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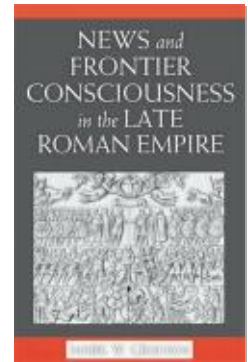
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Toward a Late Roman Cosmology of Space and Frontiers



I think Heaven smiled on you [Constantius] and willed that you should govern the whole world, and so from the first trained you in virtue, and was your guide when you journeyed to all points, and showed you the bounds and limits of the whole empire [τῆς ἀρχῆς ἀπάσης ὅρους καὶ πέρατα], the character of each region, the vastness of your territory, the power of every race, the number of the cities, the characteristics of the masses.

—Julian, *Oration* 1:13–14 (Loeb trans.)

The connection here between the celestial/divine and the mundane of Roman territory and boundaries is hardly incidental. Heaven itself, or God himself, revealed to Constantius II (r. 337–61) the boundaries of his empire and all the space in between. In the Roman world of all periods, images of territorial space were intertwined with cosmology and thus with worldview.¹ In the words of C. Nicolet, “territory was not neutral: it was viewed as having a relationship with the cosmos, religiously oriented and pervaded with sanctity.”² Nicolet focuses on the early Empire, but there is no indication in the sources that such a religious mentality disappeared in the later Empire.³ The very notion of bounded space, assumed by the presence of frontiers, was central to Roman cosmology. Anthropologist M. Kearney, in his book on worldview, writes that “cosmologies are by nature pre-eminently statements about

space.”⁴ Roman views of territory and boundaries cannot be disconnected from cosmology, as is suggested by the fact that at Roman territorial boundaries stood *Terminus*, the god of boundaries at center and periphery alike.

During the early Roman Empire, the definition of cosmos seemed “to broaden in meaning and more often denote[d] not just the world as the natural, physical structure of the universe, but especially the inhabited world.” Cosmology came to encompass the whole, undifferentiated, realm of the gods, nature, and the human. Sources from this period begin to show the cosmos as the sphere of man’s activity and not just that of the gods or celestial bodies. Pliny as well as the Gospel of St. John, for example, refer to the cosmos as the abode of “mankind,” “the inhabitants of the world,” “the sphere of man’s activity,” and “the scene of life.” Pliny presents cities as well as rivers and islands as basic elements of the cosmos.⁵

Although less explicitly so in the early Empire than the later, frontiers of both divine and human construction were expressed as elements of the cosmos as well. Writing in the early Empire, Pliny would nowhere refer to physical boundaries or frontiers of empire but always to divisions of people groups. When he does refer to the limits of Roman rule, he connects “the rule of Rome and the rule of *Natura*,” thus implying the connection to the cosmos.⁶ Other writers of his era likewise refer to boundaries as divisions between human groups rather than space or territories. In general, the later Empire saw a shift away from an exclusively ethnic emphasis on frontiers and more toward literal divisions of territory and space demarcated by those frontiers. The ethnic focus does not disappear, but it becomes only one mode of expression, and a subordinate one at that.

If Nicolet is correct in arguing that the Romans saw no distinction between the celestial and terrestrial worlds, then it follows that a dominant celestial cosmology could never be separate from terrestrial geography. Of the three major cosmologies known in the history of Western civilization, the Romans primarily occupied the second, the so-called Hellenistic or Ptolemaic cosmology.⁷ The Ptolemaic cosmos was part of a key shift in thought of the Hellenistic period and beyond, one that shaped understanding of the universe for centuries to follow until it was replaced during and after the sixteenth century. Examples of its influence on the New Testament, for example, suggest that the Ptolemaic cosmology reached beyond a small circle of scholars.⁸ According to this cosmology, earth was the center of a systematic cosmos, surrounded by rotating planets, sun, and moon. The ordered universe opposed the chaos outside of it. Romans were sure that their Empire was located at the center of the cosmos. Pliny the Elder as well as Christian writers well into the seventh century and beyond thought within this cosmology.

