News and Frontier Consciousness in the Late Roman Empire

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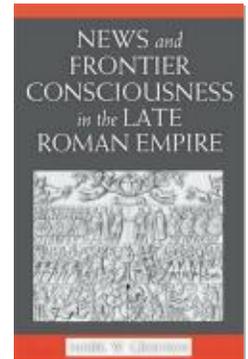➡ For additional information about this book

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Getting the Word Around

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> The roads are reopened. . . . [T]he traveling stations and inns revived and they are again reinforced with their old ease: the entire empire shares the same breath and the same feeling like a single organism and is no longer split in two and pulled apart everywhere.
>
> —Themistius, *Oration* 16.212

These words, delivered in 382, described one aspect of Roman recovery after the infamous Battle of Adrianople in 378. A true sign of recovery was the restoration of communication.[1] Communication held the empire together, as Themistius expresses in evocative organic terms. The loss of these communication avenues, often taken for granted by any people who enjoy such a vast network, was seen as disastrous to the empire itself and to its people. Loss, in fact, often makes one eloquent about structures that ordinarily go unmentioned. Such moments can be helpful in revealing the ideological context of Roman communication.

Whenever the sharing of news involved human contact, *pace Fama et portenta,* it traveled through a massive and diffused human network often appearing only implicitly in the sources.[2] The Romans are famous for imposing their will on a wide and varied landscape by their constructing and maintaining of that context to meet their administrative and other needs. Since the spreading and sharing of news is a "process fundamental to all societies,"[3] it is useful to trace the context within which it moved in a Roman setting.

Holding together a vast empire presumed a system within which information could move as quickly and efficiently as possible. Crucial here is both the intentional construction of that system and the unintentional result that news moved about freely, keeping a wide variety of people informed. Themistius gives glimpses of this dynamic and hints at the role that news could play in the life of the Roman Empire at large. Roman highways, like our own interstate highways, were designed first of all for the movement of troops and military equipment. But also like our own highways, such avenues of communication served a wide range of additional purposes.

In her analysis of news in the Greek polis, S. Lewis contrasts at a critical level the role of news in the Greek and Roman worlds. In the Greek world of the fifth and fourth centuries B.C., she argues, "news for news' sake . . . was entirely absent from communication between ancient *poleis*. Individual citizens exhibited a great appetite for news, but the regular and official passage of news between *poleis* was entirely absent."[4] In the Roman world, however, she suggests that the same was not true because Romans developed road networks and institutions that allowed for the conception of the Empire as a unity. It was not until the emergence of the Roman Empire, in fact, that the Greek *poleis* collectively saw themselves as parts of a single unity. The structure of news institutions in the Empire demonstrates the ideology of unity, holding, at some level, the Empire together and serving to facilitate the modes of communication explored earlier.

Roads

Communication of any kind from frontier regions or even within the Empire presumed the existence of roads, and passable ones.[5] When Libanius remarks that Julian sent him a last letter from the frontier after which Libanius had to speculate about his doings, the implication is that news could no longer be regular because the Roman road system had ended at the frontier. There were "no messengers to tell us," but "we rejoiced as if we saw them."[6] This is not to say that the road suddenly stopped at some arbitrary point. It clearly did not. Rather, it suggests a limit to Roman maintenance of the road and says something about the activity of letter carriers and free movement of peoples and hence the movement of news in such areas.[7] The initial meaning of *limes* as a road that penetrated into enemy territory preserves the sense of making an inroad into foreign territory. Later, *limes* came to refer to a series of roads that seemed to mark the boundary of empire itself.[8]

The role of roads in the "*limes* debate" is well known and shows the difficulty of interpreting the primary functions of frontier roads. At issue is

whether *limes* roads were intended primarily for the sake of communication or to separate empires or peoples. All agree, obviously, that roads at frontiers served a crucial supply and communication function. Isaac and others have suggested that often "*limes*" means only a garrisoned road in a frontier zone rather than a boundary or barrier.[9] In fact, Isaac claims, *limes* roads, like rivers, served to enhance travel and communication between the Roman Empire and the Persian Empire, or *barbaricum*, rather than to demarcate or separate space. The actual role of roads as necessary ingredients in the spread of information, particularly about frontiers, has been analyzed less.

Anatolia and points eastward had an excellent and reliable system of communication maintained into the later Roman Empire, much of which we learn about for the later period in the writings of the church fathers. Roads to the active eastern frontier, in particular, were especially important and well maintained. The location and importance of various roads throughout Asia Minor have been well explored through studies both of the roads themselves and of the milestones found along them.[10]

One of the results of having roads in an area is that they facilitated what A. D. Lee calls the "imageability" of a region.[11] Imageability served as a form of background knowledge against which information proliferated and suggests the role that roads themselves played in shaping a Roman worldview. The ability to imagine a region requires that communication move from it in sufficient quantity and verifiable quality. Regions not traversed by roads could not, in fact, be well imagined by the Roman mind, because information could not move quickly or effectively across them.

