



PROJECT MUSE®

News and Frontier Consciousness in the Late Roman Empire

Graham, Mark W.

Published by University of Michigan Press

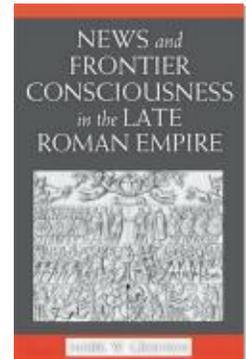
Graham, Mark W.

News and Frontier Consciousness in the Late Roman Empire.

University of Michigan Press, 2006.

Project MUSE., <a href="

<https://muse.jhu.edu/>.



➔ For additional information about this book

<https://muse.jhu.edu/book/66756>

Access provided at 23 Jan 2020 23:15 GMT with no institutional affiliation



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/).

PART 2



*Media: The Triumph
of the Periphery*

Modes of Communicating Frontiers



Rumor [*Fama*], the swiftest messenger of sad events, outstripping these messengers, flew through provinces and nations, and most of all struck the people of Nisibis with bitter grief.

—Ammianus Marcellinus, *Res Gestae* 25.8.13

Rumor [*Pheme*], the messenger of good news, does not cease announcing to us that you have been darting about like the stars, appearing sometimes in one part of the barbarian land, again in another.

—St. Basil, *Epistula* 196 (Loeb trans.)

The striking contrast between these two statements, both written in the late fourth century, reflects more the immediate mood of the writers than any significant difference in outlook. Rumor has been alleged, in all ages, to be the most active source of news and information, accurate or not, good or bad. Often Roman writers get no more explicit in describing how news moved from one place to another. Ancient persons observed, as we often do, that news just travels. They imagined Rumor as a divine being, flying with wings. In Athens, an altar to Rumor reinforced its divine status.¹

Since at least the days of Hesiod, *Pheme* reported on events in a manner mysterious in its quickness. The common translations of *Pheme* as both “common report” or “the god Rumor” show the lack of a clear divide between

divine and human news. Even St. Basil's reference retains the idea of Rumor as a person or entity. Ammianus, like Greeks of the classical period before him, saw Rumor as a divine source of information, coming seemingly from nowhere and, if interpreted correctly, always true.² When describing at one point how news was able to circulate so quickly throughout the eastern provinces and even beyond, Ammianus claims, "We believe (nor in fact is there any doubt of it) that Rumor flies swiftly through the paths of the air" with the "circulation of the news of these events."³ Such a description fits in well with the general tendencies in the fourth century toward popular belief, at all levels. The fact that Ammianus, in effect, expresses his views so strongly (*neque enim dubium est*) shows that he is not just talking of "Rumor flying" in a poetical way but rather affirming his belief in Rumor as deity.⁴ This fact should not be forgotten, as it shows ways in which perceptions of news could reflect ancient worldviews.

The opening quotations also suggest that rumors of events near or even beyond frontiers were of particular interest to Romans of the later Empire. The recipient of Basil's letter, Aburgius, is traveling with Gratian's western army on the Danube frontier, supplying money to the soldiers, as we are told later in the letter. Rumor, here, effectively crossed a natural frontier. Ammianus' reference highlights how news of the surrender of Nisibis, defining in the minds of many Romans the Empire's easternmost point, spread quickly.⁵ Rumor from the peripheries was also the most risky—long travel distance and long-standing images of those near and beyond the frontiers could make the interpretation of it difficult.⁶ But perhaps that added to its very attraction.

The sources also describe the spread of news in far more mundane ways, although the element of mystery often lingers. But the actual passage of news is one of the most taken-for-granted aspects of the ancient world. The Romans, like the Greeks, are generally reticent about their media. We frequently read in the sources of someone learning or hearing of something. We catch but fleeting glimpses of its spread in such phrases as "news reached," "news circulated," and "news spread and burst upon . . ."⁷ The means of communication is rarely if ever mentioned. The ancients' apparent disinterest in describing what we would call media does not, of course, deny media a present and active role in their world. It is possible to look beyond the assertions of Ammianus, Basil, Libanius, and others that news literally flies on wings, but then we are left with historical questions about human agency and the human-created structures through which news moved. The clues are there, if somewhat spotty, but it does seem a bit anachronistic to dwell on the lack of organized news media as if the ancients lived in a state of disappointment or frustration at not having modern media.⁸ The role of news in Late Antiquity,

as in many ancient contexts, has received little systematic attention. In a sense, news flow was hardly worth noting by the ancients due to what one historian has called its unspoken “very ordinariness.”⁹

The Roman Empire itself remained together, in a sense, because of formal and informal channels of communication. These channels became more important in the later Roman Empire as they carried news from and about the frontiers to people increasingly attentive to happenings on them. Part of this interest was the increased presence of the emperors on the frontier as well as escalating transgression of the frontiers by outsiders. But there is more to the story. This shift was roughly concurrent with what J. Eadie calls “the general collapse of the centre of gravity in imperial politics and the triumph of the frontier.”¹⁰ Eadie traces this phenomenon with reference to the third-century insurrections in the East. Images of frontiers were passed via expanding media through the human context. A wider and stronger proliferation of media reporting on frontiers placed them at the fore in a later Roman worldview.

News and information afford crucial insight into the study of Roman frontiers in Late Antiquity and especially of a late Roman frontier consciousness. Consciousness is shaped by one’s worldview as well as new information that complements or challenges that worldview.¹¹ In her study of news in the Greek polis, S. Lewis argues that news is always mediated by a particular set of beliefs and expectations.¹² As news entered the polis, she claims, it could only be analyzed against a backdrop of preexisting, if tacit, knowledge. Orators and writers appealed to this backdrop in proclaiming their messages. Thus, a modern reading of an ancient text should include, in a sense, consideration of both the knowledge backdrop and the expectations of the audience. Both can give insight into news flow.¹³ Such an approach assumes analysis of tacit knowledge. Again, “What goes without saying, goes without saying.”¹⁴ There is a type of objective consensus that shapes a “common-sense world” that does not have to be rationalized, analyzed, or made explicit.