The assumptions of this cosmology permeated all Roman thinking about their world. Their world was part of an ordered cosmos and not merely a large flat space on which empires fought for control of peoples or territory. The bishop Isidore of Seville (r. 600–636), borrowing from classical images, continued to see the earth (*terra*) in the middle of *mundus*: “Everywhere the ocean flowing around encompasses its borders in a circle.” The eastern region of the world was its head, *quasi facies*, and the north the hind part. Although it might be difficult for the modern mind to imagine such cosmological assumptions working together comfortably with images of topography and space, both fit together naturally in the Roman mind.⁹

The connection between cosmology and topography is clear in the imagery of the sphere, an important component of imperial ideology that could function well within a Ptolemaic cosmology. The large number of associations of the sphere or globe with successful Roman military and/or political leaders is a testimony to the prevalence of the Ptolemaic cosmology.¹⁰ The globe generally symbolizes imperial power in Late Antique, Byzantine, and Medieval iconography. Ammianus gives the following example involving such a sphere:

In this welter of adverse events Constantius' fortune, already wavering and at a standstill, showed clearly by signs almost as plain as words that a crisis in his life was at hand. For at night he was alarmed by apparitions, and when he was not yet wholly sunk in sleep, the ghost of his father seemed to hold out to him a fair child; and when he took it and set it in his lap, it shook from him the sphere which he held in his right hand and threw it to a great distance. And this foretold a change in the state, although the seers gave reassuring answers.¹¹

The sphere clearly was a powerful sign, connected with the solvency of the state and with it the cosmos. It indicated the possession or loss of power.

From a slightly later context, Procopius describes Justinian's equestrian statue.

He directs his glance toward the rising sun, taking, I think his course against the Persians. In his left hand he holds a globe, by which the sculptor indicates that all land and sea serve him, but he has neither sword nor spear or any other weapon, but on his globe there is a cross, by which alone he has acquired the empire and victory in war. And extending his right hand to the rising sun and spreading out his fingers he orders the barbarians in that direction to remain at home and to advance no further.¹²



Fig. 2. Globes on coin. Valentinian I and Valens seated with globes; young Gratian between. SPE-S RP, “hope of the state.”

Again, we see a connection between the solvency of the empire and the fact of frontiers beyond which “barbarians” are not allowed. Emperors who maintain the frontiers are worthy to claim that “the land and sea serve” them. The symbols of majesty, both through the outstretched right hand and the possession of the globe in the left, communicate a strong empire, one whose frontiers would not admit barbarians.

Other examples of the globe appear on coins and in the visual arts and further connect the globe to the *oikoumene* and the cosmos itself. The iconography of the globe shows the dominion of the emperor or figure pictured receiving or holding it. On one coin, the emperors Valentinian (r. 375–92) and Valens (r. 364–78) sit enthroned, each holding a scepter and a globe. A young Gratian (r. 367–83) stands between them. On another coin Maximianus (r. 286–305, 307–10) is shown receiving a globe from Diocletian; on other coins he is shown receiving a globe from Jupiter.¹³ The Missorium of Theodosius II depicts a seated emperor flanked by Valentinian II and Arcadius, each holding globes.

The image of a ruler seated on a globe was prevalent and was absorbed readily into Christian symbolism and iconography. Jesus is shown on a globe, signifying his connection with the *oikoumene* and the *cosmos*. The association of Christ and the globe also appears on mosaics. The apse mosaic at San Vitale features Christ seated on a globe. A. Grabar has pointed out that the globe-shaped throne was a symbol of universal dominion for emperors that was taken over in Christian iconography to show the universal rule of Christ.¹⁴

Both literary and visual evidence, then, show the connections among the cosmos, divinity, and the frontiers. The existence and maintenance of the frontiers is very real in the worldview of Romans. Strategic and rational concerns of frontier defense worked together with the cosmic and divine to form a single unit. The seen and the unseen worlds were in cosmic union. During the later Empire, a sphere firmly held in the hand of an emperor is a visual indication of the solvency of the Empire, especially due to defended frontiers. Thus, a late Roman cosmology is strongly connected to frontiers.

To the ancients of any period, cosmology was partially a function of religious beliefs, however the exact expression of those beliefs might have differed from period to period and region to region. The world of the Romans, no less than the world of any ancient peoples, was one in which the “constant intervention of divine powers was taken as a fact of life.”¹⁵ Assumptions about the cosmos necessarily are thus shot through with religious meaning. Although he dismissed the classical “heresy,” which claimed that “heaven has a spherical form” (he proposed a large, “orthodox” cuboid instead), the sixth-century Byzantine writer Cosmas Indicopleustes wrote nearly half of his *Christian Topography* on topics celestial, even extending it to demons and to angels. His description of geography juxtaposes indiscriminately what we might consider divine and mundane elements.¹⁶

Pagan or Christian, Romans envisioned divine powers holding together the system of the cosmos. Julian, the famous pagan emperor, expressed his views thus in his “Hymn to King Helios”: “this divine and wholly beautiful cosmos, from the highest vault of the heaven to the lowest limit of the earth [*ges eschates*] is held together by the continued providence of the gods.” Julian wrote this while on a military campaign to Persia to claim for Rome a new portion of that earth by extending his own frontiers. He, no less than his Christian contemporaries, believed that ultimately the will of God or the gods held together the world, even down to its seemingly temporal boundaries. Most evidence from the period suggests that Julian shared basic worldviews with his contemporaries, pagan and Christian. And Julian’s personal friend, Ammianus, at one point associates a shift of the eastern frontier with a disturbance of the cosmos itself.¹⁷