Although the general trend in Late Antiquity was toward ruralization, the fourth century saw a growth in the status of those cities of Asia lying along the roads connecting Constantinople and the eastern frontier. C. S. Lightfoot sees this growth as consequent to the creation of the "New Rome" and traces its effects on sites such as Amorium, located on one such major route.[12] The connection of these cities to the eastern frontier was facilitated by the continued and essential maintenance of the roads.

That roads connected the frontier of the empire to points inland is made clear both by archaeological work and by written sources. For Late Antiquity, one of the crucial written sources, again, is the *Itinerarium* of Egeria. Her account indicates that persons of Late Antiquity imagined a fairly clear frontier line along the roads that led into the Persian Empire. Her detailed descriptions reveal stops along the way as well as the extent to which certain areas were guarded by imperial troops.

The difficulties of passing into Persian territory are further illustrated by a highly hyperbolic passage in a letter by St. Basil in 357. Trying to convey the

difficulties he would surmount in order to be with his friend, an itinerant philosopher named Eustathius, Basil presents himself advancing into and even beyond Persia.

> Nay, so love-sick was I that I was compelled either to take the road to Persia and go with you as you advanced to the uttermost limit [*mekiston*] of the land of the barbarians—for indeed you even went thither, so obstinate was the demon who kept us apart . . . for if I had not grown weary of following you as a lamb follows the shepherd's staff held out before it, I really think that you would have driven on and on even beyond the Indian Nyssa, or, if there is an uttermost spot [*eschaton*] of our world, that you would have wandered even there.[13]

That it was even a metaphorical option to walk into the land of the Persians suggests that active roads connected the two empires and information and news could travel along those routes. And the juxtaposition of two words for outermost limits shows the necessity of distinguishing the boundary of both empires with the somewhat extreme image of the boundary even beyond the Persian Empire itself.

St. John Chrysostom describes in more detail the journey to Babylon, mentioning paved roads, regular road stations, towns, and villas along the way.[14] Ammianus records that when a certain Ursicinus was called to travel from Nisibis westward, he encountered "abundant transportation facilities" for his trip to Milan.[15] Although it is fairly certain that he got most of the information from archives, Eusebius records in some detail the roads and features of Roman Palestine, Arabia, and Syria, attesting to an active and well-maintained road system up to the Roman frontiers in some of these areas.[16] So, roads connected the frontiers to interior regions, although it was not always easy or convenient to travel past their limits, which often were marked out by guard posts.

Information coming from or going to peripheral areas relied on these road networks and, of course, persons traveling on them to reach more central locations. The absence of such roads could prevent a flow of information and thereby keep certain regions out of the news circuit. Basil would write to Euphronius, bishop of Colonia in Armenia,

> Because Colonia, which the Lord has handed over to you for guidance, has been settled far from the highway, frequently even if we write to the other brothers in Lesser Armenia, we hesitate to send a letter to your Reverence, since we do not suppose that there is any carrier going that far.[17]

The implication, of course, is that news of any kind would not be able to reach this area often, even if it originated relatively close by. Such areas may be presumed, to follow K. Lynch's/Lee's "imageability theory," to have been cut off from the rest of the Empire for certain periods.

Even when roads did connect more and less peripheral areas, news flow was restricted in certain seasons. St. Basil records that the road between Cappadocia and Rome was entirely impassable in the winter[18]—that, coupled with the presence of enemies along the road, made it necessary to travel by sea, a concession for Romans of this period.[19] One especially harsh winter (374–75) saw the roads closed until Easter and, according to Basil, there was no one in Cappadocia with the courage to face the difficulties of the journey. Basil complains that the clergy in his area had taken up sedentary crafts and did not go abroad in the winter—so the letters pile up. Basil also notes a general lack of traffic, not necessarily seasonally related, that could stop the flow of news to his area at unexpected intervals.[20]

The danger of travel during invasions made news flow particularly erratic. St. Basil writes of communication problems during the Gothic revolt of 378: "Because I have heard that all the roads are filled with brigands and deserters, I was afraid to entrust something into the hands of our brother lest I should become complicit in his death too."[21]

Ancyra as a Case Study

One way of assessing the significance of news along the roads of the later Empire is to analyze the importance of certain nodal points of communication and the role they played. Ancyra is a prime example of one such place. Hardly a world-class Roman city, Ancyra shows the taken-for-grantedness of news and communication centers. Its actual importance, only implicit in the sources, is a testimony to the unheralded and tacit significance of news. Its rise in status in the later Roman Empire further underscores the growing importance of news from and about the frontiers during this period.[22] Culturally, it always lagged behind the upper tier of cities of the Roman East, such as Athens, Antioch, Alexandria, and Constantinople. And yet some extremely important and newsworthy events took place here.