Various studies have explored the time of news travel, usually focusing on the deaths of emperors or the results of battles or invasions.¹⁵ These studies are crucial to understanding communication and action in the ancient world. But analyzing news involves more than tracing the speed at which information travels and against which policy decisions were made. News structured thoughts and lives; it defined communities. For the Roman world, more so than for the Greek, we know about formal channels of communication, the likes of which are necessary for holding together a vast empire. More, in fact, can be said about the content and form of news in the Roman world simply because, for much of the empire’s existence, anyway, we know of the roads on which it was carried and often the officials responsible for disseminating

the information. But therein also lies a danger inherent to most studies of ancient communication in general and of the knowledge of frontiers in particular. One should not overemphasize the role of the official (usually political or military) channels of communication to the neglect of more popular and/or implicit means of communication. Sources do tend to highlight the role of military news when they mention news at all, but there was much more at work structuring the late Roman imagination and in particular its frontier consciousness.

My focus is on news as such and not on military or strategic intelligence. It is, however, difficult to escape the emphasis on wars and rumors of wars, so central to the ancient sources. Although much of our knowledge of news in Late Antiquity does concern wars, usurpations, and the like, a careful reading of the sources can provide clues to the diffusion of news about and from frontiers in a more general sense.¹⁶ I will examine a variety of media of communication individually, organized within broad categories borrowed widely from modern media studies.

The Written Word

As a key element of long-distance communication throughout much of human history, the written word often preserves news in a way impossible with more ephemeral modes. It can also record reception of news in a way impossible for any other mode. Communication over space and time is a prime mark of literate and civilized societies. "Civilization is built on literacy because literacy is a universal processing of a culture by a visual sense extended in time and space."¹⁷ As mentioned throughout this study, the Roman Empire was an "empire of the written word." W. V. Harris estimates that the rate of literacy in the Empire averaged perhaps not much above 10 percent, albeit with significant regional variation. Late Antiquity probably saw a steady decline from this rate for reasons outlined by Harris in his analysis of that period.¹⁸ Yet the cultural influence of literate people on the rest of the population continued to be significant and was felt far beyond their shrinking circle. The written word thus continued to function at all levels of Late Antique society.¹⁹ The predominance of more visual media and symbolic modes of communication in the later Roman Empire further suggests that news continued to proliferate alongside or even in spite of the decline in literacy.

Our most detailed written source for the late Empire, Ammianus' *Res Gestae*, is one example of how historiography itself is a form of media.²⁰ He was writing, at least in the surviving books, contemporary history.²¹ His *Res Gestae* is, in one sense, a medium for transmitting news, much of it gleaned firsthand,

to a public. News contained in historical writing generally was slower than that from other modes in reaching the public (and slower still in reaching the illiterate public, if it did so at all). But such information also tended to be viewed as the most accurate. This is not to say that the educated public trusted historians implicitly. Rather, there was a general expectation that historians, unlike, so often, the panegyricists, had done serious research. As a crafter of current history, Ammianus was very aware of his own audience and their expectations as he wrote. At times he expressed frustration with his ever-demanding public. In a passage that says as much about his own historical theory as the role of his writing as media, Ammianus writes,

Having narrated the course of events with the strictest care up to the bounds of the present epoch, I had already determined to withdraw my foot from the more familiar tracks, partly to avoid the dangers which are so often connected with the truth, and partly to escape unreasonable critics of the work which I am composing, who cry out as if wronged, if one has failed to mention what an emperor said at table . . . or because in an ample account of regions he ought not to have been silent about some insignificant forts . . . and many other matters which are not in accordance with the principles of history. For it is wont to detail the highlights of events, not to ferret out the trifling details of unimportant matters. For whoever wishes to know these may hope to be able to count the small indivisible bodies which fly through space, and to which we give the name of atoms.²²

I quote this passage at length for what it reveals about audience interest and the place of the written word in communicating news meaningful to Romans, not to mention the difficulties of meeting the demands of that audience. And yet the very fact that Ammianus mentions the complaints gives a sense of his sensitivity as both a historian and a crafter of media—in short, he knows what people will say because he has heard their complaints, and he does care. He even shifted his emphasis to avoid having to listen to them. This passage suggests that Ammianus is interested in what the audience considers relevant, even as his professed deviation from that standard gives clues of its expectations. The public interest in the emperor and forts, both of which often were located at or near frontiers, is readily apparent in the passage as well.

Ammianus' audience also included potential informants. Writing contemporary history in the Roman world came with its own set of dangers and problems as well as responsibilities.²³ Ammianus, like most Roman historians, is aware of the dangers of offending someone in power or potentially

coming into power. His reference to the “dangers which are so often connected with the truth” is, no doubt, acknowledgment of the risks all Roman historians faced. Accuracy in reporting news had to be balanced against saying too much, or even too little, in a dictatorship sensitive to the value of news in shaping perceptions.

A further example of Ammianus’ sensitivity to his audience occurs at the beginning of his account of Julian.

I shall describe [his achievements] one by one in progressive order, deploying all the resources of my modest talent, if they will suffice. What I shall narrate will come close to the category of panegyric, yet it is not made up of eloquent deceit, but is a wholly truthful account, based on clear evidence.²⁴

Again his historical theory merged with his self-reflexive sense of being a crafter of media. This passage also demonstrates how Ammianus thought an audience would receive panegyric. He is aware of his audience, and he is sensitive to its critiques and hesitations. Media communication has as one of its primary essentials that it respond to the expectations and demands of the audience. Much of what Ammianus wrote would not have been otherwise known by his audience.

Major written histories, like Ammianus’, were themselves in part the products of the written word in their dependence on shorter written accounts, even for contemporary events. On a much smaller scale than historians, soldiers, out of duty or just curiosity and interest, wrote accounts of campaigns and journeys to and from the frontiers.²⁵ These accounts kept the frontiers more in the public arena by their proliferation and by the increased number of them, specifically along the eastern frontier. These minor writings generally do not survive; we know about them through fortunate reference among the letters of Libanius and others. Their role in spreading news was vital. Plying the *notarius* Philagrius for information, Libanius notes that Philagrius would, while on campaign with Julian, “examine and put into writing every particular, the nature of the localities, the dimensions of cities, height of fortresses, width of rivers, and all successes and reverses.”²⁶ It seems that as a *notarius* (a fact noted by Ammianus rather than Libanius), Philagrius was expected to do this. It is in this letter that Libanius claims that he will take the “bare facts” and “clothe them in the garb of oratory.”

