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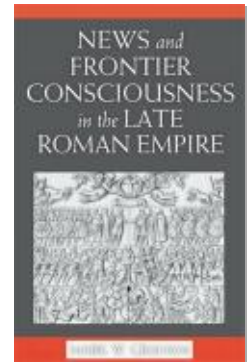
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*Ῥοσ Ἀρχαῖος: Natural Frontiers
in a Late Roman Worldview*



Here let the most noble accomplishments of the bravest Emperors be recalled through representations of the separate regions, while the Twin rivers of Persia and the thirsty fields of Libya and the recurved horns of the Rhine and the many-cleft mouth of the Nile are seen again as eager messengers [*nuntii*] constantly arrive. . . . For now, now at last it is a delight to see a picture of the world, since we see nothing in it which is not ours.

—Eumenius, *Panegyric* 9.21 (Nixon and Rodgers, trans.)

At some point during the final two years of the third century, a high-ranking civil servant delivered these lines in panegyric to an otherwise unknown governor. Eumenius was trying to convince the governor to allow him to donate his salary toward the rebuilding of the rhetoric schools of his hometown of Autun, in Gaul.¹ In addition to the rare insight the whole of this panegyric gives into later Roman educational structures, it reveals how Romans perceived some of their natural frontiers as well as how they came to possess that knowledge. Eumenius had just finished describing a great wall map in the porticoes of the Autun school. The map, he claimed, let “young men see and contemplate daily every land and all the seas” as well as “the sites of all locations with their names, their extent, and the distances between them, the sources and terminations of all the rivers, the curves of all the shores, and the

Ocean, both where its circuit girds the earth and where its pressure breaks into it.”² Eumenius then spoke the finale of his panegyric, with which this chapter begins. The selection is fascinating for what it reveals about a scarcely attested aspect of Roman geographical education as well as the way it highlights some natural frontiers.

The orator’s focus is on the frontiers, which within the very recent past had been challenged, strengthened, or reestablished.³ The students, he affirmed, needed to “see clearly with their eyes what they comprehend less readily by their ears.”⁴ The map, then, was regularly updated “as eager messengers constantly arrive” with news. The speech itself obviously was informed by very recent news from such messengers. These messengers were coming from the peripheries of the empire, expressed specifically in terms of rivers, deserts, and ocean. The arrival of very recent news from the frontiers let the limits of the empire be “seen” again, to delve in the synesthesiatic oratory of Eumenius. An effective education, Eumenius argued, depends on having “the best masters of all virtues” skillfully communicate the recent happenings of the world—that is, news—to students visually as well as verbally.⁵ The rest of the public, with “their minds . . . gazing upon each of these places,” will “see” the peripheries of the Empire in the words arriving with the messengers.⁶ News would thus help shape perceptions of the peripheries.

Although there is much debate over their actual role, natural features were perceived as frontiers and barriers by Romans, especially during the late Empire. Natural features at the frontiers, as suggested by Eumenius, were an important part of a Roman worldview. This worldview was shaped by news coming from the frontiers inasmuch as news was interpreted against it. Such a dynamic affirms that people act and respond to the world as they perceive it—a worldview. This chapter explores features of the landscape that Romans saw as forming frontiers or barriers to the empire—rivers, primarily, but also mountains, deserts, and the sea or ocean. Rivers are prominent here because they appear much more often in Roman texts. As is often the case with frontiers in general, references to natural frontiers usually appear after moments of crisis or celebration—over transgressed frontier zones or of victory over extended frontiers. Much of our knowledge about the way that Romans viewed their peripheries is found in images in public oration and in visual arts. The association of natural features with the frontiers of empire was solidified in the later Roman Empire.

Early in the third century, the historian Herodian looked back on the policies of Augustus, contrasting them to those of the Roman Republic as well as the recent ones of Septimius Severus (r. 193–211). Augustus, Herodian claims in this brief aside, had changed the Republic by stationing mercenary troops

all around the empire to act as a “wall of the Roman Empire.” Furthermore, Augustus had, according to Herodian, “fortified the empire by hedging it around with major obstacles, rivers, and trenches and mountains and deserted areas which were difficult to cross.”⁷ Herodian’s presentation is anachronistic; the image of the wall of empire, fortified by natural barriers, is, in fact, an artifact of his own recent past and cannot be traced to the early Empire. To be sure, Augustus had bragged in his *Res Gestae* of expanding the empire to the natural limits of Roman *imperium*.⁸ The rivers and other physical features of the Empire were seen as natural places to stop expansion. But at no time prior to the late second century does one see these limits emerge specifically as “barriers” or “walls” rather than just natural, logical stopping points. Such references reveal a new stream of thought that emerged sometime in the second century but became more pronounced due to the events of the third century.

By the later Empire, the image is clear. Romans began to imagine physical features as their frontiers whenever possible. The Roman Empire became seen as bounded by various physical or topographical features. Mountains, rivers, deserts, and the sea were all recognized as the frontiers to Roman holdings.

Firm challenges to the concept of natural frontiers have questioned whether physical features actually functioned as frontiers of empire. J. C. Mann puts one view succinctly:

To the unthinking, the Rhine or the Danube can appear as a “natural frontier.” No such thing as a “natural frontier” exists. Rivers in particular hardly ever function as effective boundaries between groups.⁹

Such pronouncements generally come from structural functionalists, many of whom have been strongly influenced by the *Annales* school. Although C. R. Whittaker describes himself as somewhere in the middle between structural functionalists and behaviorists, his own position on this issue puts him clearly with the former. He claims that “politicians find rivers or mountains convenient geographic markers around which to bargain or focus patriotic fervor,” but natural frontiers never really functioned as frontiers. He and many other Roman historians see mountains, rivers, and deserts not as real barriers but as having been “‘promoted to the dignity of being a natural frontier’ by victorious nations in the process of expansion, and in the desire to define space.”¹⁰

Such statements appropriately caution against taking ancient references too quickly at face value, especially the type of rhetorical sources used throughout this study; but they also seem to overstate the case. Many of Whittaker’s examples are drawn from nineteenth- and twentieth-century contexts and say little about the ancient context and ancient responses to geographical features

of the landscape. To say, as he does, that the Duke of Wellington rejected the Indus River as a frontier in India in 1808, for example, need not mean that the same could be said of the Romans and the Danube.¹¹ In terms of worldview, physical features were crucial to Roman understanding of frontiers. Perhaps natural features are ineffective militarily (although even a certain number of Roman military historians are beginning seriously to doubt this chestnut),¹² but it is perfectly natural to imagine them as frontiers or boundaries. The sources say as much, even, especially those that were not part of the Roman political propaganda machine.