At Ancyra, seven roads converged, more than for any other city in Anatolia and more than almost any other city except Rome. Of the four major communication routes through Anatolia, Ancyra is central to three.[23] In the words of D. French, Ancyra was thus important as a communication center, a "nodal point of a road network designed for a static frontier."[24] Clues to its importance come from a wide variety of sources. Ancyra is one of only

six fortified cities presented on the *Tabula Peutingeriana*, suggesting an unexpected level of importance.[25] Conversely, it did not get a personification on the *Tabula*, as did Antioch, Rome, and Constantinople, suggesting that as a symbolic or cultural center it did not loom very large. In fact, it does not even have its name on the *Tabula Peutingeriana*, a fact that caused S. Mitchell to note its "unrecognized potential."[26]

Anatolian road networks were crucial for communication between the eastern periphery and sites inward. As throughout most of antiquity, Anatolia was the great highway of major armies. Much earlier, Herodotus had recorded how the Persians had worked out a very sophisticated system of roads with lodging houses and stations throughout the peninsula.[27] Ancyra became, in the later Empire, the central node of the ancient network of roads throughout this highway peninsula.

Sources from the crucial years of the later fourth century give hints of the importance of Ancyra. It seems that Ancyra was specifically chosen as a site for newsworthy events. The first general synod after Constantine's conversion was held here in 314, probably because of the road networks, which provided easy access. According to one account, it was also Constantine's choice as the site for the council, which, due to extenuating circumstances, met at Nicaea instead in 325.[28] The importance of Ancyra may also be seen in the fact that emperors on eastern campaigns usually stopped here to conduct important business. Their very arrival in places like Ancyra would be a media event in and of itself, proclaiming that something of importance was pending on the eastern frontier and giving rise to intense proliferation of news and/or speculation. Constantius II stopped here to great acclaim on his eastern campaign; Themistius, in fact, delivered his first oration here during Constantius' visit.[29] Julian visited here on his way to the eastern frontier and held court before proceeding "by usual roads" to Antioch.[30]

It was probably Julian who left a memorial here in the form of a large column that stands today in downtown Ancyra (usually with a stork's nest on top). It seems that Julian was very concerned about spreading news about his campaign. Incidentally, and appropriately, Julian passed legislation concerning the *cursus publicus* during his stay here.[31] An inscription praising Julian as the "lord of the whole earth," from the Ocean to the Tigris, was erected in Ancyra to proclaim news of the emperor's campaign.[32] When Julian departed for his ill-fated eastern campaign, he left Valentinian in Ancyra "to follow later according to orders." Such a placement assumes that Ancyra was excellently located for getting the news quickly to him and for allowing him to follow along or take other appropriate action at a moment's notice. In this light, the strategic importance of Ancyra is fairly obvious.

Fig. 9. Column of Julian at Ancyra.

Jovian and his son, Varronianus, assumed the consulship at Ancyra after Jovian had marched back from Persian territory following his disastrous campaign. After Jovian's death, Valentinian, still waiting at Ancyra, was chosen emperor at Bithynia, near the site of Jovian's death. Valentinian was informed there of his rise to the purple very quickly, Ammianus notes. Finally, Valens heard of eastern forces arriving after he returned to Ancyra by rapid march. During the contentions between the usurper Procopius and Valens in 365, Valens had proceeded by "rapid march to Ancyra," just the type of place where he himself could gather and spread news to combat the claims of Procopius. By using news networks effectively, Ammianus implies, Procopius had just saved himself from possible destruction.[33] In the battles over the throne, places like Ancyra were helpful for diffusing news quickly and effectively. All of these examples show the potential of such sites as news centers.

The fact that these highly newsworthy events occurred at Ancyra suggests that the participants could have news of their doings proclaimed widely throughout an information network of which Ancyra was the center for Anatolia if not the whole East. No other city in Asia was so poised for handling news and information. Later, when Justinian significantly decreased the public post, he actually repaired the highway linking Ancyra with the eastern frontier.[34]

Ancyra did not produce literary luminaries of the likes of Libanius and Ammianus. It could not boast an important philosophical school. In fact, Ancyran students who wanted a first-rate education went to Athens or Antioch. At Antioch in particular, an overflow of rhetoric would praise that city and all that went on there. Thus we have an abundance of information on the happenings of the city, much of it flowing from the stylus or golden tongue of Libanius.[35] Antioch is usually accorded the status of the "city from which the defense of the Eastern Empire was organized."[36] But when viewed from a communication standpoint, the comparative status of Ancyra rises considerably.[37] It was certainly important for more reasons than the fact that, as the *Expositio Totius Mundi* baldly states, "its inhabitants eat the best and finest bread."[38]

Ancyra serves to remind us of the importance of news and yet also the way it was taken for granted and so rarely recorded. Ancyra's importance, it seems, arose from its position at so many major road intersections and by its consequent connection to crucial news from the eastern frontier. The case of Ancyra suggests something of an inverse to Lynch's/Lee's "imageability theory"—the greater number of roads converging on a city, the more important that city was for imagining the outside world, especially if those roads connected to frontiers.