Other examples come in the aftermath of disaster. Immediately after the death of Julian and the subsequent retreat from the eastern frontier, Libanius begins to ply persons passing through his native Antioch for news from the

frontier. His writings suggest that he was searching for news from, and from beyond, the frontier to incorporate into his orations and that some of the news was of a more popular nature than would be contained in official military records. He rounds up all the usual suspects for information, but suddenly no one wants to give him the news he craves. In his complaints over the reluctance of participants to talk about the “disregarded” Julian, he mentions those who would never neglect to keep a “written account of such events.”²⁷ These people, even his friends, he claims, said that they did have such accounts and that they would give them, “but none did”; in fact, they refused even to give verbal accounts. Libanius admits that he did get a few lists of “some days and route distances and names of places,” from a few strangers, but the news coming from the frontier was far less than he expected. He specifically wanted a detailed account of Julian’s achievements so that he could “fully explain” the campaign beyond the frontiers. Libanius closes the epistle hinting that there are written accounts to be had but that he is having trouble getting them.

The implication here is that written accounts of a popular as well as technical nature were quite common in association with military campaigns and hence gave news about and from frontiers and beyond. They covered a variety of topics beyond just troop movement. The fact that people would, under normal circumstances, part with their writings, even to strangers, suggests that these accounts were recorded for just such purposes.²⁸

Libanius was primarily interested in getting news to fill his orations and letters. Many of his orations he delivered to critical acclaim in Antioch; he also had them circulated in written form throughout the Greek-speaking world, where his status as a literary figure was immense. Libanius thus provides one example of how the influence of the written word, even accounts by an army commander or scribe, could go far beyond the small circle of the literate and/or army leaders to touch a much wider audience. Such news from the frontiers, highly regarded (and progressively more so), was also shaping and expressing frontier consciousness.²⁹

Written records of events were stored in major cities for official purposes but were also available to historians and others as well.³⁰ Ammianus notes “extant statements filed among the public record houses” that he used in writing his own history. The collection must have been extensive; as recorded earlier, when Ammianus states that not everything done is worth recording in a historical account, he claims that if he wanted to relate all the activities of the lowest class of people, “even the array of facts to be gained from the public records themselves would not suffice.”³¹ C. Ando interprets such records as pieces of information that “formed part of the larger history of the imperial commonwealth.” The information was not placed here for the benefit of

historians but nonetheless was diffused as available news.³² In a fascinating topographical study of Eusebius' *Onomasticon*, B. Isaac has argued that Eusebius wrote this whole geographical work, with its full reference to roads, cities, and topographical features, primarily from information in the archives.³³ Evidently, the material available in archives was quite extensive and available for perusal.

Another form of written news was short pamphlets (*biblidia*). These seem to have been circulated widely for people to read. They could be incorporated into longer histories, but sometimes they stood on their own. Julian, for example, "enthused by his own achievements," wrote up a *biblidion* of his campaign on and over the Rhine frontier. Eunapius notes that he would not repeat the account in his own story but rather suggests that "those who wish to observe the greatness of his words and his deeds I shall direct to turn to his *biblidion* and to the splendors of his account."³⁴ It seems that such accounts were in demand and readily available, else Eunapius' injunction to read them would be empty and would imply that Eunapius was just being evasive.

Similar to these pamphlets would have been personal memoirs that were made available to historians. One of these, a particularly valuable source, was written by Oribasius of Pergamum, the doctor and close friend of the emperor Julian. Oribasius was familiar, we are told, with all the details of the campaign, "having been present at them." He wrote up for Eunapius "a detailed memorandum" designed especially to further Eunapius' historical work.³⁵ There is some indication that Ammianus and Libanius made use of this memoir as well.³⁶

Written legal texts and imperial pronouncements also functioned as media for dissemination of news.³⁷ Ammianus describes how Constantius II sent "laureled letters" of his "conquests" (at some of which he was not even present) for proclamation through edicts. Constantius' own utterances were "deposited in the public record houses." Ammianus used these very records in composing his own history, although he remained skeptical of Constantius' outrageous claims of victories in battles in which he was not even a participant.³⁸ Imperial letters and edicts present the blurring of the boundary between the spoken and the written word and show how news, in the form of imperial pronouncements, was disseminated. The fact that they often were read aloud also breaks down, or at least weakens, any real or imagined barrier between the literate and illiterate in late Roman society in terms of news reception.

One type of written news, channeled through official pronouncements, was less direct in the way it could reach the public. In a law of 443 we are told that the Eastern *magister officiorum* was required to submit an annual report every January concerning the frontiers in Thrace, Illyricum, Oriens, Pontus,

Egypt, and Libya for the sake of rewarding and punishing frontier commanders.³⁹ Such a report implies news gathering on or near the frontier. But through the “worthy rewards” and “suitable indignations”—public acts themselves, no doubt—the message would have been spread of the importance of defending the Roman frontiers.⁴⁰ Such laws show, again, the interest of the center in the peripheries of the Empire and the increased attention to news and information from there. The edict goes on to imply that the purpose was to spread abroad the report on the stability of the Roman frontiers.

The written word proliferated widely through inscriptions as well, especially in cities, although the question of readership and reception is vexed.⁴¹ One can imagine that these would have been read much less than modern historic markers, because they were much more common. But we do have some evidence that new inscriptions could garner attention. In a commentary on Deuteronomy 6:5, a rabbi claims that the things “which I command thee this day . . . should not be in your eyes like some antiquated edict to which no one pays any attention but like a new edict which everyone runs to read.”⁴² This reference shows that Romans were interested in news as much as people in any age. So-called history walls are quite common as well and show emperors, specifically, trying to shape an image by enumerating their accomplishments, often at or near Roman frontiers. As D. Potter points out, they differ from ordinary civic inscriptions “in that they were assembled over a period to form a coherent group: they were not *ad hoc* inscriptions reflecting immediate public concerns.”⁴³ Examples here are abundant, and I will choose one that specifically shows the importance of frontier information. Julian is praised in an inscription from Ancyra as the “lord of the whole earth” who has conquered up to the Tigris River.⁴⁴ The bounds of Julian’s conquest are the natural frontiers of Ocean and the Tigris River. The movement to Ancyra of news from and about the frontier thus is proclaimed by the written word.

One interesting fact of the later Roman Empire is the increasing number of inscriptions that proclaim that an emperor has constructed a defensive work. J. J. Wilkes has documented this phenomenon, drawing attention to inscriptions such as one concerning Constantine:

following the subjugation and control of the Franks through the excellence of Constantine, the *castrum* of the *Divitenses* was constructed in their territory in the presence of the emperor himself.⁴⁵

Such a picture further corroborates the heightened frontier consciousness during the later Empire, a consciousness to which emperors could appeal.