B. Isaac's denial that geography determined the boundaries of Empire seems motivated by a desire to see how the frontiers actually functioned, usually in military or strategic terms, and he does much to illuminate the eastern frontiers in an ancient military context.¹³ But he, like Whittaker, is concerned much "less about ideology than about actuality."¹⁴ What Isaac, Whittaker, and others seem to be questioning is whether physical features actually served as strategic frontiers in any meaningful sense. Were they used to shape a frontier policy or strategic planning in any global or long-range sense?

These questions are not unimportant; rather, they are irrelevant to this study. Whittaker himself claims, in commenting on Roman imperial ideologies, that "ideology is no guide to the reality of frontiers."¹⁵ My interest is not so much in how frontiers or natural frontiers functioned in a strategic sense but rather in how they were perceived—the habitus shaped in schools like Autun. Glimpses of those perceptions in media of the day are vitally important for understanding how Romans viewed their frontiers and their world.

In his famous polemic against the pagans, Orosius gives a fascinating overview of the whole world, noting its divisions into three major parts as well as by regions and provinces.¹⁶ This work can be considered a medium in that it reports on current problems to people demanding an explanation for recent happenings within the Roman Empire.¹⁷ The whole world, he notes, is under the control of the city of Rome, even to his present time. As he describes each region, he follows Pliny in mentioning natural features and the number of *ethne* in each area. In almost every case, the critical border for each region, large or small, tends to be a river, a mountain, or the sea. When Orosius defines what separates Roman territory from "barbarian," he records, for example, that the "Danube separates territory from the land of the barbarians in the direction of Our Sea."¹⁸ The "farthest boundaries" of Africa are the Atlas Range. Orosius, a Spanish monk, does not seem to be promoting natural boundaries to the level of frontier as imperial propaganda, unless that itself forms a central, if unconscious, part of his habitus. He exults in the Roman Empire as the fulfillment of God's plan for the earth, but he is not blind to

problems and losses. In other parts of his work, he is content to see that God himself controls the Empire's frontiers and allowed barbarians to enter or violate them simply by removing his protective hand.¹⁹ And yet Orosius focuses on physical and natural features as boundaries to empire. Perhaps he has imbibed imperial ideology here, but it is useful to set this type of ideology in the context of his own thought and that of his contemporaries, for clearly it had a strong hold on his own worldview. It shapes his whole view of geography.

Mountains, Oceans, Deserts

In what is most likely the only formal definition of a Roman frontier term from before the modern period, Suidas, a tenth-century Byzantine lexicographer, offers the following, using a popular Late Roman example.²⁰

Eschatia. The areas toward the *termasi* of the land are called *eschatia*, which border on a mountain or the sea. . . . Again, Diocletian, when considering the state of the empire, considered it necessary to strengthen all *eschatia* with sufficient forces and to build forts.²¹

In Greek sources of the Roman period, *eschatia* is the equivalent of the Latin *limes*.²² Suidas probably based his example here on descriptions in Zosimus.²³ It is interesting that he singles out mountains and the sea specifically as the site for *eschatia*.

The notion that mountains divide territory has a long history. The Romans were not exceptional among peoples, ancient and modern, in imagining that mountains bounded their territory of control. Herodian, it will be recalled, claimed mountains as one of the natural features with which Augustus fortified the boundaries of the Roman Empire.²⁴ A similar reference appears in the writing of the fourth-century philosopher and rhetorician Themistius. Dismayed over the "indescribable Iliad of disasters" of the barbarian invasions of the late fourth century, he would claim that not even "uncrossable mountains" could hold out the hordes of barbarians. This reference is linked to "unfordable rivers" and "unpassable wastes." Ammianus likewise presents the Taurus Mountains as separating the peoples beyond the Tigris from Armenia.²⁵ From a later period, Procopius describes how the "Persians opened the way from Iberia into Colchis which was beset at every point by precipitous ravines and unmanageable brush, with woods so thick that, before the Persians, it seemed impassable even to a fit man."²⁶

Oceans and the sea also functioned as frontiers and boundaries in a Roman worldview. In fact, ocean was presented under the Principate as the

“most prestigious boundary” for measuring conquest.²⁷ The author of the *Expositio Totius Mundi* refers to the Ocean as “a waste, and there is the end of the world.”²⁸ Romans traditionally treated the ocean as part of the boundary of the earth itself. The elder Seneca, for example, presented “the outer ocean” as “earth’s boundary, the border of nature itself, oldest element and birthplace of the gods—darkness prevails here.”²⁹ Ocean himself, a deity, was the father of rivers, also boundaries.³⁰ In oration and panegyric, ocean functions more visibly as a boundary. The linking of Roman rule to this type of “from sea to sea” imagery is fairly common. As Libanius put it at one point, “Constantius, besides possession of the islands and regions lying upon the Atlantic, was master of the land from the very far shores up to the streams of the Euphrates.”³¹ An inscription to Julian records that as “lord of the whole world,” his rule extends at one extreme from the Britannic Ocean.³² A panegyricist sees the two oceans as the places where the sun sets and rises—all, of course, under the sway of the emperor.³³

Oceans also hold a crucial position in the Roman cosmology. The so-called Near Eastern cosmology envisioned the ocean as chaos surrounding the cosmos. The Ptolemaic cosmology did not dispense with this image entirely, even as it set forth a planetary picture of cosmos. Eusebius writes, “In the Middle, like a core, He laid out the earth, and then encircled this with Ocean to embellish its outline with dark-blue color.”³⁴ The ocean is more decorative now than a threat to the cosmos, as it is presented in the Old Testament and other Near Eastern writings as well as the Revelation of St. John (21:1). St. Augustine would summarize his own view of the world in commentary on Psalm 72:8:

For the land is encircled by a great sea which is called the Ocean: from which there flows in some small part in the midst of the lands, and makes those seas known to us which are frequented by ships. Again, in *from seas unto sea*, that from any one end of the earth even unto any other end, He would be Lord.³⁵

He explains this passage again in a letter concerning the end of the world. He writes that the “universe is surrounded by the Ocean Sea,” and then he refers to “the whole world which is, in a sense, the greatest island of all because the Ocean also girds it about.”³⁶ To St. Augustine, as to his contemporaries, the Ocean was the ultimate boundary. Later, Isidore of Seville would envision Terra as a region surrounded everywhere by the Ocean, which “flowing around encompasses its borders in a circle.”³⁷ Orosius likewise shares this cosmography of the ocean. In his view, the whole world is surrounded by a periphery of

ocean. The boundary of Europe is the Western Ocean, “where the Pillars of Hercules are viewed near the Gades Islands and where the Ocean tide empties into the mouth of the Tyrrhenian Sea.” But at the same time, Orosius could present the Roman Empire as extending almost to the outer part of the ocean: “The boundaries of Africa toward the west are the same as those of Europe, that is, the mouth of the Strait of Gades.”³⁸ His wording suggests the difficulty at times of distinguishing cosmological references to the bounds of earth and the boundaries of the Roman Empire. As seen earlier, the union of cosmology and empire is significant to worldview.