At the heart of this discussion are Roman perceptions of space. Frontier consciousness can only be formulated against a backdrop of notions of space. These visualizations were part of a process by which Romans analyzed their world and changes within it. Recent work on Roman space perception, primarily for the early Empire, has shown how risky it is to ignore Roman assumptions about space when one is exploring Roman frontiers or any other aspect of imperial ideology. In the words, again, of Nicolet, “in order to set boundaries to their Empire and to claim to have reached those that were

marked out, the Romans needed a certain perception of geographical space, of its dimensions and of the area they occupied." Within this space, Romans could make sense of their administrative framework as well as imagine their Empire and its limits.¹⁸

Anthropological and sociological research on space perception shows that it cannot be divorced from a value system or worldview. R. M. Downs, an anthropologist analyzing space perception, writes,

The *real world* is taken as the starting point, and it is represented as a source of *information*. The information content enters the individual through a system of *perceptual receptors*, and the precise meaning of the information is determined by an interaction between the individual's *value system* and their *image of the real world*. The meaning of the information is then incorporated into the image.¹⁹

Downs imagines here something of a recurrent yet organic system in which new information, filtered through a value system, changes one's perception of the "real world." As new information is processed through perception and that value system, the perceived world itself actually changes and then fresh information can renew the cycle, so to speak.

The real world is thus perceived through a worldview, to impose terminology foreign to Downs's system but widely used by anthropologists such as Kearney to describe the same general phenomenon. Downs's model suggests how news (information) can relate to cosmology and worldview. During the later Roman Empire, new information and new types of information, specifically from frontiers, challenged traditional notions of space perception. Thus, an altered worldview emerged, based in both traditional and changing value systems and new information and new types of information.

A visual example of this type of change may be seen in a few depictions of the emperor in late Roman art. On the so-called Barberini diptych (ca. 500), the traditional Roman ceremony of *adventus*, recognizing the arrival of the emperor, is infused with new meaning. On this piece appears a "cosmic hierarchy where emperor and empire mediate between Christ in the clouds of heaven, and subjected barbarians." The Roman image of the cosmos here had incorporated new information with the image of the *parousia* of Christ. The image of the subject barbarians at the bottom of the diptych, clearly separated by a strong line, suggests Roman images of boundary and of space perception, presented in cosmic time. The west side of the base of the column of Arcadius gives a similar example of a changing value system, of new information producing or reflecting a new image of the real world. The *parousia* of the emperor



Fig. 3. The victorious emperor defeating his enemies. Central section of the Barberini Diptych. Byzantine ivory from Constantinople (?), first half of sixth century CE. 34.2 H 26.8 cm. Inv: OA 9063. Photo: Chuzeville. Located in Louvre, Paris, France. (Courtesy of Réunion des Musées Nationaux Art Resource, NY.)