Inscriptions directly at or on the frontier also could proclaim a message about the frontier. Although their audience might have been very small, their impact would have been clear. Their role is hotly contested—not surprisingly, since they suggest a linear frontier—but a few such inscriptions are possibly attested in the literature, even if none have been discovered yet. John Malalas, in describing how Diocletian built “forts on the *limes* from Egypt to the border of Persia,” explains the system by which *duces* were assigned to frontier zones in order to ensure security. He records that there then were erected “boundary posts” or “statues” to the emperor and the Caesar right on the *limes* of Syria.⁴⁶ It is possible that these “statues” were actually inscriptions recording the emperor’s exploits at or near the frontiers. Whatever the translation, it appears that the purpose of demarcation was clear, at least to Malalas. One other inscription marking the boundary of empire is feasible. If “Romans and Burgundians” is the correct reading of the manuscript of Ammianus’s *Res Gestae*, as Potter and others think it is, this is another example of Romans marking, or at least imagining, boundaries this way.⁴⁷ It is interesting to see the debates over this passage. Those who see a defensive view of the Empire developing in Late Antiquity read *Romanorum* in the manuscript; those who reject any change in Roman understanding read *Alamannorum*.

Letters among the literati were also a very effective means of spreading news, particularly if the direct recipients were orators or preachers. Letters generally were not a private matter in antiquity anyway and were more available for wider circulation and diffusion than today. Epistolography was the major way of directing news and information across and throughout the empire. Their crucial role in the late Empire in particular is highlighted by the fact that “the provincial aristocracies of the Greek East of the fourth century engaged in more travel and expended more effort in the creation and maintenance of extended networks of influence via personal visiting and exchange of letters than their predecessors of earlier periods of antiquity.”⁴⁸ The letters exchanged between Julian and Libanius, for example, provide fascinating insight into how information could move from the frontiers to more interior regions. And again, such news as that found in the letters would often make it into Libanius’ orations, diffusing that news widely and effectively.⁴⁹ In one oration he specifically mentions getting news in the form of a letter straight from the frontier:⁵⁰

[Julian] sent me a last letter from the frontier of the Empire [*apo ton tes arches horon*], and marched on, ravaging the countryside, plundering villages, taking fortresses, crossing rivers, mining fortifications, and capturing cities.⁵¹

The fact that the letter is seen by Libanius as coming from the frontier gives a clear sense of the way that news from the frontier itself could proliferate in official channels. Yet the frontier marked an end to formal channels of communication. This passage, delivered in oration, also shows the news that a Roman public was receiving and how it could come from “private” letters.⁵²

In a letter to a certain Modestus, Libanius also mentions together frontiers and the passage of letters. This time the letter is going from the interior provinces toward the frontier, as did many of Libanius’ own letters to Julian. Libanius exclaims, concerning a letter sent by Modestus, “But your letter has crossed the Euphrates; no wonder then that it only arrived lately in the emperor’s hand.”⁵³ The Euphrates, as a natural frontier, was permeable, but news was neither quick nor efficient moving across it. And it could slow down communication both ways. Libanius goes on to tell what he knows the emperor Julian is doing beyond the frontiers through reports from prisoners of war.

Letters from North Africa also give news from frontiers and show efforts to diffuse it. As in the East, references often are to conflicts of some sort, although those in North Africa were much smaller in scale. References are much fewer, due to the comparative inactivity of the frontier there, the infrequency of the emperor at the North African frontier, and the lack of writers, such as those who covered the East, analyzing current situations in North Africa. In short, North Africa lacked the momentous event, the mainstay of ancient historiography, and, it seems, audience interest as well.⁵⁴

St. Augustine reports occasionally on the North African frontiers. Very interested in the placement of the eastern frontier, he gives us only an occasional glimpse of those to his south. In a letter to Boniface, ex-governor of Africa, Augustine mentions the “ravaging of Africa” by African barbarians. After referring to how Boniface, during his tenure, had protected the churches of North Africa from the incursions of barbarians, Augustine warns that the barbarian inroads have started again.⁵⁵ Augustine specifically mentions the “common talk” of how, on assuming office, Boniface had made the barbarians tributaries almost immediately. News of the renewed attacks was now circulating in the same way that it had circulated before Boniface had subdued them. All we get is a brief insight here, but it makes clear that news of the barbarian pillages filtered freely through North Africa.⁵⁶ In another letter, written concerning “the end of the world [*de fine saeculi*],” we get a further glimpse of frontiers. Augustine tells his reader(s) that he gets daily “information” from the North African frontier. He gains this information by regularly seeing actual captives from there.⁵⁷

Another reference shows us that the pastoral nomads on the other side of the Roman frontier were not always so hostile.⁵⁸ It also gives some indication

of how the frontier functioned. A provincial named Publicola wrote a letter to Augustine in the last few years of the fourth century to ask about an ethical dilemma. Publicola had heard that barbarians who crossed Roman frontiers to work were required to swear by their own *daemones* to the decurion or tribune in charge of the *limes*. He refers to the guard of the *limes* a few more times throughout the letter, highlighting the guard's role as a keeper of the *limes* against the barbarians. His ethical dilemma over whether Romans should require this oath had been provoked by news he had heard from the frontiers. Augustine's response is practical, assuring that peace is secured by the oath of the barbarians, "not only for a single *limes*, but for whole provinces."⁵⁹ Such news kept North Africans apprised of the situation on their frontiers.

A final written mode of disseminating news was through pilgrimage and other travel accounts of journeys to frontiers, usually in the east. The rise of Christian pilgrimage, following on Helena's famous visit to Jerusalem in the early fourth century, allowed Romans more contact with far-off frontiers. Pilgrimage was a very established institution in the ancient world, but Christianity focused it on the eastern parts of the empire. Pilgrimage would not be confined to the Holy Land *per se* but included trips to Old Testament sites as well, often near Roman frontiers.