The connection of ocean to boundedness was very powerful in Late Antique art and iconography. Abundant mosaics present Ocean as encircling the earth.³⁹ This idea is echoed in a mosaic inscription from the transept of the basilica of Dumetios in Nikopolis, which describes a scene portrayed there.

Here you see the famous and boundless ocean
Containing in its midst the earth
Bearing round about in the skillful images of art everything
that breathes and creeps
The foundation of Dumetios, the great-hearted archpriest.⁴⁰

This same image is expressed in panegyric, where Ocean is said to “gird the earth.”⁴¹

As seen with Themistius, deserts also functioned as frontiers.⁴² The desert frontiers were quite extensive, reaching from southern Syria and across Africa to Mauretania and the Atlantic. Surprisingly, they figure only slightly in recorded Roman ideology and cosmography. Successful invasions generally did not come from the desert frontiers, and their place in the sources is consequently small. In the words of C. Daniels, “in short, the desert frontier was successfully held, over immense distances and by the smallest regional armies, for something over half a millennium.”⁴³

Rivers

I do not know much about gods; but I think that the river
Is a strong brown god—sullen, untamed and intractable
Patient to some degree, at first recognised as a frontier
—T. S. Eliot, *The Dry Salvages*

It was not until the early 1970s, particularly with C. Wells’s *German Policy of Augustus*, that Roman historians seriously began to question the significance

of rivers to the Empire and its frontiers. It had long been assumed by most writers of history (of any era and context) that rivers served as natural barriers. The Roman Empire was pictured by most historians as clearly bounded by the Rhine, Danube, and Euphrates on its northern and eastern frontiers for most periods. The rivers themselves complemented a firmly held view that saw linear barriers, like Maginot lines, surrounding the Roman Empire. Beginning with Wells, many Roman historians proposed that rivers in fact served as links between peoples on both banks or as modes of transportation and communication rather than as boundaries. Rivers, in effect, came to be seen as highways or bridges rather than as barriers.⁴⁴ From that time until very recently, this view has held a firm consensus. Roman historians following this trend effectively have challenged a simplistic view of a Roman Empire surrounded at all periods by linear barriers.

Initially, the “bridges rather than barriers” view of rivers gave little if any credit to the *Annales* historian L. Febvre. Writing exactly fifty years before the publication of Wells’s book, Febvre first proposed (in his *La Terre et l’Évolution Humaine*) that rather than serving as natural frontiers, rivers in fact link groups together for common activities such as trade and communication. It had taken exactly half of a century for Febvre’s idea to hit mainstream Roman historiography.⁴⁵ Many Roman military historians in particular, following Wells, have essentially argued that rivers were never military barriers and hence did not serve in a significant sense as the barriers that ancients and moderns alike had imagined them as being. The argument has been made for many contexts and not just for the Roman Empire.⁴⁶ While it certainly may be debated to what extent rivers function as military or strategic barriers in reality, it remains important not to ignore the place of rivers in the worldview of ancients.⁴⁷ A Roman view of rivers encompassed a variety of factors, cosmological and religious among them.

To be sure, available sources do refer to rivers as modes of transportation and communication. Gregory Nazianzus, for example, in describing Julian’s Persian expedition, presents him using the Tigris as a way to carry his provisions as he marched next to it.⁴⁸ And Persians were notorious for being able to cross the Euphrates very easily by building temporary bridges.⁴⁹ And yet it does not follow that such pictures invalidate rivers as significant boundaries in the minds of Romans.⁵⁰ It is not clear to me how rivers “could hardly have served as a line of communication” if, in fact, they “became considered a defensive line.”⁵¹ Whittaker here denies, in fact, that they were considered a defensive barrier, but that seems an overstatement in light of the evidence.

The abundance of references in Roman sources to rivers as boundaries speaks strongly to the contrary. A full range of factors shaped the ways that

Romans viewed their rivers and their frontiers. In the recent words of D. Braund, one of a growing number of dissenters from the Febvre/Wells thesis,

For Romans, boundaries were redolent of rivers and rivers of boundaries at centre and periphery alike. . . . From a Roman perspective, rivers were indeed natural boundaries in a sense that includes their religiosity, their natural power and their tendency to divide and to bound. . . . Modern strategists . . . miss much of the point which lies embedded in the environmental psychology of the Roman world.⁵²

M. J. Nicasie is another recent historian who has begun to question the current consensus that rivers do not make sense as barriers in military terms.⁵³ More recently, S. Mattern claims that even during the Principate, “in some ways the river boundaries functioned as political borders,” and she provides some telling evidence.⁵⁴

One of the strongest attempts to refute the natural frontiers model with actual ancient evidence is by Isaac.⁵⁵ A critical dialogue with his view might explain how mine differs both in emphasis and conclusion as well as in interpretation of the ancient evidence. His method is, first of all, to quote passages to the effect that rivers were not difficult to cross when bridges, boats, and trained swimmers were available. The specific swimmers he mentions, the Batavians, were known for their abilities, and he refers to Tacitus and Dio to that effect.⁵⁶ But Isaac fails to mention that the same passage also records that other barbarians were terrified by the demonstration of the Batavians—that is, it was not a normal “barbarian” thing to be able to swim rivers with ease. Other swimmers, described as Germans, actually fought on the Roman side during Claudius’ (r. A.D. 41–54) campaign. Isaac draws from this fact that if any army were to be hampered by rivers, it would, in fact, be the Roman rather than the barbarian.⁵⁷ Isaac then uses Dio to show that rivers can be bridged with little difficulty, as Roman soldiers regularly practiced building bridges on the Danube, the Rhine, and the Euphrates.⁵⁸ So far, so good—but the issue at stake seems to be whether barbarians were building bridges at all, and neither Isaac nor his references give any hints that they might be. Thus, it seems that the point stands that barbarians would also have been hindered in crossing rivers if even bridge-building Romans in fact were.⁵⁹ Isaac does not prove his case here but rather turns the issue around by showing that Romans were hindered rather than answering whether the barbarians were actually blocked out en masse by rivers. It seems, even as his own examples make fairly clear, that they were.