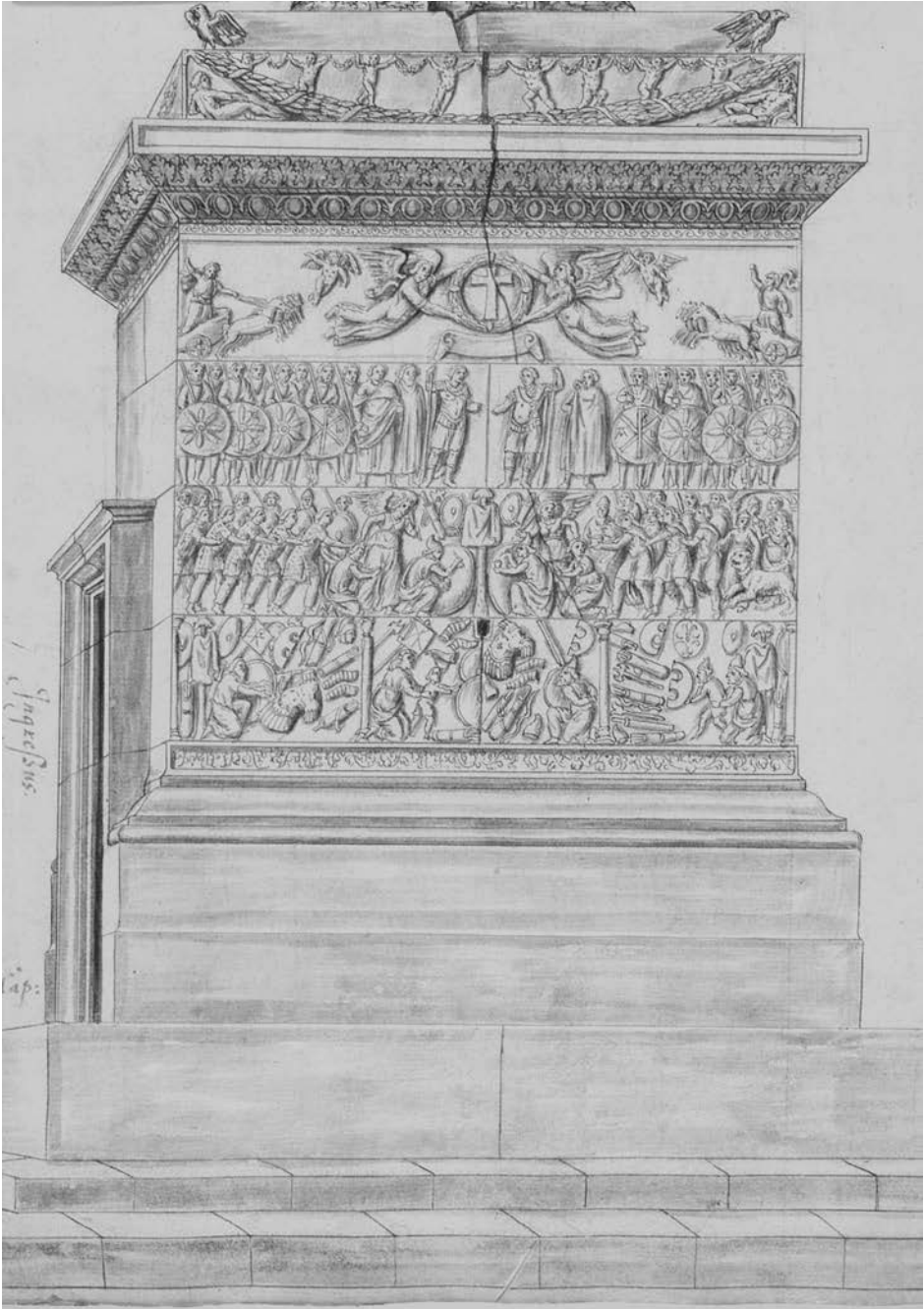


Fig. 4. West side of column base, column of Arcadius (Freshfield drawing). M5. 0.17.2 f.13. (Courtesy of Master and Fellows of Trinity College Cambridge.)

presents a clear hierarchy: “Christ in heaven, the emperor on earth, and the subject nations, by means of a division into registers.”²⁰

The cosmic presentation in these visuals suggests the ways in which the space perception of the Romans mingled with value and belief systems. The divine and mundane were a unit, as before, but now a Christian reading of the cosmos mixes with the classical. Such changes present the frontier consciousness of the later Roman Empire.

The Shapes of Roman Geography

As suggested earlier, there is a general divide among historical geographers on how to interpret human thought and action in geographical and topographical context. On the one hand are the structural determinists, who hold that people think and act according to the way the world *is*, and on the other hand are the behaviorists, who stress that people think and act according to the way they *perceive* the world to be.²¹ I am more interested in how Roman perceptions of such features shaped thought and action than in a scientific analysis of the way their world actually was/is. Perceptions and ideologies are seen best, if not exclusively, in texts and visual images.

On the ground, so to speak, the Romans' understanding of space was directly related to their understanding of geography. Debates over Roman knowledge of geography and their application of it are ongoing. But in general, Roman thought has been seen as shaped by two different traditions in geography. The first of these was the Ptolemaic geographical tradition, which aimed to produce a “graphic representation of the whole known part of the world.”²² This tradition, probably the minority, could plot spatial points in relation to others using a demi-Cartesian grid system and aimed to produce something of a two- or even three-dimensional depiction of the globe. In a Ptolemaic system, any given point could be related to any other point on a grid. Ptolemy and Marinus of Tyre worked out a system of projection drawn from eight thousand points, with latitude- and longitude-type coordinates. This tradition, although it would be more influential in the modern period, is less noticeable in Late Antiquity. According to P. Janni, this mode of thought aimed to comprehend what he calls “spazio cartografico,” closer to our own understanding of space. Janni cautions that this type of study was highly theoretical and was pursued only by a few academics.²³

The second tradition was more utilitarian and purely descriptive, often working with written topographical texts more than with graphic representations. This tradition often is seen as the mainstay of military strategists and campaign planners, although Whittaker has recently challenged its prevalence

even among them, at least for the early Empire.²⁴ More geographical information, it must be noted, was available to emperors of the later Empire, especially since this period witnessed the increased presence of the emperor on the frontier. And an increase in the number of eastern campaigns as well as the number of literate soldiers increased the available knowledge of the geography at and even beyond frontiers.