The most famous pilgrimage to these Old Testament sites was that of Egeria. Egeria was especially keen to visit all the places with direct biblical significance along the way.⁶⁰ Although her intention is to visit and describe the biblical sites of the East, she does not neglect more contemporary descriptions and concerns, and she regularly mentions Roman forts and soldiers as she approaches Rome's eastern frontier.⁶¹ In doing so, she conveys news, even if unwittingly, about local conditions near the frontier. She is told by a bishop that Haran is "10 staging-posts from here, inside Persian lands," about 5 staging posts from Nisibis.⁶² As noted previously, the frontier city of Nisibis had been ceded by Jovian about twenty years before Egeria's arrival. The locals presumably recognized a very literal territorial boundary here (as marked by staging posts), and Egeria includes the detail almost incidentally. She records what she was told, and thus she gives an account of the local view of the frontier. Her account, read into the Medieval West, provided a picture of the eastern frontier and thus passed into the imagination of the Western Middle Ages a view of the extreme east of the Roman Empire. One late-seventh-century monk uses the story as a prod to encourage his monks to learn from the example of this amazing woman who "transformed the weakness of her sex into iron strength" by traveling to the "bounds of almost the whole earth."⁶³

Visual Modes

News also traveled via visual media, probably even more so during the later than the earlier Empire. Visual modes included ceremony and various types of visual art. J. Matthews makes clear, largely in agreement with S. MacCormack, that “ceremonial, in sight and sound, is a mode of communication.” The expanded elaborateness and frequency of public ceremonial in the late Empire is one of the central features of the period, one of many that distinguish it from the earlier empire.⁶⁴ Ceremonial served, in a sense, as a means of popularizing communication. In the ceremonial of Late Antiquity, emperors could capitalize on the interest that Romans had in their frontiers. They regularly paraded prisoners of war from beyond Roman frontiers. These processions themselves were a medium of proclaiming news from and from beyond the frontiers of the empire and carried on a tradition of processions from the early days of Rome.⁶⁵ And yet with the elaboration of ritual and ceremony in Late Antiquity, the message proclaimed became more clear and dominant. The presence of these captives in processions would proclaim the victories of Roman generals at or beyond Roman frontiers. Furthermore, prisoners of war and hostages were for Romans an excellent source of information about things going on at the peripheries of the empire.⁶⁶ In one of his many laments over the death of Julian, Libanius mourns that the emperor could not return, leading prisoners as a token of his accomplishments. Libanius writes this in the same letter in which he also is complaining that written accounts have suddenly become inaccessible to him.⁶⁷ The prisoners themselves were potential sources of information.

The presence of foreigners in and of itself was a medium for proclaiming established or subdued frontiers. The Blemmyae of Africa, for example, seem to have been a favorite of the Roman people. At least by Late Antiquity, they had come a long way from their image in the first century, when Romans regarded them as humans with no heads, and eyes and mouths attached to their chests.⁶⁸ Yet still, less than flattering images of African groups persisted. The author of the *Expositio Totius Mundi* describes the desert borders of Africa, “beyond which dwell the worst peoples of the barbarians.”⁶⁹ The author of the *Scriptores Historiae Augustae* records how the emperor Probus, after subduing the Blemmyae beyond Egypt’s frontier, sent them northward and “thereby created a wondrous impression upon the amazed Roman people.”⁷⁰ The Blemmyae are described elsewhere as being transported around the Roman Empire. A certain Abinnaeus writes in a petition to Constantius II and Constans in 341 that, after serving for thirty-three years in the Roman army, the commander of the frontier region of the Upper Thebaid in Egypt had commanded

Abinnaeus to escort a group of Blemmyae to Constantinople. The letter survives on papyrus as part of an archive of his letters and papers. It seems that he spent three years with the group, traveling slowly.⁷¹

Again, the very presence of such peoples proclaimed a frontier between Roman and Other, even if that frontier was far away. Eusebius mentions “men of the Blemmyan race” as well as others lining up outside of the imperial palace gates. He describes their

exotic dress, their distinctive appearance, the quite singular cut of their hair and beard; the appearance of their hairy faces was foreign and astonishing. . . . The faces of some were red, of others whiter than snow, of others blacker than ebony or pitch, and others had a mixed color in between.⁷²

Such persons created quite a spectacle and served as a visual medium of communication, pointing to the frontiers from which such people came from and beyond which, to the Roman mind, they still belonged. These also would have been the type of people whose presence in North Africa gave St. Augustine daily reminders of the frontier to his south.

The presence of an emperor traveling on campaign also served as visual form of communication, increasing interest in frontier events and news. With the emperors present on frontiers from Marcus Aurelius onward, there was heightened interchange of information and news between peripheries and centers.⁷³ His visible presence on the frontiers generated more news and brought together, in effect, center and periphery. It also increased the number of visitors to frontier regions.⁷⁴ Libanius mentions in one oration that, with barbarians harassing Constantius II’s “frontiers all around, what was needed was the presence of the emperor to rally the troops and stem the flood.”⁷⁵ As seen in the Panopolis papyri, the presence of the emperor at the frontier—in this case, the stern Diocletian—could create a scene in more ways than one.⁷⁶ The administrative stir occasioned by an emperor’s visit generated news and speculation.

Traveling ambassadors also provoked interest in things peripheral. Libanius specifically records how a certain Spectatus, a philosopher and ambassador, was seen as “fortunate in the eyes of many; to some because he had seen so much of the land and the mountains and the rivers of [Persia], to others because he had observed the Persian way of life and customs.”⁷⁷ There are sufficient examples of philosophers serving as ambassadors to conclude that this type of interchange of news was common enough.⁷⁸ Their gifts of persuasion were well used, as we can see in the case of a Neoplatonist philosopher named Eustathius. Not only did he almost persuade Sapor II of the terms of the mission,

he nearly convinced Sapor to become a philosopher as well (until some magi talked some sense into him).⁷⁹ The loquacity and perambulatory lifestyle associated with these figures generated interest and thus led to the delivery of news from the frontiers and beyond.⁸⁰ Eustathius, Eunapius records, could not even with effort get away from those wanting to hear him. Philosophers often traveled on personal business as well. One, a certain Hellespontius of Galatia, was “so ardent a lover of learning, he traveled to uninhabited parts of the world to find someone who knew more than himself.”⁸¹

Other visual modes of communication included public maps and paintings of campaigns. These would have displayed to the Roman world happenings at its frontiers. As Eumenius, the orator at Autun mentioned previously, made clear, such visuals were designed to put a picture of the Roman world into the minds of Romans so that they could imagine scenes of action as well as their frontiers.⁸² Messengers coming from frontiers would present news in relation to such views of the world. The *Tabula Peutingeriana* has a few notations that could perhaps be the visual depictions of frontiers.⁸³ Wording on the Table near depictions of the border of Syria and Mesopotamia records the “*fines Romanorum*,” suggesting a frontier of the Empire.⁸⁴