Next, Isaac turns to a passage from *De Rebus Bellicis* that provides, as he sees it, crucial refutation of the concept of natural frontiers. I quote at length the same section he does, written ca. 368–69:⁶⁰

First of all it must be recognized that frenzied native tribes, yelping everywhere around, hem the Roman empire in, and that treacherous barbarians, protected by natural defenses, menace every stretch of our frontiers. For these peoples to whom I refer are for the most part either hidden by forests or lifted beyond our reach by mountains or kept from us by the snows; some, nomadic, are protected by deserts and the blazing sun. There are those who, defended by marshes and rivers, cannot even be located easily, and yet they tear peace and quiet to shreds by their unforeseen attacks. Tribes of this kind, therefore, who are protected either by natural defenses such as these or by the walls of towns and towers, must be attacked with a variety of novel armed devices.⁶¹

The passage is significant, Isaac claims, because it shows “genuine ancient comments on the value of natural obstacles as the frontier, made by a man with a professional interest in military affairs.”⁶² Natural features, he concludes, are then obstacles to Roman action rather than barriers to repel barbarians.

This simply does not follow. The passage occurs in a description of offensive military machines and does not seem to be making overarching statements about the defense of the empire against the “yelping savages.” Truly if the river is a barrier to action for the Romans on one side of the river, it will be so (if not more so) for barbarians on the other as well. The anonymous author seems to be giving us a view from only one side of the river here—interestingly, the defense against the barbarians. None of this precludes the view from the other side, namely that the Romans also are protected by such obstacles from those who “menace every stretch of our frontiers.” To continue, as Isaac does, that the “only strategy [the anonymous author of *De Rebus Bellicis*] can conceive of is preventative or retaliatory attack across the frontier” is an argument from silence at best. The context, again, is a description of military equipment, and that focuses the author’s presentation—any argument about the real limits of his conception from this passage seems a stretch.

Rivers were easy to ford, Isaac continues, because of easily transportable bridges that the Romans could carry and that the anonymous author in fact describes. But what about the barbarians, who, it seems, should be the real focus? We are not told here or elsewhere whether the barbarians had transportable bridges. Other evidence suggests, in fact, that they generally did not.⁶³

Therefore, it seems to me that the passage could in fact be implying the opposite of what Isaac argues—namely, that the rivers did a better job keeping barbarians on one side of them than Romans, even if rivers and other natural obstacles also served to shelter the barbarians (and hence the need for military machines). Again, without the benefit of bridges and machines, how effective could the barbarians be against the Romans?

Isaac continues with references to easily crossed rivers, but, again, his examples generally fail to convince. He cites as evidence barbarians crossing on the frozen Danube from Pliny's *Panegyric* and Florus' *Epitome*. Isaac concludes, "In other words, the river, at least in winter time, did not help in keeping them out." So much is true, although that did not seem to restrict barbarian campaigns to that time of year either.⁶⁴ Such statements should not be taken as a general refutation of rivers as barriers. Although the Danube did freeze regularly, it did not do so consistently.⁶⁵ The whole ancient fuss about a frozen river, it seems, could hardly be stronger indication that the unfrozen river was, in fact, seen as a substantial barrier.

Isaac's further analysis of *Panegyric* 6.11.1 is generally unconvincing as well. "We are not now defended by the waters of the Rhine, but by the terror of your name" appears to be epideictic praise of the emperor rather than, as Isaac suggests, the general denial or depreciation of a river barrier as such.⁶⁶ Isaac continues with the panegyric, "Nature does not close off any land with such an insurmountable wall that courage cannot cross it." But, again, this statement seems to be in praise of the type of courage that can surmount the difficult-to-cross bounds set by Nature. If just anyone could cross them at will, then what is so praiseworthy about this emperor? Isaac's own reference seems, again, to argue against his case. His final example, from Procopius, that Persians could cross the Euphrates easily because of bridge-building equipment, is more convincing.⁶⁷ And yet it also shows that rivers would generally be crossed only for large-scale invasions. Isaac thus proves the point I will argue later in the chapter: that crossing a frontier river was perceived as entering a foreign land.

Isaac's case against rivers as natural frontiers simply does not hold much water, in my estimation. My point here is not necessarily to resuscitate rivers as "scientific" boundaries but rather to argue that they were, in fact, *perceived* as frontiers of the Roman Empire by the Romans and probably the barbarians as well. Rivers thus served an important role in the worldview of Romans.

The treatment of rivers as frontiers is clear both in terminology and in concept. In the early Empire, rivers were presented at times as the natural bounds of *imperium* or imperial power. By the later Empire, however, they are seen more as linear boundaries. From the early Empire, the term *ripa*

(riverbank) was used to designate a river boundary.⁶⁸ Tacitus records one such example: “It was no longer the land and river-boundaries of the empire, but the winter quarters of the legions and the ownership of territories which were in danger.”⁶⁹ Here Tacitus distinguishes land and river boundaries, a separation that does not hold past the fourth century, when *limes* becomes a term used as well for river. But here we see rivers serving as the boundaries of imperial power, or *imperium*.

A further example shows this same tendency to distinguish land and river boundaries and gives hints to the way that late Romans imagined natural barriers. Although it is difficult to determine whether the author is presenting a late-Imperial or a second-century perspective, the author of the *Scriptores Historiae Augustae* records, in a reference to Hadrian’s reign, how a river separates Roman from barbarian: “In many areas where the barbarians are separated [from the empire] not by rivers but by land boundaries [Hadrian] shut them off with high stakes planted deep in the earth and fastened together so as to form a palisade.”⁷⁰ The implication here is that rivers were imagined as the boundary separating Roman from barbarian, and their absence was seen as a lack of such a boundary.⁷¹ Otherwise, it would hardly be worth mentioning the fact that in some places barbarians were not so separated. The construction of the palisade seems to be an attempt to make up for nature’s deficiency.

By the later Roman Empire, the term *limes* became more clearly associated with rivers in a way that it never was for the earlier Empire.⁷² Perhaps the constant association through time of rivers at or near *limites* blended the two in Roman minds. News from their frontiers often was associated with rivers, particularly on the northern and eastern frontiers. Ammianus, for example, could write in the late fourth century that the “*limes* of the East, extending a long distance in a straight line, reaches from the banks of the Euphrates River to the borders of the Nile.”⁷³ The association of *limes* and river is clear and specific to the later Empire. Another late Imperial source likewise refers to “forts on the Rhine, Danube, and Euphrates frontiers.”⁷⁴ Jerome refers in an epistle to the fact that the “frontier of the Danube has been shattered” by barbarian invasions.⁷⁵ As will be seen later in the chapter, he is communicating news about the frontier in this letter, and he equates the frontier with the Danube River. This change in terminology concomitant to a shift in frontier consciousness is expected; rivers no longer serve as the outer limits of expansion or just dividers of peoples but as the frontier and *limes* of empire.