This second tradition was probably the one on which Julian relied when, due to his extensive reading before his Persian campaign, he was “as informed about the geography of the region as if he had been born there, such long acquaintance with the terrain had his books given him even when he was far away.”²⁵ It seems that Julian was able to read up on the geography of the Roman frontier region and beyond in available books and in pamphlets prepared by soldiers and other travelers in these areas. This geographical tradition imagined points on a line in relation to each other. According to Janni, this common system of imagining space was closely related to the Roman method of road construction; Roman *spazio odologico* was defined in terms of points along a road. Thus, Janni contends, the vast majority of Romans conceived of space as linear rather than two- or three-dimensional. This is the presentation of the *itinerariae* (literal descriptions of roads), of which many are extant, as well as of the *Tabula Peutingeriana*, a twelfth-century copy of a fourth-century Roman road map, which seems to be a visual depiction of *itinerariae*.²⁶ Both the written and the visual forms conceive of the world as being laid out along a road system or systems.²⁷

As foreign as this linear geography is to our own cartographic mentality, recent historical geographers have begun to suggest that the difference might not be as extreme as it seems at first glance. Nicolet in particular has criticized attempts to put forward a “‘natural’ difference between the ancient way of thinking and our own.” A linear mentality, he contends, “must not systematically be set in opposition to a cartographic mentality, which only appeared in modern times and which brought about a totally new vision of space in two dimensions, through complete charts based on astronomical measurements and on actual triangulation.” Although the ancient understanding was different from ours, there seems to be no reason to deny outright any type of global vision to ancient cartographers. In fact, as Nicolet has argued, from Augustus onward, knowledge and representation of the imperial sphere implied “the creation of a geography, chorography and a cartography that were coherent and progressively improving.”²⁸ Janni’s contentions seem supported by a newly discovered map of Spain from the first century.²⁹

The Roman cartographic mentality was, though, different from ours in crucial ways. Janni warns against “taking for granted the thought-world of easy,

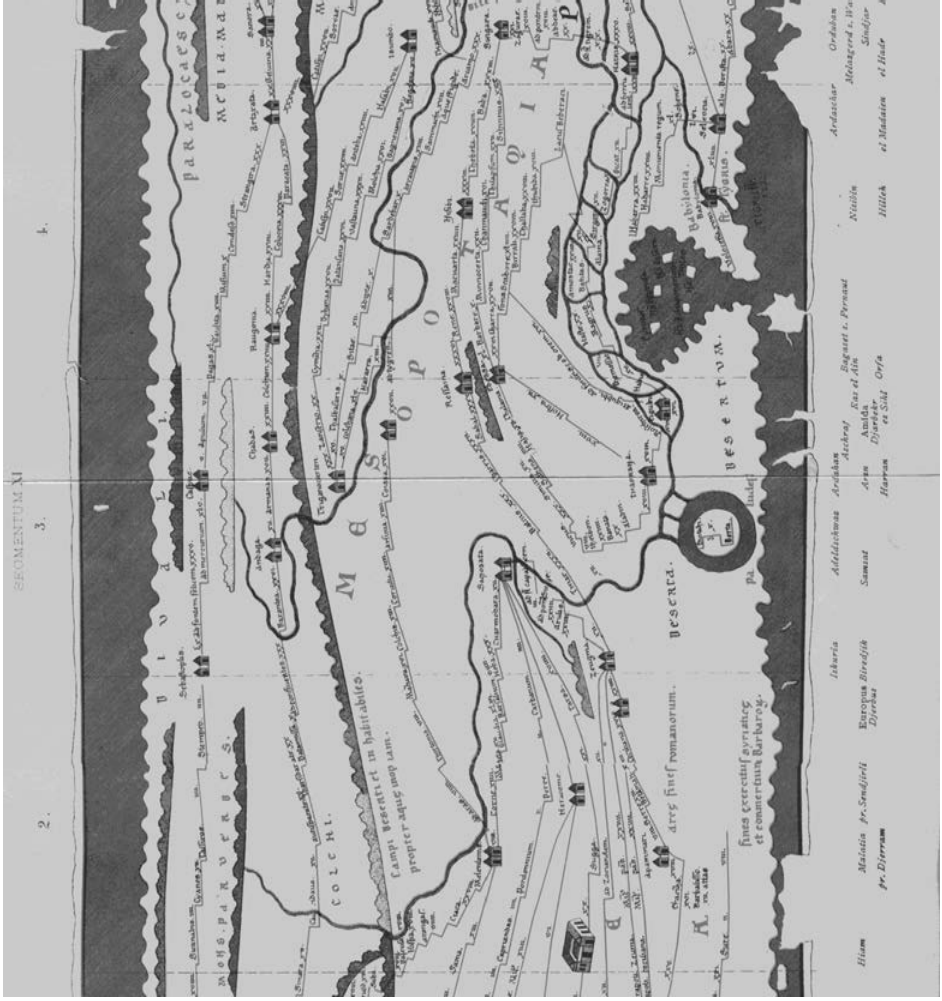


Fig. 5. Tabula Peutingeriana: "fines romanorum" and Nisibis.