Large visual depictions of campaign scenes were also sources of news.⁸⁵ These tableaux could be fixed in place or carried in processions. Herodian reports that after defeating the Parthians in 198, Septimius Severus “dispatched a report to the Senate and people, making much of his achievements and ordering that his battles and victories should be painted and publicly exhibited.”⁸⁶ He adds that nearly forty years later, the emperor Maximinus Thrax, having defeated Germans in a difficult battle among some marshes,

made a report on the battle and his own distinguished part in a dispatch to the Senate and the people. But he went further, and ordered huge pictures of it to be painted and set up in front of the senate house, so that Romans would be able to see as well as hear about his exploits.⁸⁷

These pictorial accounts depicted Romans at or near frontiers and served as media for proclaiming news to the public. It is far from certain how common this practice was in Herodian’s day. His own wording suggests that he might be describing something new to his audience. Whatever its origins, the practice is attested into the later Empire. Eunapius mentions such a painting as well:

There was a Persian, a prefect at Rome, who reduced the success of the Romans to mockery and laughter. Wishing to offer a representation of

what had been done, he assembled many small panels in the middle of the Circus. But all the contents of his painting were laughable, and he unwittingly mocked his subject in his presentation. For nowhere did the painting show or allude to either the bravery of the Emperor, or the strength of the soldiers, or anything that was obviously a proper battle. But a hand extended as if from the clouds, and by the hand was inscribed, “The hand of God driving off the barbarians” (it is shameful, but necessary, to write this down) and on the other side, “The barbarians fleeing God,” and other things even more stupid and odious than these, the nonsense of the drunken painters.⁸⁸

The purported unconventional nature of this particular picture gives us a sense of the type of information that should have been on such paintings. Eunapius implies that there was a norm for this type of painting, and these “drunken painters” were certainly not meeting it. It also suggests the boundary between the habitus of native-born Romans and newcomers, such as this naturalized Persian. This prefect is identified as a Persian, even if he has become a prefect of Rome. Singling out this fact suggests Eunapius’ own dislike for him. To Eunapius, the prefect just did not know the correct way to portray the Romans—emperors or soldiers. And his portrayal of God driving off the barbarians, although it might have been the view of some Romans, was far from palatable to the pagan Eunapius.

The stereotypes Eunapius presents here also give us some indication of how Romans viewed themselves. As so often, these appear in a denunciation of the Other. When Attila the Hun, in Milan, saw a painting of Roman emperors with Scythians “lying dead before their feet, he sought out a painter and ordered him to paint” himself with Roman emperors bringing him gold.⁸⁹ The value of spreading a definite message through a visual medium was not lost on Attila.

Sculpture was also a common visual medium for presenting news from the peripheries. The image of the emperor seated in majesty over stylized barbarians was a powerful symbol of frontier conquest.⁹⁰ The base of the obelisk of Theodosius in the hippodrome of Constantinople provides one of many extant examples in sculpture. Persians and barbarians are shown in submission, begging for victuals and bringing offerings to Theodosius, who is seated in majesty among the Senators. Such images, placed in areas of high visibility, would provide people in Constantinople with images of the conquered as well as news of imperial campaigns on the two most active Roman frontiers in their own day. The base of the column of Arcadius also depicts enemies in submission in a similar arrangement to that on Theodosius’.

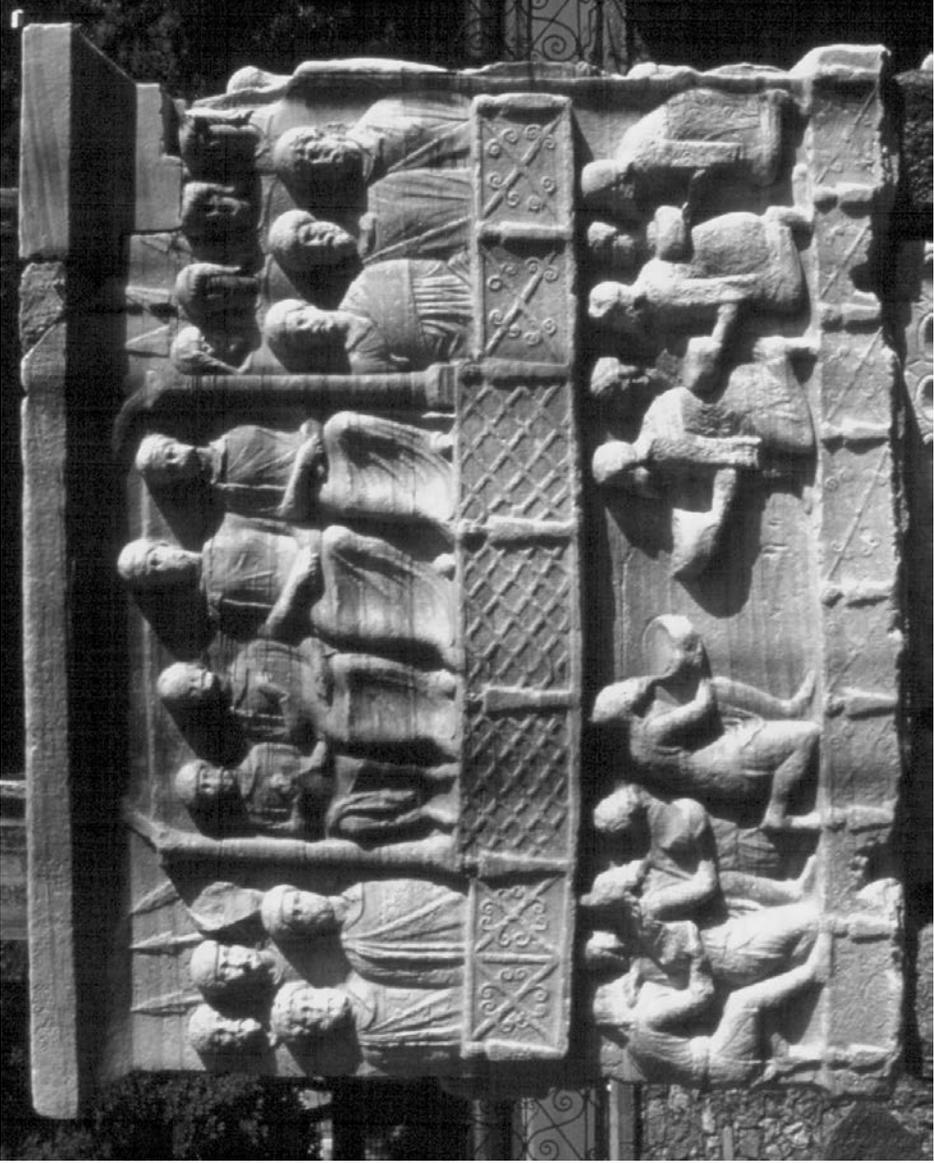


Fig. 8. Base of obelisk of Theodosius at Constantinople. Subjugated Persians and barbarians beneath emperor.