One could object that because the term *limes* occurs more frequently in later sources than earlier, it might mean little, then, to say that its application to rivers is also more frequent. But we have gone from absence to frequency, a change that cannot be ignored. The change in meaning is further highlighted

by usage in other fourth-century writers. Ausonius, a fourth-century teacher and writer, speaks of a river as a *limes*. He describes the emperor Gratian in glowing terms: “a most powerful emperor: the witness, pacified in one year, is the *limes* of the Danube and the Rhine.”⁷⁶ *Limes* qualifies the rivers.

This is not to say that *limes* became exclusively associated with *river*. In fact, other writers from the fourth century continue to see a difference between *limes* and *river*, although the association is stronger than in early imperial writings. Festus claims that “Trajan made Armenia, Mesopotamia, Assyria and Arabia provinces and established the eastern *limes* beyond the banks of the Tigris.” And “Mesopotamia was restored and beyond the banks of the Tigris a *limes* was re-established, so that we gained sovereignty over five peoples beyond the Tigris.”⁷⁷ Such references anachronistically reflect a late Imperial change in the meaning of the terminology, which can allow it to be more strongly associated with rivers.

Even where the term *limes* is not specifically connected with rivers, available sources present rivers as the actual boundaries of empire. The connection of rivers to imperial power was strong from earlier times, but its expression would change in the later Empire. The tie might be summed up for the early empire in a phrase from Propertius (born ca. 50 B.C.): “*Tigris et Euphrates sub tua iura fluent* [the Tigris and Euphrates flow under your jurisdiction].”⁷⁸ Here the eastern rivers flow under the jurisdiction of Augustus rather than serve as the literal limits of empire. The ambiguity of Rome’s imperial reach is apparent in such early references. By the later Empire, Romans could look back, anachronistically, on a long history of eastern rivers serving clearly as their *limites*. Much earlier, rivers had functioned as some type of division, at least in the mind of Romans. As early as the 90s B.C. a governor of Cilicia negotiated an agreement with the Parthian king in which the Euphrates was set as the bound of their respective holdings.⁷⁹ Crassus, according to one Late Antique source, was rebuked by the Parthians for crossing the Euphrates contrary to a treaty made between Lucullus and Pompey.⁸⁰ The Parthians, it seems, held the Romans to that agreement. Later developments challenged this arrangement. Trajan, for example, established the eastern frontier at the Tigris—although Festus, in terms more comprehensible to a fourth- than a second-century audience, records a *limes* beyond the Tigris—a move rejected by Trajan’s successor, Hadrian, who wanted the border between the Persians and the Romans to be the Euphrates. These arrangements had a long resonance within the collective memory of the Romans.⁸¹ They became, in effect, benchmark moments of history by which Romans could evaluate the condition of the present empire. Galerius’ defeat of the Persians in 298, for example, was seen as reestablishing the boundary between Rome and Persia set by Trajan.⁸²

Clearly, then, the status of rivers as boundaries played a key role in frontier consciousness, and this consciousness crystallized in the later empire. By this time, the memory of the river bounding the two empires was long. Julian calls the Euphrates the “ancient boundary” (ὄρος ἀρχαῖος) between “that country and ours.”⁸³ The pilgrim Egeria calls the Euphrates the *fines Mesopotamiae*.⁸⁴ In reference to what Persians could have taken from the Romans, Libanius uses the formula that they could have extended “all the way to the Euphrates, the Orontes, the Cydnus, the Sangarius, or to the Bosphorus itself.”⁸⁵ The reference points for territorial conquest, at least from a late Roman perspective, have become rivers.

The idea of rivers as boundaries occurs in most historical accounts from later Roman sources.⁸⁶ Theodoret (393–466), monk, bishop, and native of Antioch, writes of the Persian campaign of 363 that Julian’s folly was that he “crossed the river which separates the Roman Empire from the Persian” and burned his ships.⁸⁷ To Zosimus as well, crossing a frontier river was synonymous with leaving the Roman Empire itself. He claims that Julian’s crossing of the Rhine in 357 was a way to assure that war was fought in “barbarian rather than Roman territory.” He further writes that on the Danube, “Romans were to retain what they previously possessed with full security and the barbarians were forbidden to cross the river or to enter Roman territory at all.” The two actions, it must be noted, are contemporaneous; crossing the river is entering Roman territory. In one case, the besieged Palmyrenes decide to “flee to the Euphrates and there seek aid from the Persians against the Romans.” When describing barbarian affairs beyond Roman borders, Zosimus writes that the Saxons sent the Quadi into Roman territory but were “hindered from crossing the river by the neighboring Franks.”⁸⁸ Again, crossing the river is tantamount to entering or exiting Roman territory. Zosimus further writes concerning the eastern frontier that when Julian “penetrated the Persian frontier,” he was crossing the Euphrates River.⁸⁹

There was also something intrinsically symbolic for Romans about crossing rivers as frontiers. This aspect can be seen early in Roman Imperial history with Caesar’s famous crossing of the Rubicon, which Suetonius calls “the boundary between Gaul and Italy.”⁹⁰ The theme continues, even as the boundaries are stretched far and wide. According to Ammianus, one of the two central oaths of conquest that Trajan would swear was “as I hope to cross the Hister and the Euphrates on bridges.”⁹¹ Trajan’s column uses scenes of river crossing to represent Roman departure into barbarian land. It begins with a series of forts along the Danube River and proceeds with figures crossing in boats.⁹² And crossing rivers, especially those near the eastern frontiers, was suggestive of invading a foreign power. The column of Marcus Aurelius does much the same thing.