habitual map-literacy,” so standard in the modern world, when one looks at the ancient world. As B. Isaac has put it, “using maps must be learnt. . . . [T]he mental translation of two-dimensional graphic representations into larger surfaces, is an acquired skill.” Thus, to a writer like the fourth-century churchman Eusebius, a given point can only be located in relation to one or two other points, and those in a straight line.³⁰

That Romans knew about some types of maps and used them fairly regularly is beyond doubt; the format and method of using those maps involves a bit more conjecture. Vegetius, a late-fourth/early-fifth-century writer on military strategy, records,

indeed, the more conscientious generals reportedly had itineraries of the provinces in which the emergency occurred not just annotated but illustrated as well, so that they could choose their route when setting out by the visual aspect as well as by mental calculation.³¹

Such a description shows a new development in thought and in campaigning. Such visual images for common use are not attested before the later Roman Empire. These most likely would have looked something like the *Tabula Peutingeriana*, with visual depictions of the natural and civic features of the Empire laid out in a long horizontal panel.³²

Furthermore, a third tradition of geographical knowledge appears in the sources, challenging the basic idea that only academics, generals, and statesmen, if anyone, cared or knew anything about geography. There is some indication of interest in educating the Roman public in geography by means of large wall maps. Although references in existing literature to such wall maps are clear, none survive. The most famous one from the early empire was the world map of Agrippa, erected in a portico in Rome on the east side of the Via Lata. We know of this particular map through a reference to it by Pliny.³³ In the late Empire, Theodosius II ordered a map of the world for display at a school in Constantinople. A surviving hexameter poem describing Theodosius’ wall map gives us some indication of what it would have included.

This famous work—including all the world,
Seas, mountains, rivers, harbours, straits and towns,
Uncharted areas—so that all might know,
Our famous, noble, pious Theodosius
Most venerably ordered when the year
Was opened by his fifteenth consulship.
We servants of the emperor (as one wrote,

The other painted), following the work
Of ancient mappers, in not many months
Revised and bettered theirs, within short space
Embracing all the world. Your wisdom, sire,
It was that taught us to achieve this task.³⁴

Another map, from the very end of the third century (to be explored in more detail in the next chapter) was designed “for educational purposes” in order to “let the schoolchildren see it in those porticoes, . . . rivers, oceans, peoples.”³⁵ The intent here seems to be that Romans might experience their vast empire visually and keep up on happenings throughout it, especially occurrences at the peripheries, as will be shown later in the chapter. Such a usage does not quite fit the image of geography only for arcane academics and generals and suggests a third category of Roman understanding of geography at a more popular level.³⁶

A couple of visual depictions survive that might give some indication of what such maps looked like. On a parchment fragment discovered earlier in the last century at Dura Europos, near the eastern frontier, there is a small painted map. According to one estimation, the map can be dated to just before A.D. 260. It gives a fairly accurate portrayal of the north shore of the Black Sea, the Danube River, and a few other points along with a few mileage indicators. The points are listed along the shore and show an attempt at a two-dimensional rendering of space. It is generally believed that this parchment was affixed to the inside of a shield and was used on an eastern campaign. Not much more can be said with certainty about this map, but it gives some indication, on a small scale, of the type of rendition given in the wall maps of the early and later empire.³⁷

Recently, another small map has come to light that is similar in some respects to the Dura Europos map as well as the *Tabula Peutingeriana* but that also incorporates some characteristics of the Ptolemaic tradition.³⁸ Executed in Egypt between the time of Nero and Domitian, the surviving portion of the map is of Spain along with a quotation from the Hellenistic geographer Artemedoros of Ephesus. Containing small drawings of buildings similar to those on the *Tabula Peutingeriana*, the map shows rivers and routes, with topographical features and perhaps even military stations marked. It contains information from Roman *itineraria* and could have worked together with these verbal descriptions of the Roman road system. But as C. Gallazzi and B. Kramer, the publishers of this important map, make clear, we are dealing here with a genuine scientific map, a distinct section of a picture of the world, not just the depiction of a road system. More studies of this map are forthcoming, no

doubt, but it is worth noting that the only extant parallel to this map actually produced in the ancient world is the shield map from Dura Europos. Its survival has rightly been noted by its publishers as extraordinary. Yet it gives us clues to the potential of Roman minds to depict their world visually. Perhaps the distinction between a Ptolemaic theoretical geography and the practical use of road descriptions was not so firm.

