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News and Frontier Consciousness in the Late Roman Empire

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Published by University of Michigan Press

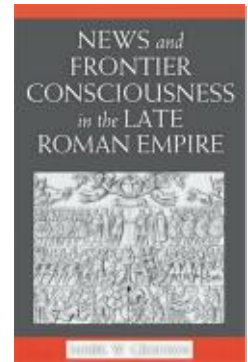
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University of Michigan Press, 2006.

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Divine Protection of Frontiers



The protection of martyrs secures this postern gate
The martyrs Clement and Vincentius guard this entrance
—Inscription from North Africa

Romans had long imagined that their frontiers were secured by supernatural forces. Like the Greeks before them, Romans had ascribed to various gods the protection of city walls as well as of the people as a whole. A worldview that attributes the divine maintenance of boundaries and frontiers is unmistakable in available sources. The protection of the world was basic to the cosmology of Late Antique peoples. In this vein, the emperor Julian writes glowing panegyric prose about how the “divine and wholly beautiful cosmos, from the highest vault of heaven to the lowest *eschates* of the earth, is held together by the continued providence of the gods.” His friend Libanius expresses a similar belief, arguing that the adoration of the gods will provide the ideal military defense, and that the communion of the Romans with the gods is the wall (*teichos*) of the Roman Empire.¹

The cosmologic continuity in this regard from the pagan past into the Christian era is pronounced. Many Christians of the late Empire, especially during the fifth century, began to imagine that God, along with a host of martyrs, defended cities at center and periphery alike. The gods’ protection of cities had become God’s protection of the *murus* of the empire, the frontier

imagined as a wall around it. The Christian belief that God rather than Terminus was the guardian of frontiers, far from supplanting the pagan belief, insured the direct continuity of such divine protection.

An episode recorded by Olympiodorus gives hints to a way a pagan mind imagined such divine protection. During the reign of Constantius III (early fifth century), a treasure was unearthed in Thrace. When the governor of Thrace, a certain Valerius, visited the area, he learned from the locals that it was a sacred site and that it contained statues consecrated by “an ancient rite.” After reporting to the emperor that the area contained “silver statues which had been consecrated to ward off barbarians,” Constantius gave Valerius permission to excavate them. He found three solid silver statues, in the form of bound barbarians, inclining toward the North,

that is toward the land of the barbarians. As soon as the statues were removed, a few days later the whole Gothic nation poured over Thrace and shortly afterwards the Huns and the Sarmatians were to invade Illyricum and Thrace also. For the site of the consecration lay between Thrace and Illyricum and to judge from the number of statues, they had been consecrated against the whole of barbarry.²

This brief episode shows the persistence of the memory, if not practice, of a pagan version of divine frontier protection. The locals were well aware of the sacredness of the site and of the presence of statues. Whether or not they knew that the sacred site was specifically dedicated to warding off of the barbarians is not clear from the passage, but the interpretation of the objects and subsequent historical analysis of Olympiodorus makes this certain once they were removed from the ground: they were placed in a liminal place as a way of warding off barbarians at the frontier. Olympiodorus imagines here the proverbial line separating Roman from barbarian, against which barbarians were constantly pressing.

The placement of the statues is crucial—between Thrace and Illyricum. The ceremony was carried out at the “frontier” between two provinces or regions of the Roman world. And yet, as Olympiodorus makes clear, their power was enough to solidify the frontier between the Roman Empire and *barbaricum*. The analogy between liminal sites is clear in the passage, again suggesting a persistence in the belief in the cosmic dimension of frontiers. The power of the sacred objects was not confined to any one frontier either, but was a general talisman against all barbarians. The type of ceremony described here parallels the Terminus cult, in which offerings to the gods would be placed in a hole. The site of the hole, once filled in, would then serve as the *terminus*,

generally between pieces of property. Such practices clearly were not forgotten in the late Empire.