The later Empire saw the solidification of these symbols from the earlier Empire. As Libanius writes of Julian's campaign, he "is still crossing rivers, facing the might of Persia, pondering upon his invasion, and considering how, when and where to attack the foe." Here, news from the front, the type Libanius craved and for which he carried on his lively letter exchange, is couched in language of crossing rivers. Rivers could be crossed in both directions; Libanius suggests in a letter that Julian needs wings to bring himself quickly back over the Euphrates to be restored to Roman territory, symbolized by "our river, the Orontes." Libanius also records in panegyric that a foe "cannot capture cities by the Euphrates or attempt to cross the Tigris . . . for the emperor's fortune fortifies them."⁹³

This idea of crossing a river as equivalent to entering another's territory is captured well in an inscription from Ancyra. Julian, "lord of the whole world," is praised for conquering right up to and crossing the Tigris after defeating the barbarians in the West. The inscription is a tribute both to the fact that crossing the Tigris was symbolic of leaving the Roman Empire and to the fact that news could travel very quickly from the eastern frontier to communication centers like Ancyra.⁹⁴

Perhaps because of their tendency to use symbols and metaphor, orations and panegyrics from Late Antiquity often imply that rivers were boundaries. In them we can see that the idea of "boundariness" of rivers is functioning even more strongly than in earlier times.⁹⁵ Reading panegyrics is tricky, however, as it involves appreciating the hyperbolic conventions of epideixis while still gleaning hints of worldview and actual fact. Panegyrics are a way of communicating news from the frontier, of special interest from the fourth century onward. The orator would receive the facts and put them into a rhetorical format for proclaiming those facts widely. Libanius gets much of his material from letters from or beyond the frontier. It is when requesting such information from beyond the eastern frontier that he tells one informant, "you will inform me of the bare facts, I will clothe them in the garb of oratory."⁹⁶ In one panegyric, Julian connects directly Constantius II's crossing of the Tigris with entering the enemy's country. "You often crossed that river [Tigris] with your army and spent a long time in the enemy's territory [*en te polemia*]."⁹⁷ Libanius would praise Constantius as "master of the land from the very far shores up to the streams of the Euphrates."⁹⁸ Libanius later recanted such praise, bestowing it on Constantius' rival, Julian. The river now became for Constantius a symbol of loss: "Every year Persians would cross the rivers and desolate cities; Constantius would arrive and be thankful that they did not do worse." Julian would then be praised in Constantius' place as the master of the rivers—"although 70 days march from the Tigris, you caused panic among the Persians

who were threatening our cities.”⁹⁹ Libanius also used riverine allusions to praise Julian after hearing news of that emperor’s victory in the West. Messengers brought the news first to Constantius but could not contain it:

many messengers sped to your senior colleague, but none requested an army of reinforcement; all bore tidings of victory. The news spread and burst upon the Persians, and then they prayed for you to stay in Rhine regions, while the Germans prayed for you to cross the Tigris.¹⁰⁰

Libanius, in effect, conceives of the rivers as the boundaries between the Roman and Persian and/or barbarian lands. In a panegyric to the Emperor Theodosius II (r. 402–50), Claudian presents a personified Roma asking a series of questions:

Was it with a looser grip that the men of old held the Danube and the Rhine, they who made me their home? Did Tigris and Euphrates tremble less, when from this place, and from my citadel, the Indian and the Mede begged for treaties that would give them peace?¹⁰¹

All three major frontier rivers are presented as setting out the limits of the inhabitation of the Romans.

The invasions and warfare of the third and fourth centuries prompted a heightened proliferation of news about frontiers in general and are no doubt partly behind the shifts in meaning that concepts like *limes* were undergoing. Rivers functioned as the specified frontier between Roman and Other. Rivers could serve as demarcations of culture, at least in media. The Thirteenth Sibylline Oracle, in reference to battles of the third century, describes the appearance of a mysterious figure:

When the swift-moving man flees from Syria through Soura, escaping the Romans across the flood of the Euphrates, no longer like to the Romans, but to the arrogant arrow-shooting Persians, then the king of the Italians will fall in battle, smitten by gleaming iron, in a state of disarray; and his sons will be destroyed by him.¹⁰²

In crossing the Euphrates, this figure begins even to look more like a Persian. Whether this passage is meant to be taken literally or not, its symbolism is clear—crossing the river makes one actually look like the Other across it. St. Jerome would write in response to events since the infamous Battle of Adrianople in 378,

Now for a long time, from the Black Sea to the Julian Alps, our land has not been ours. During the last 30 years, the frontier of the Danube has been destroyed and war has fallen upon soil in the very center of the Roman empire.¹⁰³

In imagining what was at one time at least a demarcation between Roman land and that of others, Jerome sees a crucial moment of transition to be the destruction of the Danube frontier. The problems have even gone from periphery to center, and the loss of the *Danubii limites* has brought catastrophe throughout the Roman Empire. Referring to the same catastrophe, the orator Themistius lamented how the “indescribable Iliad of disasters on the Danube” had led to the Roman empire being overrun—not even “unfordable rivers” had been able to keep out the barbarians. The implication here, once again, is that the rivers were, at some level, construed as natural boundaries for keeping the barbarians out.¹⁰⁴ The shock of the barbarian conquest is that the Goths had surmounted such seemingly impossible obstacles.

Further hints to the place of rivers in the worldview of the Romans may be found in visual and verbal references to the sacredness or even divinity of rivers.¹⁰⁵ Like the Greeks before them, the Romans imagined rivers as gods, descending from Oceanus, the father of all rivers.¹⁰⁶ The Danube, for example, was revered locally as a deity.¹⁰⁷ The sacred character of rivers may also be seen in the ceremonies of propitiation required for crossing them. The river gods were to be appeased with sacrifices before a bridge could be built across a river.¹⁰⁸

Statues and depictions of river gods abound and give some visual insight into the place of rivers in a Roman worldview. Multiple depictions of river gods, often assuming reclining poses, may be seen in the *Lexicon Iconographicum Mythologiae Classicae*.¹⁰⁹ Euphrates often appears in a reclining pose, suggesting a supine boundary.¹¹⁰ Some rivers appear here with long, flowing tails, signifying the flow of the river.¹¹¹ Trajan’s column depicts the Roman troops leaving Roman territory by crossing the Danube while the river god Danuvius looks on, immersed up to his midriff in the water.¹¹² The deified Euphrates and Tigris appear on Trajan’s arch at Benevento. On the reverse of one coin of Trajan, the Tigris and Euphrates are portrayed along with an inscription celebrating Armenia and Mesopotamia under his power.¹¹³ And the Merida Mosaic Map has personifications of the Euphrates on it.¹¹⁴ That the theme continued in Late Antiquity can be seen in the grand effigies of the Nile and Tigris in the Baths of Constantine.¹¹⁵ The iconography of rivers reminds us of their sacred status as well as their status as a boundary. Abundant numismatic evidence suggests more of the same functions.



Fig. 6. River gods on coin. Trajan standing; Euphrates and Tigris reclining with Armenia subjugated (*Armenia et Mesopotamia in potestem P R redactae*).

In the later Empire, rivers continued to be deified or, in a Christian context, personified. Numerous mosaics depict personified rivers. The Basilica of Thyrso, for example, depicts the Tigris and Euphrates as persons.¹¹⁶ The iconography of rivers is also expressed in terms of the rivers of paradise flowing somewhere near the eastern bounds of the world. In Christian cosmology, the rivers of paradise often were depicted as surrounding the whole earth, as the outer frame of the terrestrial world. Their appearance on mosaics, especially at the frames, suggests a continuity of the idea of rivers as boundaries.¹¹⁷ The four rivers of paradise often serve as the outer frames of depictions of the terrestrial world, blending iconographically with Ocean.