Geography and Boundaries

The relationship of geographical knowledge with Roman understanding of frontiers is fairly clear in available sources. A recent view that Romans “knew or . . . cared little about geography”³⁹ largely has been formulated in opposition to E. N. Luttwak’s Grand Strategy notion. Fortification lines at the peripheries of the empire seem, to the modern eye, irregular, unscientific, and even random. These observations supposedly debunk the idea that Romans could ever have had a universal strategy, simply because they had no global geography. As Isaac puts it,

There is no evidence, in fact, that geography determined the boundaries of the empire. . . . [W]hat we know of ancient geography indicates that it had by no means reached the level required to provide military planners with global strategic insight of the sort required for a territorial strategy.⁴⁰

But such conclusions seem to take us far beyond the evidence. Available sources do suggest that Romans cared a great deal about geography, especially during the later Empire.

To understand a late Roman view of geography, it is necessary to assess a variety of texts expressing views of the world. Late Roman knowledge of geography brought myth, biblical texts, and classical cosmology to its understanding of frontiers and boundaries. Myth played a crucial role in the Roman imagination of space and frontiers. D. Braund has argued that myth was critical in defining the Roman frontier in the Caucasus region, for example. To the extent that myth does structure the world and helps make sense of it, Romans relied on it when observing or imagining their frontiers with foreign peoples or with another’s territory.⁴¹ One feature of the world chroniclers of Late Antiquity is the means by which they imagine the history of the world, including remote stories and hoary myths, playing out anachronistically in terms of their own Late Antique context. One such way they do this is to imagine various myths enacted along the Roman *limes*. For the most part, these references

reflect images of the frontier from the perspective of the fourth century or later.⁴² For example, John Malalas records that Orestes took Iphigenia, the daughter of Agamemnon and Clytemnestra, and “traveled to the East, to the Saracen *limes*, and reached Trikomia in the land of Palestine.” His spatial dimensions here are late Roman. And again, Tauros, the emperor of Crete, fights Agenor and his sons in the east, on the *limes*.⁴³ Such references, placing events of the remote and mythical past in a contemporary Roman setting, remind us that there was no clear divide between the world of myth and lived experience when Romans imagined their imperial frontiers.

Supernatural elements were also seen as defining frontiers, or at least boundaries. The author(s) of the *Scriptores Historiae Augustae* record(s) that “many declare that there is a certain decree of fate that no emperor may advance beyond Ctesiphon, and that the emperor Carus was struck by lightning because he desired to pass beyond the bounds which fate has set up.”⁴⁴ The author of this passage himself was not quite convinced by the story, believing instead that Carus had been killed by an illness; many did believe, though, that there was something supernatural about such boundaries. Aurelius Victor, on the same incident, claimed that in spite of oracles of warning, Carus had indeed passed “immodestly and vaingloriously” beyond Ctesiphon and had thereby paid the price by being struck dead with a thunderbolt.⁴⁵ A similar reference records that the emperor Julian’s big mistake was that he had disobeyed a sibylline prophecy that proclaimed that “the emperor must not that year leave his frontiers [*limitibus*].”⁴⁶ Again, the connection of frontiers to divinity is unmistakable. Ammianus elsewhere records that one of the blessings bestowed by Fortuna on Julian was that “no barbarians crossed his frontiers [*fines*].”⁴⁷

Biblical stories could function similarly to myth in world chronicles. Malalas, combining chronology of Greek mythology and biblical story, records that after the time of King Minos, Solomon built a city on the *limes* which he called Palmyra (Past Fate), because in the past the village had been fatal for Goliath, whom [Solomon’s] father had slain there.” The reference point of the Roman eastern frontier is read anachronistically into the biblical and preclassical past. Later, Malalas records, Mary and Joseph departed to Persian territory by way of the *limes*.⁴⁸ The reader and/or hearer of biblical stories could thus fit them into a framework of a Roman conception of space.

Biblical passages also provide a framework for the fourth-century Western pilgrim/nun, Egeria.⁴⁹ She prepared for her eastward trek by perusing all the books of the Old and New Testaments for their descriptions of “the holy wonders of the world, and its regions, provinces, cities, mountains, and deserts.”⁵⁰ Her notion of geography was shaped powerfully by biblical texts, as is clear throughout her pilgrimage account. The same must be said of Cosmas

Indicopleustes, who based his entire description of the universe on his interpretation of biblical passages.