Imperial Post

The *cursus publicus,* set up by Augustus, was one of many innovations that made the maintenance of such a widespread Empire possible. Our most explicit piece of information about the Imperial post, however, comes from sixth-century Byzantium, although it purports to summarize earlier conditions. Procopius here blasts Justinian for damaging the welfare of the state:

> The Roman emperors of earlier days took precautions to ensure that everything should be reported to them instantly. . . . Secondly, they were anxious that those who conveyed the yearly revenue to the capital should arrive there safely without delay or danger. With these two objects in view they organized a speedy postal service in all directions. The method was this. Within the distance that a man lightly equipped might be expected to cover in a day they established stations, on some roads eight, on others fewer, but very rarely less than five. As many as forty horses stood ready at each station, and grooms corresponding to the number of horses were installed at every station. Always as they rode the professional couriers changed their horses—which were most carefully chosen—at frequent intervals; and covering, if occasion required, a ten days journey in a single day, they performed all the services I have just described.

Although the point of this passage is to show how Justinian damaged the whole postal system, Procopius gives us insight into how it had functioned ideally in past times. Although Justinian "allowed for postal service to continue" on "the road leading to Persia," he drastically decreased the number and quality of the stations along the way. The result, Procopius goes on to relate in the passage, "has been that events happening in any region are reported with difficulty, too late to be of any use and long after they happened, so that naturally no useful action can be taken."[39] Although constructed for official strategic reasons, the post played a role in disseminating news more widely.

Late Roman references to this system in use appear in a variety of sources. An organized corps of *agentes-in-rebus* is first attested in 319, although some think that it arose during the tetrarchy to replace the *frumentarii,* who had become disliked by provincials.[40] Libanius kept up on news of Julian through functionaries of the imperial post. As noted earlier, Libanius was very interested in passing along this type of information in public oration. He records that rumor continues to inform him, and yet he still could keep up on some news about Julian through "the men who spend their lives on the flying camels—for

may their speed be honored by the title of 'wings.'" Libanius mentions one such *agens-in-rebus*, Aristophanes, who "traversed the world on horseback" and from whom "no information that required prompt delivery ever came slowly."[41]

Couriers, *frumentarii*, and *agentes-in-rebus* regularly appear as bearers of information, although it remains uncertain how much of their actual reports would have been classified as news. They were generally special agents of the emperor, and at times it is said they were even hated by the general populace, who gave them names such as *curiosi* on account of their ostensible nosiness.[42] With such a reputation and the importance of the speed of their missions, it is doubtful that couriers mingled with the public much or announced news from the frontier. Yet their very presence would have aroused curiosity and rumor. Seeing men on "flying camels" rushing through town would give rise to speculation, especially in civic centers.

Officially, only persons with a warrant (*evictio*) for official government business issued by the governor or emperor were permitted to use the lodging and stable facilities of the *cursus publicus*, although the road itself could not be so restricted. However, during the later Empire, wealthy persons and those with connections to officials readily received *evictiones* for private travel without much trouble. The repeated prohibitions of personal travel on the *cursus* suggest that the rule was broken continually and that private persons continued to use it. Bishops as well were permitted to use the post to attend councils or to conduct other ecclesiastical business. The pilgrim Melania the Younger was allowed to use the *cursus publicus*, as well, on her trip eastward in 436.[43] It appears that she was able to get a pass on the road because of a connection with her uncle, summoned to Constantinople. Even when *evictiones* could not be given, travelers could still wait in line, so to speak, behind official travelers for lodging and for animals.[44]

Markets and Fairs

The importance of markets, fairs, and festivals as points of communication is as certain for the ancient world as for the contemporary age. Here, people from dispersed communities would gather, trade, mingle, and share news. These gatherings consisted of a few different types—annual, occasional, or periodic events.[45] A study of fairs in preindustrial societies notes that possibly the most important noneconomic function of fairs is communication:

> the assemblage of such relatively large groupings of population make the market-place one of the most important nodes in the communication network of a peasant society. . . . The presence of professional

traders traveling constantly from market to market in a circuit of market towns bring the latest information to each of the market-places.[46]

Generally, our knowledge of the ancient fairs comes only from literary sources, since fairs were periodical events that did not leave permanent structures. But Mitchell proposes that the circulation patterns of civic bronze coins might also show market patterns.[47] Often markets could attract people from far distances, giving news a chance to enter local communities. Menander Rhetor, in a late-third-century treatise on epideictic oratory, "judges a festival on the number and status of visitors, as well as distances traveled by them." Theodoret of Cyrrhus writes circa 440 of a fair in a town of Cilicia (Aegae) that attracted "a large number of merchants from the West." At this same site, a pilgrim's guidebook from the sixth century records a period of "tax-free trade for forty days."[48] Such long-distance trade was a crucial means for spreading information around.