Related to their role in the religious world of Romans, rivers were believed to have been put in place by forces of nature that were not to be disturbed. The elder Pliny presents rivers as having a harmonious relationship



Fig. 7. Tigris from basilica nave. Tegea, Basilica of Thyrsos. (Courtesy of Henry Maguire, *Earth and Ocean: The Terrestrial World in Early Byzantine Art* [Penn State University Press, 1987].)

with humans. They could serve as prophets of warning, at other times demarcations. Rivers, as part of the natural order, were in place for a reason. Pliny, for example, sees changing their course as “*contra naturam*.”¹¹⁸ Although this could equally refer to rivers at the center as at the periphery, it is specifically invoked for the frontier rivers. There was something about their placement that implied dividing and bounding.

Such images continued into the later Empire. In his *Satire on the Caesars*, Julian depicts Octavian in an argument with Alexander the Great over who was the greater ruler. Octavian claims, “For I did not give way to boundless

ambition and aim at enlarging her empire at all costs, but assigned for it two boundaries, defined as it were by nature herself, the Danube and the Euphrates."¹¹⁹ Inflated rhetoric aside, Nature herself had determined these boundaries, at least from Julian's fourth-century perspective. In a panegyric already referenced, one emperor is praised because now his own name makes up the boundary of the empire while "previously it seemed that Nature herself had mapped out the Rhine so that the Roman provinces might be protected from the savagery of the barbarian by that boundary."¹²⁰ Nature was behind the placement of the rivers, and their role as frontiers is fairly clear.¹²¹

Christians, likewise, saw rivers as a part of Nature, although their view of how Nature was governed could differ from traditional Roman views.¹²² The fourth-century Cappadocian father St. Basil describes natural boundaries in an extended reference in one of his homilies.

How is it that all the different species of fishes, having been allotted a place suitable for them, do not intrude upon one another, but stay within their own bounds? No surveyor apportioned the dwellings among them; they were not surrounded with walls nor divided by boundaries; but what was useful for each was definitely and spontaneously settled. This bay gives sustenance to certain kinds of fish and that one, to other kinds; and those that teem here are scarce everywhere. No mountain extending upward with sharp peaks separates them; no river cuts off the means of crossing; but there is a certain law of nature which allots the habitat to each kind equally and justly according to its need. (4) We, however, are not such. Why? Because we pass beyond the ancient bounds [ὄρια αἰώνια] which our fathers set.¹²³

This passage and the quotation from Proverbs 22:28 at the end suggest much about how Romans, perhaps specifically Christians, viewed the boundaries set by God through Nature. At one level, Basil's homily here may be read in terms of a Cappadocian civic patriotism.¹²⁴ Throughout his letters and homilies, he is complaining about efforts by non-Cappadocians to take over his territory. People impinge on others by taking over parts of their villages, cities, provinces, and countries.¹²⁵ It is the "law of nature" that constrains the fish—humans, Basil implies, need visible boundaries, like surveyor lines, mountains, and rivers. Passages such as this can reveal attitudes toward such natural boundaries. Why would Rome want to impinge on the territories of others when clear natural boundaries existed?¹²⁶

The Euphrates River particularly becomes a reference point for boundary or limit from the Scriptures. Examples of its use show the effects of scriptural

texts and their echoes in the worldview of Late Romans. The Euphrates functions as a border in the Scriptures, a fact not lost on Romans of the later Empire. Genesis 15:18, for one of many such examples, sets the boundaries of Israel's Promised Land "from the river of Egypt unto the great river, the river Euphrates."¹²⁷ Such passages could be read by Romans with reference to the Roman Empire and its boundaries.

We have explicit proof that some were. Egeria, the western pilgrim, in describing the Euphrates, quotes Genesis 15:18:

The Bible is right to call it "the great river Euphrates." It is very big, and really rather frightening since it flows very fast like the Rhone, but the Euphrates is much bigger. We had to cross in ships, big ones. . . . After crossing the river Euphrates, I went on in God's name into the region of Syrian Mesopotamia.¹²⁸

Later, Cosmas, the sixth-century Christian "cosmographer," would write that the eastern border of the world itself is paradise from which flow four rivers, the Nile, Tigris, Euphrates, and the Pheison (Indus).¹²⁹ Cosmos' reference point for the eastern frontier or border of the world is river sources. We could critique his topographical accuracy, but that would do little justice to his own worldview, which saw rivers on the eastern border of the world itself, a worldview apparently shared by the average sixth-century Roman.¹³⁰ The fourth-century author of the *Expositio Totius Mundi* likewise devotes a space in his short geography of the world to speak of the centrality of these four rivers to universal topography.¹³¹

The Old Testament provided a timeless ideological model of frontiers. Its references were taken outside of historical time and into a continuous present, often with specific reference to the Roman Empire rather than the land of Israel. Ammianus himself uses phrasing that seems to echo biblical passages.¹³² In his formula connecting the Nile and Euphrates together as the *limes* of the East, his wording seems strongly reminiscent of the wording of Genesis 15:18, which also connects the two rivers as a boundary.

But the *limes* of the East, extending a long distance in a straight line, reaches from the banks of the Euphrates to the borders of the Nile, being bounded on the left by the Saracenic races and on the right exposed to the waves of the sea.¹³³

My point here is not that Ammianus studied Scripture regularly or that he is even intentionally echoing Scripture here but rather that its images shaped, at

some level, the way that he and others, possibly raised as Christians, viewed their world. A “biblical geography,” so to speak, was not unique to Christian pilgrims like Egeria or monks like Cosmas.¹³⁴

Epilogue: Shaping the Physical and Metaphysical Context

One thing is certain about the constructed barriers that survive from Roman times in England, North Africa, Germany, and elsewhere—recent historians are far more eloquent on their purpose than are ancient writers. References to them in ancient sources are rare. The author of the *Scriptores Historiae Augustae* was clear, in one such example, that walls were intended “to separate barbarians and Romans.”¹³⁵ This same author contends that Hadrian built structures wherever Romans did not have a natural barrier like a river to keep the barbarians out.

