passages is explicitly identified by the biblical writers as

Jerusalem. But readers of the third century and beyond freely read into such passages any frontier city for which they had news of problems and that seemed to fit at the moment.

The theme of civic desecration is important, since eastern cities, to a large degree, were seen as holding together the Roman frontier zone shared with Persia. Recent historians, such as B. Isaac, challenging views that the *limes* roads functioned as the frontier, see these networks of cities as the real setting of the eastern frontier.¹¹² The topos of civic destruction in the East is almost exclusively linked to the destruction of important frontier cities. One of the apocalyptic signs comes after the destruction of the East, when the people are left asking, "Was there ever a city here?" At this point in the oracle, Enoch and Elijah, familiar figures in Jewish apocalyptic literature because they are recorded as never tasting death, return to herald the coming end. Along with foretelling other calamities, they declare, "The Persians will arise . . . and will overturn with the sword the cities of the East together with the multitudes of the soldiers of the Roman Empire."¹¹³ Looking beyond the scope of this study, conflict at the Persian frontier continued to provoke apocalyptic speculation. The political relationship between Byzantium and Persia at the time of Heraclius (r. 610–41) was likewise read in terms of the Parousia.¹¹⁴

The focus of apocalyptic speculation in the East contrasts interestingly with that in North Africa. In the east, cities symbolized cosmos and were the basis of defense and communication. Certain strategic cities were seen as making up the frontier zone, and their loss was etched deeply into Roman memory. The control of them was key to holding the frontier zone. It thus comes as little surprise that the predominant apocalyptic image near this frontier zone is the overthrow or destruction of cities. Their loss, as argued by Augustine, Cyprian, and others far away from the site of action, was tantamount to disaster at the frontier. And that could signal the actual apocalypse or at least the direst of apocalyptic imaginings about the end of the *saeculum* and/or cosmos. In North Africa, conversely, the writings of St. Cyprian suggest that a crucial indicator of apocalypse was a decrease in the number of forts. This view seems to be specifically North African and fits in well with the archaeological situation in North Africa. There, forts and fortlets, rather than cities, made up the frontier.¹¹⁵ The communication format in each area fits in well with its particular archaeological situation and suggests one way in which the human topography could inform both worldview and news.