Certainly Olympiodorus, himself a Neoplatonist pagan, was attuned to this type of story. His belief in the sacred power focused on these images is clearly strong since he argued that the removal of the statues was the reason that the barbarians were allowed, by the gods, to pour into Roman territory. Providing insight into a late Roman proliferation of popular belief, *superstitio*, Olympiodorus is not reporting this supernatural incident in Tacitean fashion (that is, “some people believe that . . .”) but rather as naturalistic historical causation. Olympiodorus is relating near-contemporary history, for he heard the story from the excavator himself, Valerius, the governor of Thrace. As with other historians of the later Empire, Olympiodorus is relaying news to his audience. He evidently still saw the power of pagan deities as maintaining Roman frontiers. At least, his audience would have understood this type of historical explanation. The transitions to explicitly Christian language in explaining the divine defense of frontiers need not distract us from the fact that Christians were very similar to pagans in the way they connected deity with the frontiers of empire.

Pagan notions of divine defense of cities continued into the Christian era as well. As late as 396, four years after Theodosius’ famous antipagan legislation, the traditional gods were invoked for protection. When Alaric and the Goths descended on Athens, the traditional deities Athena and Achilles were called on to save the city from destruction, according to the pagan Zosimus.³ Gradually the role of protector of cities would be transferred to martyrs and saints. Of particular note will be their special defense of frontier cities or fortresses, a vital function of defense that extended beyond just the city itself to the whole of the frontier.⁴ Libanius speaks of the need to restore frontier cities with strong language: it is more glorious than having “the fabric [*soma*] of the *oikoumene* . . . increased.”⁵

Saints and martyrs would assume a crucial role of frontier protection. Paulinus of Nola, for example, records how the translation of relics to Constantinople was a critical part of its defense.⁶ Fortresses with saints’ names were also fairly common in the eastern part of the empire.⁷ Theodoret of Cyrillus, writing in the early fifth century, clearly articulates the role of these saints and martyrs in defense:

The noble souls of the victorious traverse the heavens and join in the dance of the immaterial beings. Their bodies are not hidden away each in its single grave, but the cities and villages that have divided them among themselves call them saviors of souls and bodies and doctors

and honor them as protectors of cities and guardians and treat them as ambassadors before the master of the universe and through them receive divine gifts.⁸

Divine defense was a real and important part of the defense of the frontier, especially but not exclusively the eastern one. Theodoret further states that Nisibis was saved from the Persian armies at one point by the prayer of its bishop.⁹ The growth and proliferation of martyr and saint cults and the subsequent protection they afforded have been well traced now for parts of the eastern frontier. Examination of the role of divinity along the eastern frontier reveals very clearly that “divine defense went hand in hand with arms and walls, a fact often overlooked.”¹⁰ To what extent this notion of divine defense was altered, in substance and form, by the Christianization of the Roman Empire, or at least its visible Imperial manifestations, is often difficult to assess. Some continuity may be seen in a widespread pagan cult centered at important eastern cities such as Heliopolis, not far from the Euphrates.

Zosimus, as mentioned earlier, believed that Constantine’s failed frontier policy resulted from the anger of the gods. In placing the blame for the “present destruction of the empire” squarely on the shoulders of Constantine, Zosimus connects failed frontier policy to divine wrath. That anger encouraged the gods to weaken the frontier zones to allow for punishment of the Christian Romans who now controlled the empire and had forgotten the gods who had made it strong.¹¹

A Christian parallel to some of Zosimus’ basic images may be found in the writings of Orosius, a student of and at times dissenter from St. Augustine. Orosius sees God’s will in the placement and defense of the frontiers and also in the clear punishment of the Roman Empire in his own recent lifetime. God protected the frontiers, but he also removed that protection for his own divine purposes. Orosius describes, in language strangely reminiscent of that of Zosimus and Olympiodorus, the violation of Roman frontiers during the reign of Valens:

Suddenly, from all sides by the will of God, the peoples located on the boundaries of the Empire and left there for this purpose are loosed and, with the reins relaxed, rushed into the territory of the Romans.¹²

Orosius was writing near-contemporary history in this passage, and his account was as much a medium for relaying news as similar accounts by Ammianus were. Orosius is reporting on the situation to Christians, who were struggling to comprehend how God could allow such calamities, and to pagans, who

believed the blame belonged to the Christians who had thrown out the gods who once had made Rome strong. To Romans, pagan and Christian alike, divine force was in control of the placement and maintenance of frontiers.