The importance of fairs for disseminating frontier information comes across in the number of fairs located in or near Roman frontier regions. The description of Nisibis and Edessa in the *Expositio Totius Mundi* singles out Roman/Persian trade as the fairs' most distinguished characteristic.[49] The purpose of the fairs at these locations was to facilitate trade with foreign merchants. But in the process, Romans from more central regions, such as the traders from western provinces, would have been exposed to frontier life and peoples. But the information function was a double-edged sword. These fairs long were seen as potential points for passage of sensitive information between the Romans and their adversaries as well. The suspicion of merchants as spies is something of a commonplace in the sources. Procopius continues a long tradition when he records that merchants were seen as potential spies, guides, and envoys.[50] After Galerius' defeat of the Persians in 298, one of the treaty stipulations was that all trade became restricted to Nisibis as an obligatory "trading post." But to what was this restriction responding?[51] Legislation from a century later gives perhaps some hints. It seems that a tense situation along the eastern frontier caused the tightening of control on traveling merchants on the grounds that they could sometimes pass along too much news. In 408–9, legislation was passed for controlling sensitive information near the frontier zone:

Merchants subject to our power or that of the King of Persia's should not hold fairs [*nundinas exercere*] beyond those places which we agreed upon . . . lest the secrets of another kingdom be probed into contrary to agreement.[52]

The places "agreed upon" usually are interpreted as the fairs at the border towns of Nisibis, Callinicum, and Artaxata.[53] Although the actual meaning of the passage has been debated, it does underscore the potential of information gathering and dissemination concurrent with trading—and, all would agree, the fair provided an excellent context for that.

The most important of these centers was Nisibis, which explains the restriction of all trade to this city in 298; it remained an important channel of trade and information until its inglorious delivery into Persian hands in 363. After 363, Nisibis continued to be a potential trading center, as we see from the statutes of the school of Nisibis. These forbade inhabitants from going into Roman territory to buy or sell.[54]

Other trade centers included Batnae, very close to the Euphrates, which Ammianus describes as trading in products in great abundance even from as far away as India and China. At its yearly festival in September, "a great crowd of every condition gathers for the fair." These fairs had a strong military presence to keep the peace and to keep an eye on a place of intense information exchange and the ubiquitous possibility of espionage. The Amida fair, near the Tigris River, was also a site of exchange of goods and news. We catch a glimpse of this fair because of an incidental reference in Ammianus. The annual fair was being held here at the time of a Persian attack, and so Ammianus mentions it, explaining that there was a "throng of country folk in addition to the foreign traders here at the time.[55] Procopius describes another frontier market near Erzerum and located right on the Roman-Persian frontier. Locals traded here and even crossed the frontiers to help in each others' fields, Roman and non-Roman.[56]

The importance of fairs as "nodal points" of communication is clear in some North African evidence as well. In the late fourth century an anti-Donatist writes how Donatists were using the medium of fairs to spread their message—they were sending "criers [*praecones*] to all nearby places and to the markets [*nundinae*]."[57] In North Africa, as in the East, fairs provided a milieu for spreading information widely, quickly, and effectively in a way not possible just within local communities. Other references point to how the rural markets of southern Numidia served as effective sites from which to rally support for various religious causes as well.[58] In North Africa, the information diffusion function was specifically a method whereby rural areas were brought into contact with the rest of the Roman world.[59] Lacking frontier cities as such, rural Romans and confederated non-Romans relied on these fairs for news of the outside world.

The *Tabula Peutingeriana* also refers to a frontier fair. Near an indication of what some consider the eastern frontier of the Empire (*fines Romanorum*),

and *fines exercitus Syriaticae*, the words *commercium barbarorum* appear, designating a frontier fair here between Romans and Persians. We also know of a customs officer nearby at Zeugma.[60] Such customs posts were also present in North Africa.[61]

Functioning in a similar way to these markets were athletic contests, although their role is probably in decline in the period here. L. Casson notes that one of the things that made travelers of an unprecedented number of Romans of the first three centuries A.D. was the games that "drew spectators from everywhere."[62] Their function in integrating rural folk in particular into Roman civic and communication networks is elusive but is just beginning to get some attention from historians of the games.[63]