Most surviving structures, in fact, are attributed to Hadrian and a frontier policy of solidification and containment following Trajan’s expansion. The most famous “frontier” feature surviving from Roman times is the wall of Hadrian in Britain, followed distantly by the wall of Antoninus Pius. The role of such structures long has been debated, and modern views seem to change periodically with new interpretations of such barriers in general across human history.¹³⁶ Their role in the later Empire is even less clear. Other examples are the *fossata* ditches and *clausurae* walls of North Africa, also generally agreed to be of a Hadrianic construction, mostly through analogy with Hadrian’s other wall projects. It is far from certain what these ditches and small fence-walls were actually used for; even less can we generalize on their function over time and into the later Empire. Some of the latest arguments present them as designed to regulate the movement of pastoralists near North Africa’s frontier.¹³⁷ Rare, however, are real indications in the sources of what these structures were used for or how Romans perceived them. One example from Procopius presents an effective defensive function for small walls in the East, perhaps exaggerating a bit:

For the Saracens are naturally incapable of storming a wall, and the weakest kind of barricade, put together with perhaps nothing but mud, is sufficient to check their assault.¹³⁸

Such walls would have been smaller projects and can hardly approximate the larger and more famous ones in Britain and North Africa. It is difficult to be clear on any of these structures. Possibly, they were a way the Romans sought to surround their Empire with barriers where nature was not kind enough to

provide such for them. The presence of such structures does hint at a changing frontier consciousness.

In one intriguing reference, an edict by Honorius (409) states that land in Africa was granted to *gentiles* for the care and maintenance of the frontier and *fossatum*.¹³⁹ The association of *limes* and the *fossata* is explicit here, but this type of reference is quite rare, and few if any other references survive for corroboration. While it is thus tempting to suggest that the *fossata* were perceived as the *limes* by the fifth century, such a conclusion is far from certain. P. Troussel, citing boundary markers from beyond the *fossata*, warns against a picture that sees them as functioning literally as the limits of empire. Recent debates over the role of the *fossata* and *clausurae* range widely. Most now see them as elements of control and channeling of the northeast and southwest seasonal transhumance routes.¹⁴⁰ Some, however, have begun to challenge any picture that sees them purely as regulators of nomadic movement. Perhaps, as A. Rushworth contends, they are better seen as a whole series of responses to various problems on the frontier zone rather than just transhumance.¹⁴¹ Rushworth allows that such barriers were at least perceived to divide Roman from barbarian and “set clear limits to the Empire,” although he imagines that they were utilized locally “for far more prosaic concerns” as well.¹⁴² It remains unclear how one should interpret ideology from these silent monuments (that is, those without images or words), but it is certainly feasible that they could have functioned as barriers in the worldview of the Romans.¹⁴³ Mattern has recently suggested that walls had a “profound psychological impact.”¹⁴⁴

References to barriers and walls are elusive in Late Antique sources. Amianus describes how Diocletian encircled the city of Cercusium,

whose walls are washed by the Eborra and Euphrates rivers (which formed a kind of island) with walls and towers when he was arranging the inner lines of defense on the very frontiers of the barbarians in order to prevent Persians from overrunning Syria, as had happened a few years before with great damage to the provinces.¹⁴⁵

The walls of one city, anyway, were seen as protecting a section of the Empire. The later Empire saw a number of city walls constructed, such as the Theodosian Wall of Carthage, largely in response to barbarian threats, real or perceived. Speculating on how these walls were perceived is tempting but goes beyond available ancient evidence.

One of the key developments we can trace in available sources, however, is the imagination of ideological walls around the empire. Such references have been commented on before, but there is much controversy here as well.

Interestingly, there exists no general study of this phenomenon that takes into account all available evidence from the later Roman Empire. Following, most likely, from the type of containment carried out in various parts of the Empire under the direction of Hadrian, the Empire was imagined as encircled by a wall. At all events, the appearance of Hadrian's Wall in the literature coincides with Hadrian's policies. Appian is the first extant author to speak of this figurative wall around the empire, and the image persists far into Late Antiquity. These images emerge during the second century and give, perhaps, rare insight into a transition in Roman thinking about the Empire and its frontiers. This wall imagery, probably because of third-century developments, becomes more standard and solidified for the later Empire.

Appian speaks of a wall in a circle blockading and guarding the great army camp, pulling together the earth and sea as if a country.¹⁴⁶ A little later, Aelius Aristides speaks in these terms: "Beyond the outermost ring of the civilized world you drew a second line, quite as one does in walling a town. . . . An encamped army, like a rampart, encloses the civilized world in a ring."¹⁴⁷ Herodian, as seen earlier, speaks of the Empire as an army camp surrounded by a wall—*τείχος τῆς Ῥωμαίων ἀρχῆς*.¹⁴⁸ From the third century, the Thirteenth Sibylline Oracle refers to the barbarian invasions in general as "disorderly races" coming up against the walls of Rome (*ἐπὶ τείχεα Ῥώμης*).¹⁴⁹ The usage appears metaphorical of barbarian invasions throughout the Roman world.

By the later Roman Empire, the reference to such an ideological wall (or walls) had become more standard and appears in a wide variety of sources. The picture here backs up R. Seager's argument that Roman frontier policy in the fourth century was defensive in nature, even the Persian campaign of Julian.¹⁵⁰ Ammianus refers to Jovian's concessions of 363 as "abandoning the *muris* of the provinces, behind which they had remained unshaken since earliest times."¹⁵¹ Here, the eastern frontier, anyway, was imagined as a protection of the eastern provinces. John Chrysostom makes a similar suggestion when he writes of Nisibis itself as "an unbreachable wall [*teichos arages*]" of the Empire.¹⁵² Libanius echoes this exact image when he speaks of the "cities, territories, and provinces that formed the defensive walls [*ta teiche*] of the Roman Empire"; he mentions these while criticizing Jovian for conceding them all too quickly. In one panegyric to Julian, Libanius praises the emperor for the "*teichos* which you have constructed around the Roman Empire [*Romaion arche*]."¹⁵³ Libanius presents the wall as coming from a mixture of Julian's religious devotion and eloquence. The wall image continues in hagiographical writers. Severus of Antioch (patriarch 512–18), for example, praises the holy martyrs who make a "strong wall for all the inhabited

earth.”¹⁵⁴ In the context of martyr cult that was seen as protecting the Empire, such references in hagiography and other ecclesiastical writings show the endurance of the wall metaphor.¹⁵⁵

The development of the wall metaphor, like the shift in meaning in *limes*, is just one of many indications that the frontier consciousness of the Romans was in transition and that generalizations about frontiers in Roman thought for the early Empire simply do not apply absolutely for Late Antiquity. Walls, real or imagined, were of human construction. Yet it seems that they were also a way to mirror natural frontiers, the ideal boundaries of empire, at least according to late Roman frontier consciousness. So much is implied, at least, by the teaching that one would hope was able to proceed in the restored schools in Autun.