Orosius' language here clearly depicts a definite frontier beyond which the hordes of barbarians were waiting. His language also recalls images from Olympiodorus—without divine protection of boundaries, the barbarians suddenly “pour” in. Although recent scholarship no longer paints a picture of hairy, uncouth barbarians itching for their chance to pour over the borders, what matters here is how Romans of the time viewed this incursion. Their lives were structured by their beliefs and by their basic worldview.

Christians at the peripheries in Late Antiquity became acutely aware of, or at least more expressive about, the role of frontier cities in the defense of the Empire. Especially through the martyr literature and other ecclesiastical writings from the eastern frontier, they expressed their need for divine protection. James of Edessa, for example, records how the “festival of the holy martyrs is the joy and pleasure of all churches, a strong wall for all the inhabited earth, and the victory of kings, and the glory of priests.”¹³ Coming from Edessa, a crucial site for communication and transportation at the eastern frontier, James clearly would have been aware of the need for divine protection there. Like Ammianus and others, he uses the metaphor of a wall to communicate his perceptions of frontiers in the East. Theodoret of Cyrrhus wrote that feasts to saints—some of them frontier saints—had replaced the old festivals in frontier areas. Mayerqat, near the Tigris River, would become filled with relics and renamed Martyropolis, as the cult of frontier saints became more pronounced there. And Resafa, an important eastern monitoring station near the Euphrates, saw the growth of the martyr cult focused on divine defense.¹⁴

Theodoret of Cyrrhus, comparing in the fifth century the pagan past to the new Christian era, “proclaimed that the old festivals had been superseded by feasts in honor of Peter, Paul, and a company of Syrian martyrs, Thomas of Edessa, Sergius of Resafa, Marcellinus, Antoninus, Mauricius of Apamea, Leontius of Tripoli.” Dara, near Nisibis, was fortified both with walls and with the relics of St. Bartholemew.¹⁵ During fortification of this frontier city in the fifth century, St. Bartholemew had come to the emperor Anastasius in a dream, “offering to protect the city.” His relics were deposited in a church there and were thought to protect the frontier city.¹⁶ John Lydus would write of this protection of Dara: “[U]nless God by [Anastasius'] hand had heavily fortified it at the throats of the Persians, long ago the Persians would have seized the domains of the Romans inasmuch as these are adjacent to them.”¹⁷ On another section of the eastern frontier, the martyr cult was centered on the shrines of St. Sergius and St. Bacchus. These two Roman soldiers had

been sent as punishment for conversion to Christianity to the empire's edge, "in the frontier zones near where the race of the Saracen dwells."¹⁸ Their martyrdom at the peripheries of the empire during the Great Persecution gave rise to the martyr cult, which to Romans naturally became connected to frontier protection.

One particular reference from North Africa shows a similar dynamic at work there. An inscription from Calama commemorates the work of humans, saintly and secular.

Twelve and one towers altogether rose up in a row;
 It seems a work of wonder, constructed so swiftly.
 The postern gate behind the baths is fastened with iron.
 No enemy could raise a hand against it.
 No one could take by storm the work of Patricius Solomon.
 The protection of martyrs secures this postern gate.
 The martyrs Clement and Vincentius guard this entrance.¹⁹

The Solomon mentioned is Belisarius' commander, a fortifier of the North African frontier. His efforts to secure this North African stronghold were bolstered by the martyrs, who thereby imparted saintly and divine power to the establishment of this frontier. Here, as elsewhere, the saints work as God's agents in protecting frontiers.