Urbanization

M. Kearney, in his many recent studies of worldview, notes that mental conceptions of geographic space and the cosmos are shaped by such tangible factors as settlement patterns, mobility, and means of communication.[64] As a human structure, demographics shaped the rate and speed of news flow. Urbanization as a phenomenon in Late Antiquity has been getting increased attention lately, especially with the expansion of the archaeological record for this period. Urbanization forms part of the demographic context of news travel from and to the frontier. As with roads, as Lee has pointed out, the presence of cities in a region likewise facilitated their "imageability" in the Roman mind.[65] Part of this imageability was related to the fact that cities also allowed for wider and quicker diffusion of news. Like roads, cities were thus essential to the workings of empire. The cities on the eastern frontier, especially through the increased diffusion of information from and about them, enhanced the imageability of the eastern frontier in a way not possible with the North African.

Lee further analyzes the relationship between dynamic news flow and settlement density with reference to a disease model, which appears to work fairly well. In the work *Germs and Ideas: Routes of Epidemics and Ideologies*, A. Siegfried argues that germs need urban centers to spread, just as ideas do.[66] Just as the spread of disease generally assumes some type of human contact, and the more intense the contact in cities, the more widespread the disease will be, so can it be said about the spread of news. The more urbanized a region, the more profound would be the news flow; the more rural, the less so.

Such broad generalizations demand some explanation. The terms *urban* and *rural* are not easy to pin down, nor are they static. And observations about the urbanness or rurality of certain areas usually are not standard. An

overview of what is meant by urban for the Republic and earlier Roman Empire, for instance, would simply not do for the later Empire. And it is very difficult not to impose modern assumptions about rurality and urbanity onto the ancient world.[67] To begin with, urban and rural were never completely separate entities, especially for the later Roman Empire. The later Empire was, in general, more rural than the earlier. For all stages of the Empire, however, our choice of terms and perspectives is often all that separates the city from the countryside.

From an economic perspective, for instance, the city usually cannot be separated from the countryside. As A. H. M. Jones put it in his monumental work on the period, "the great majority of the cities were, however, essentially rural. They drew the greater part of their wealth from agriculture, and their urban centres were of minor economic importance."[68] Likewise, the countryside could depend on the city and its markets for a livelihood.

Socially, demographically, and administratively, however, there could be vast distances between a city and a countryside.[69] Certain types of buildings, landscapes, and administrative statuses were the distinguishing features of cities and towns and defined a specific type of civic culture, whereas their absence designated countrysides.[70] The countrysides, most beginning just outside of a city, contained over 80 percent of the population at the height of the Empire, working in agricultural settings. For the later periods the percentage gets even higher.[71]

If the presence of cities does indeed facilitate the imageability of regions, then the eastern frontier would have been much easier to imagine than the North African. The mythological descriptions of the African frontier and its peoples are a testimony to the lack of news coming from there and the lack of imageability. The cities of the East "on our frontier" and "facing the barbarians" were seen as forming a bulwark against the Persians as well as marking the boundary of empire itself in some places. The defense of these cities, Libanius writes, is of utmost importance in guarding the East. In another passage, Julian orders his men to take twenty days' rations with them, "that being the distance to the fine city [Bezabde] that marks the boundary of the Roman Empire." Libanius writes how these frontier cities were seen as crucial to the "fabric of the world" itself and that their wasting is a disgrace: "news of a city not retaken would make our people despondent and paralyze them."[72] News from such areas was crucial to Romans.

North Africa did not have such cities occupying strategic sites on the frontier that could act as major communication nodes. There, the keys to controlling surrounding territory were series of fortlets.[73] Since probably only military personnel would have frequented these fortlets near the edges of the

Sahara, little if any news would have proliferated from and about these areas. The relative absence of references to the North African frontier in late Roman sources can be understood in the context of this lack of news flow and lack of urbanization.

Ecclesiastical Contexts

During the fourth and fifth centuries, monasteries, church complexes, and holy sites began to spring up with more frequency. These complexes could take on the appearance of small towns and served to facilitate the contact of peoples from all around them, especially at major church festivals, which could attract crowds of pilgrims from far and wide.[74] In some cases, these sites provided a framework for the spread of information in rural eastern areas. In this way, ecclesiastical networks provided a more rigorous and unifying interchange of information than seen before in the Roman world, replacing, it seems, a similar role played by the gatherings at athletic contests in the first three centuries. And they especially complemented the communication network of cities that did exist along the eastern frontier.[75]