Coins fulfilled a similar purpose and at a much more diffused level.⁹¹ The submission of barbarians became, by the late Empire, a cliché on coins and probably led to a point of diminishing returns in terms of news diffusion. Yet emperors continued to put out stylized images of themselves on the frontiers of Empire, defeating the barbarians.⁹² The power of news is clear in the quick and efficient quashing of new coinage of the usurper Procopius in 365 by Aequitius, the military commander of Illyricum.⁹³ Procopius had circulated gold coins bearing his own image as a form of enticement to join in a revolt. Aequitius executed those involved in the coin circulation. His swift and resolute actions as well as those of Procopius' partisans show the power of coinage in diffusing a message. It is doubtful that another picture of a defeated barbarian on a coin would have provoked any particular type of response, but the very presence of frontier peoples on coins would serve to keep the frontier in the minds of Romans.

Spoken Modes

Spoken modes of communication are, of course, the most predominant yet the least recoverable. If their writings are any indicators, we can be sure that late Romans were talking more and more about their frontiers. Verbal accounts were, to some, the most believable. Eunapius contrasts written history with oral history, which he defines as contemporary history.

In the case of persons and events before our generation, we must defer to written authorities or to the reports about them which memory passes down to us via an oral tradition. But contemporary events we must hand down to posterity with due regard to truth, as Plato says.⁹⁴

A close reading of available sources does reveal some of the possibilities of such spoken modes of communication and of the type of contemporary events that late Roman audiences found significant enough to discuss.

Often it is difficult to discern whether written or spoken modes were used in communicating news. For example, it seems as if the messengers that Eumenius mentions in his request for the restoration of schools at Autun delivered their messages at least in part by speaking (such is implied, at least, by the description of them as *nuntii*).⁹⁵ Internal revolts and external problems on various frontiers had led to a heightened news flow from periphery to center.⁹⁶ Eumenius' panegyric is just one of many hints of the flow of this news and its potential in shaping and expressing a late Roman worldview. Messengers, especially those arriving from peripheral areas, were critical to this process.

Libanius also records their activity when he speaks of reports, true and false, that have filtered back from the eastern frontier after the death of Julian.⁹⁷

War captives could also play a role in relating verbal information about the frontiers in addition to a role as symbols and visual media. Although he can only imagine, for a while, what Julian is doing beyond the eastern frontiers, Libanius' curiosity is to some extent satisfied, he explains, because "the prisoners of war tell us what he is achieving, and they tell that he is making quick progress and that the towns are in ruins. But we do not know what to do with all the prisoners."⁹⁸ So, in Antioch, Libanius is able to keep up with Julian through the steady stream of prisoners who are sent back. He later relates that the information they gave him helps compensate for the lack of news he is getting from the Romans after the death of the emperor. Julian also avails himself of information from war captives. He plies one old captive for information on the topography of an area beyond Roman frontiers. The old man is forced to tell the truth once he discovers that Julian can verify the reports from his own knowledge gained from reading books.⁹⁹

News could also proliferate verbally as Romans and non-Romans mingled more freely in the later Empire. Julian gives hints in one of his orations that "barbarians" could be found throughout the empire discoursing on frontier matters with the Roman population. He delivered an oration while still a Caesar and campaigning in the West in which he suggests that many in his audience in Gaul knew about the barbarian name of Nisibis because of their "frequent interchange with the barbarians of those parts."¹⁰⁰ The implication is either that people throughout the Empire knew details about the eastern frontier because of foreigners who circulated throughout the empire or that many members of his audience had actually been to the eastern frontier. Either way, it is interesting that he notes the sharing of knowledge so freely between Persians (or perhaps Saracens) and Romans.

The choice of Nisibis here is instructive in that it shows that Romans themselves throughout the Empire were talking about the extreme eastern frontier. A further hint of this type of interaction between periphery and center is provided by the description of Nisibis and Edessa in the *Expositio Totius Mundi*. This work records that the inhabitants of these frontier cities were "on good terms with all the provinces," implying, again, some level of interaction between frontier areas and those far away from them.¹⁰¹ Both Nisibis and Edessa are singled out in this passage as the centers of Roman/Persian trade, a further catalyst for such interactions.

Travelers from frontier zones would share news from the frontiers with people eager to hear about occurrences at these frontiers or about the state of affairs at them. A significant number of these travelers would have been

pilgrims. One can only imagine the number of people Egeria and others like her told about their travels right up to the eastern frontier. Malchus of Nisibis, a Syrian hermit, once told Jerome, early in the fourth century, that he was stopped at one point in his travels on account of “the closeness of Persia” and Roman soldiers he encountered. His wanderings, he tells Jerome, then took him westward by necessity.¹⁰² Such glimpses gave news and information to many who, like the vast majority of Romans, would never get near Roman frontier zones.

Such bits of information impart small yet telling glimpses into whole networks of exchange by which people related information from the frontiers. We also hear of a desert saint, nearly one hundred years old, living in the East and upset by the pillaging of the town nearby, making his way to Constantinople to report the damage. He never returned, as Theodore of Sykeon tells us, but died on his way back after relaying the news in person. Here we get a picture of the way that news could be spread by travelers.¹⁰³ The fact that this old desert saint took it upon himself to bring news to Constantinople personally suggests that in the region in which he lived, the news might not otherwise have reached anyone who could do something about it.

Soldiers also were key sources of information when they were traveling back from the eastern front. Libanius’ habit of pressing them for details appears throughout his letters and orations and shows an interest in the frontiers not only by himself but also by his audience. Especially at major stops along the way, a mass of soldiers would attract a significant amount of attention and thus further the relay of news.¹⁰⁴ And veterans returning to their native communities would have had plenty of stories as well as a wide variety of geographic and ethnographic material from the peripheries of empire to share in addition to the perennially popular war story.¹⁰⁵ These stories, in fact, must have been a major, if not *the* major, way of communicating news to local communities throughout Anatolia and elsewhere.¹⁰⁶

The role of orators themselves was vital, as well, in spreading news. The speeches of Symmachus, for example, were one way for the people of Rome to learn of the restorations going on at the frontier zones.¹⁰⁷ Libanius’ role in this respect already has been explored, as he declared news, often straight out of correspondence reaching him from the frontier itself. The panegyricists gave a wide range of information on Roman frontiers. In panegyric, the frontiers become a crucial indicator of the strength of the Empire. News from frontiers become major themes in the Latin panegyrics of Late Antiquity, expressing the variety of ways of viewing Roman interaction along borders. By all these methods, panegyrics served to communicate news about the frontier to Roman audiences, even if it was embedded in epideictic oratory. These, along

with rumor, suggest a wide and active network of information sharing at the interpersonal level as well.