Their importance in an ancient context is clear in that "in all accounts of ancient travel religion is accorded the largest role as a motive for travel, even among the poor."[76] Christianity did not initiate pilgrimage, but it did focus it on points east and it did diversify the travelers. With the growth in eastern pilgrimage during the fourth century, the role of monasteries as lodging houses became that much more important.[77] Drawn primarily by the associations of charismatic power, the number of pilgrims expanded enormously during the fourth century.[78] Often, monasteries sprang up near roads so that they could supply travelers, thus also serving as an excellent context for news exchange.[79] The monasteries on or near the eastern frontier tended to be located by east-west roads, specifically for the purpose of provisioning and servicing travelers in these regions.[80] The ones located near the frontiers became centers of refuge during border conflicts.[81]

The *Itineraria* of Egeria presents some of these characteristics of monasteries. Throughout her journey, she records how she was the beneficiary of the hospitality of monks in monasteries or church complexes. In these venues she hears about current situations along the eastern frontier. Although she also stays at *mansiones* and inns as well, she often mentions staying in monastic houses. And although her interest is more in the biblical geography of the regions to which she travels, she also records enough contemporary circumstances to suggest that she is sharing news with the locals and with the monks, and vice versa. Having heard of the holy reputation of the monks of

Mesopotamia, for example, "long before she got there," she is eager to mingle with those monks. She happens to arrive at Carrhae on a feast day on which the monks have gathered from far and wide. She finds that they all live on the outskirts of the cities of Mesopotamia. At Carrhae itself she records that there were no Christians. The feast day pulls together all the monks from Mesopotamia, she assures us; even the far-scattered ascetics, "the great monks," came to town on such days. Such gatherings held much potential for intense news and information exchange, and Egeria was clearly informed thereby.[82]

The monastery of St. Theodore of Sykeon, located right near an Imperial post road, became a crucial stop-off point for eastern travelers.[83] Carrying on something of a family tradition—minus the preconversion prostitution by his mother and sister—St. Theodore welcomed pilgrims and others into his monastery.[84] The descriptions in his *Life* give a good sense of travel in central Anatolia toward the end of Antiquity.

As places of congregation and lodging, monasteries became ideal for the spread of information. Letters could be passed from monastery to monastery, as is readily seen in the letters of Basil the Great and Gregory of Nazianzus. And monks passed from monastery to monastery or to churches, keeping up a lively information connection, albeit often centered on doctrinal controversies. Lodging areas could also spring up around holy men, as one did for Daniel the Stylite, whom the Emperor Leo (r. 457–74), with some effort, persuaded to provide lodging for brothers and strangers.[85]

The potential for news spreading at such locales is clear in a passage just before this one in which the emperor, having heard of insurrections in the East, went to Daniel the Stylite for advice. The emperor, the *Life* records, told Daniel of all the problems in the East; Daniel then gave much advice, as the source specifically records, in the presence of the emperor and all who were with him. The next book records how the emperor, having heard of a Vandal plot to attack, also informed Daniel and sent for his advice.[86] All of these episodes show the potential of the holy man and the holy site as a way to draw and diffuse news. Disaster news especially demanded the aid of a holy man.

The sites of some monasteries have been excavated, but too few yet to generalize about information networks. One of the difficulties of assessing the archaeological survey of eastern sites is distinguishing between forts and monasteries. Monasteries could be heavily fortified, as for example the basilical church near Seleucia connected with the cult of St. Thecla.[87] Egeria describes it thus:

> There are many cells all over the hill, and in the middle there is a large wall which encloses the church where the shrine is. It is a very beautiful shrine. The wall is set there to guard against the Isaurians, who

are evil men, who frequently rob and who might try to do something
against the monastery which is established there.[88]

Abandoned forts, especially near the eastern frontier, could be reestablished
as monasteries, as S. Gregory claims, because the internal architecture would
be similar.[89] Such fort buildings would meet the two paradoxical criteria for
many types of monasteries in the East. First, they were to be found "on the
outskirts of the world," separated from the world, especially the civic world
of the Empire. As St. Basil exults, "we have quietude on the outskirts of the
world, so that we may speak with God himself who provided it for us."[90] Sec-
ond, monasteries tended to be near roads so they could be of service to travel-
ers, especially traveling churchmen and -women.[91] Forts and fortlets could
meet both of these criteria. Archaeology has unearthed only a small number
of these monasteries, so, as Mitchell warns, it is dangerous to generalize about
them as a system,[92] but it is clear that they began to serve as an important
network of communication.

With the change in culture concurrent with Christianity, the character
of information as well as the context for carrying it underwent some signifi-
cant changes. Networks of bishops and other church officials existed well be-
fore Constantine, but their role came to be much more important with the
Christianization of the Empire. The change to a church-centered information
network altered the content and character of information flow in addition to
providing new opportunities. And information about frontiers was to be put
to new uses.

As early as St. Cyprian in North Africa (mid-third century), we can iden-
tify important conduits of information along the channels set by church orga-
nization and hierarchy. Such growth is a remarkable accomplishment, seeing
that it occurred even before bishops were granted access to the *cursus publicus*.
Cyprian's intelligence-gathering mechanism was superb, as can be seen in the
types of information available to him—and not just church related. At one
point, for example, he appears to have known of Valerian's orders even before
the provincial governor.[93] Valerian had issued his commands from the Danube
frontier while campaigning against the Goths.

After Constantine, the already-established networks take on more official
functions. The letters of church fathers demonstrate the importance of this
system of communication. St. Basil the Great sheds much light on letter car-
riers and networks among church officials—he also gives valuable insight into
the limitations of the system. Traveling clerics were expected to deliver news
of church controversies and councils as well as other human-interest events
of the time. The number of times Basil refers to letter carriers is instructive,

as are his references to the gaps in the system. In a letter to Amphilochius, bishop of Iconium, Basil writes, "but it is impossible for me to write because of the lack of persons traveling from here to your country."[94] The exchange of information presumed the existence of already-functioning channels. And the number of extant letters suggests a vibrant and active exchange of information. For all of Basil's complaints about problems in the system, we can probably conclude that he at least had in his mind an efficient and well-working system. Basil thought that the clerics should be available to spread news, whether by word of mouth or otherwise. The fact that he complains that they are not fulfilling such duties suggests that it was expected that the church should spread information.

Epilogue: Romanization and the Triumph of the Frontier

With the expansion and proliferation of news from the frontiers in the later Roman Empire, it is hardly surprising that the sources begin gradually to present a clearer picture of the late Roman view of their frontiers. Indeed, media suggest that there was something beyond Roman *limites,* foreign territory and not just peoples. The ideology of *imperium sine fine* continues in rhetorical texts, as expected. But by the fourth century, the very concept of frontiers had changed, due in part to the expanded proliferation of news in an environment long provided by the Roman administrative machinery. The message received in part from that bureaucracy often was not necessarily exactly that sent out by the Roman propaganda machine. At times, it was more; at times, less. Certainly "it was largely thanks to the Roman government that the vast majority of the population of the Mediterranean world received information about their world" with better "quantity and quality than it ever had before, or would again before the dawn of the modern era."[95] But to square equally the intentionality of the Roman government with the news the Roman public received denies Roman individuals a great deal of agency. The Romans were not merely passive to the dissemination of Roman news along with concurrent ideology and value systems. I am not imagining here the manufacturing of consent as a means of consensus building by the imperial regime. Propaganda can be packaged and distributed; rumor cannot. Various informal channels of news played a key role in the formation of the late Roman frontier consciousness as well.

Romanization has been defined as "the series of social, cultural and economic changes which drew together the centre and periphery of the empire."[96] If this definition succeeds—and I think it does to the extent that modern concepts can encapsulate ancient conditions—then news flow between center

and periphery should certainly take its place as a social and cultural factor of Romanization. As Themistius makes clear, communication structures were crucial to holding the Empire together. Yet in another sense, this definition of *Romanization* also fails in its ambiguity. It does not account for the difference between early Imperial and late Imperial conditions. Romanization for the early Empire was bringing center and periphery together by taking Rome to the peripheries—on roads, by sea, by letter, by word, through symbols. By the later Roman Empire, the center was not so self-absorbed. Late Antique Romanization, if such it can now be called, is the taking of those peripheries back to the center.

The growing importance of the frontiers, highlighted and furthered by the steady flow of frontier information to centers, was one of many changes of Late Antiquity and led to what I am calling here the triumph of the frontiers. This news flow shaped late Roman frontier consciousness, a fact that has been implied before, albeit not in these terms. C. Wells speaks concerning the frontiers of the great "change from the early Empire to later, despite the continuity of the rhetoric used about barbarians, frontiers, and expansion."[97] His comment invites exploration of what the change in terms of frontiers might be. Whittaker has contended that the shift was not one within Romanization (call it reverse Romanization), as I am proposing, but rather one of "barbarization"—frontiers collapsing and thus allowing the blurring of the ideological distinctions between Romans and barbarians. Taking the focus off of Western Europe, as I have done here, allows for some decidedly different conclusions. For one, it frees us from focusing so strongly on the Germanic settlers who would soon violate Roman frontiers. We can read texts without reading into them our own expectations that the barbarians are coming and that they are going to stay. Related to this, I think it makes teleological readings of the Roman mind a bit less of a hazard.

Rather than frontiers decreasing in importance in the later Roman Empire, heightened news about them solidified them as a major topic of discussion and a major indicator of the coherence of the Empire. Frontiers were important in the later Roman worldview as a result of the news that proliferated about them. Even as political boundaries of the empire shifted or even collapsed, the frontier consciousness reached its zenith. Rumor can fly anytime, but, as Hegel's famous adage goes, "The owl of Minerva flies only at dusk."