Panegyrics themselves could be circulated widely. Libanius notes one by Themistius making the rounds in the East, far from the place of its initial delivery.¹⁰⁸ Panegyricists realized their role as newsmen. In one particularly overblown piece of self-congratulation, the orator Pacatus imagined “distant cities” flocking to him to get information to pass on to subsequent generations.¹⁰⁹

Orators, understandably, often were accused of overreaching. But they, like historians, were concerned with the accuracy of their accounts and how they would be received by their audiences. Julian, no mean orator himself, describes the heroic deeds of Constantius II in florid, poetic language. He pauses at one point, however, assuring the audience, “if there be anyone who declines to heed either the opinion expressed in my narrative or those admirably written verses, but prefers to consider the actual facts, let him judge from those.” In the litany of facts to follow, the pride of place is given to an account of Constantius’ defense of Nisibis. In one oration, Libanius records events from the battle of Singara, near the eastern frontier: “And let no one distrust the hyperbole before he hears anything.” “Our scouts who personally watched the maneuver brought back news which was based on observation and not on guesswork using other sources.”¹¹⁰ Libanius is diffusing tactical information here in a popular format.

From the same oration, one can also get a sense that orators, like historians, were also concerned about appealing to the needs and range of belief of their audiences. Libanius, at one point even gets in a jab at historians, some of whom considered historical writing superior in truth quality to panegyrics. Panegyrics could relate contemporary and thus relevant and true material, he implies. Referring to the capture of a “not unimportant” Persian city, he writes, “For we are not recounting an action which has been blotted out by time, as antiquity fights on the side of falsehood, but I think that everyone bears before his eyes.”¹¹¹

The public delivery of edicts, a key element of Roman control and propaganda, was likewise a verbal mode of communication, and it reached large audiences. Before they were made into inscriptions or deposited in the public record houses, all imperial letters would have been read aloud to the people in major cities and carefully and publicly acknowledged.¹¹² Libanius records in a few epistles how he intended to include letters from the emperor in his panegyrics, thus allowing more information from the frontiers to be passed on to the public.¹¹³

Due to the way news spreads orally, it was generally more complete among the people near where the action took place, even news of empirewide

importance.¹¹⁴ Libanius writes that although the “whole empire” was in grief at the news of Julian’s death, the greater grief was probably among the areas “where the Greeks live, for they have greater knowledge of the disaster.”¹¹⁵ The proliferation of news in close proximity to events generally comes from word of mouth.

Divine Modes

In addition to Rumor’s active role, divination was also an important source of news. It will be recalled that Julian claimed a divine source for Constantius II’s knowledge of the “limits and bounds of the whole Empire.”¹¹⁶ The advantage of divination, of course, is that it can relay news exactly as or even before something is happening. This type of news was, at least in the minds of those receiving it, the most accurate of all news, provided it was interpreted correctly. As argued throughout this study, the later Roman Empire saw a decided rise in forms of popular belief, *superstitio*, at all levels.¹¹⁷ Thus, divination was more of a crucial factor in the later Empire even than in the earlier.

Libanius records many such examples. Julian, he claims, heard the news in Gaul of Constantius II’s death in Cilicia even before those in Cilicia had heard about it. He proclaimed that Julian had learned this news through divination: “there resulted the strangest paradox of all, that [Julian] announced the tidings to the bearers of it, and they departed after hearing the news they had come to deliver.”¹¹⁸ The gods, of course, fly more quickly than the fastest of messengers.

Ammianus corroborates Libanius’ account, recording that Julian had “inferred from prophetic signs (in which he was adept) and from dreams, that Constantius would shortly depart from life.”¹¹⁹ Ammianus later records that, through liver divination, Julian understood what would soon happen; doubting the sincerity of the soothsayer, Julian learned by another sign the very moment that Constantius died.¹²⁰

When the news arrived by normal means (that is, official envoys) from Cilicia, Ammianus claims that Julian was merely confirmed in his mind of the prophecies he had already experienced. When the news, traveling swiftly as if being “drawn through the air by winged dragons,” entered Constantinople, Ammianus records that “all sexes and ages poured forth, as if to look upon someone sent down from heaven.”¹²¹ This is, of course, standard panegyric hyperbole buttressed by Ammianus’ own love for Julian, but it nonetheless gives a rare glimpse of news affecting the whole of the population.

Much less encouraging for Libanius and Ammianus, news of the death of Julian also came via the gods. About Julian’s death, Libanius records,

But we in Antioch discovered it through no human agency: earthquakes were the harbingers of woe. . . . [W]e were sure that by these afflictions heaven gave us a sign of some great disaster. . . . The bitter news reached our ears that our great Julian was dead.¹²²

Before it had reached him through word of mouth, then, Libanius already knew of the tragedy. Of course, he is interpreting signs in retrospect (*ex eventu*), but divine methods of news flow allowed for this.

Christians worked out their own way of getting news from divine channels. As will be seen in chapter 6, they did this through Christianizing sibylline and other oracles as well as by searching the Scripture for up-to-the-minute news on what was happening in the Empire. Often, these searches focused on the empire's violated frontier zones. Claiming a form of "general revelation," some held that the pagan sibyls were declaring the truth for all to hear and in fact confirmed rather than challenged the gospel. As will be seen, such prophetic and then apocalyptic readings of current events further emphasized the frontiers.

News gained through supernatural means must be placed on par with rumor and other sources of information in a late Roman worldview. Although the news relayed by divine sources theoretically should have been superior and flawless (that is, as descended from gods), its interpretation of course remained an issue. To answer skeptics (most likely Christians) of pagan divination, Ammianus quotes Cicero: "The gods,' says he, 'show signs of coming events. With regard to these if one err, it is not the nature of the gods that is at fault, but man's interpretation.'"¹²³