The relationship of geography and boundaries also may be seen in descriptions of the Roman Empire as extending to or almost to the bounds of the earth itself. The boundaries of the empire become, in a certain sense, the boundaries of the earth.⁵¹ Such references speak at some level to Roman cosmic notions of space. The fifth-century North African presbyter Orosius speaks of the Roman Empire as being extended “almost to the outermost boundaries of the earth.”⁵² Egeria, who traveled from Western Europe to the eastern frontier of the Empire, is described by a biographer as traveling to the “other side of the world.” In another section, the same biographer describes her journey “to the bounds of almost the whole earth” and enumerates her “labor of traveling the whole world.” Her travels throughout the earth are a means of seeking “the kingdom of heaven on high; . . . as she trod this earth, she was obtaining paradise in calm and exultant glory.”⁵³ Egeria herself records that when she arrives in Edessa, a city near the eastern frontier, the bishop greets her warmly because of her journey from “the other end of the earth.”⁵⁴ Such descriptions suggest ways in which Romans used the language of boundaries together with their understanding of geography.

Before the third century, the dominant means of referring to frontiers is in the context of an ever-expanding hegemony of the Romans. Pompey’s *Res Gestae* claims that he “extended the frontiers of the empire to the limits of the earth.”⁵⁵ Early imperial references were bound to the ideology of *imperium sine fine*, and with few exceptions they present Roman frontiers as ever-expanding to natural or logical stopping points.⁵⁶ If that expansion stopped in any place, it was only because it was convenient to do so and because going further would lead into useless areas or might include unwanted persons. Appian records in the second century, for example, that

on the whole, prudently possessing the best parts of land and sea, [the Roman emperors] choose to preserve their empire rather than extend it indefinitely over poor and profitless barbarian peoples. In Rome I have seen embassies of some of these offering themselves as subjects, but the emperor did not accept them as they would be useless to him.⁵⁷

By the late Empire, however, this way of viewing the world is only one of the options. A whole array of sources presents a definite shift. The ideology of *imperium sine fine* continues, but along with it are notions that the frontiers are defensive barriers, that they are placed against outsiders, and that they demarcate a clear space known as the *Imperium Romanorum*.

Key sources on imperial and frontier ideology from the late third century onward are panegyrics. Panegyric gives insight into the worldview of Romans at many levels by indicating how Romans viewed the temporal and spatial limits to their world at specific moments in time. Looking at tacit dimensions of worldview can show us something about the long periods of peace between punctuating moments of crisis and disaster.⁵⁸ As examples of epideictic (display) oratory, panegyrics give insight into the Roman mind by presenting a reconstruction or construction of the recent past according to established literary conventions. A panegyric was literally a public speech by a skilled rhetorician given in honor of the emperor or other outstanding figure. Every New Year's Day, imperial birthday, and anniversary was commemorated, and every deed remotely deserving of honor was used to praise the honoree. Panegyric was a widely circulating medium, touching not only an immediate listening audience but potentially the whole of the literate public and beyond as well. Many panegyrics became rhetorical models in schools and were studied and quoted from. Panegyrics present the hopes and joys of Romans, particularly at the moment the speech was uttered. In the words of C. E. V. Nixon, editor of the most recent collection of late Roman panegyrics, the panegyric is "a priceless historical document reflecting the outlook of the day."⁵⁹ Panegyrics aimed to give stability and hope to a people otherwise uncertain of the future.

The panegyrics present frontier consciousness in a variety of paradoxical ways. The strengthening or perceived strengthening of frontiers provided orators with specific and concrete reference points in their praise of the emperors. Audiences for such panegyrics would have appreciated the factual grounding of these references even amid the epideictic rhetoric. S. MacCormack, in her influential study of ceremony in Late Antiquity, has pointed out that Roman audiences would have been conditioned to sort facts as "facts" from facts as symbols and tokens of imperial majesty.⁶⁰ The praise or flattery, therefore, would fall flat if not grounded in some type of perceived fact. Information about frontiers thus helped describe the solvency of the Roman Empire. The variety of references shows the relation of space and frontiers in the late Roman mind.

First, and connecting to Roman structural ideologies such as *imperium sine fine*, most panegyrics imply that Romans are firmly in control of where they place their ever-expanding imperial frontiers. The image is one of growth that would eventually lead to the takeover of the whole world, or at least what was worth having. A panegyric from the last decade of the third century highlights how, through his campaigns into Germany, the emperor Maximianus has expanded indefinitely the frontiers of the empire.

Indeed, could there have eventuated a greater one than that famous crossing of yours into Germany, by which you first of all, Emperor, proved that there were no bounds to the Roman Empire except those of your arms. For 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. And before your Principate who ever failed to offer thanks that Gaul was protected by that river?⁶¹

Maximianus preserves the solvency of the Empire through his defense of the Roman frontiers. He is praised in different panegyrics for “extending the boundaries of Rome by means of *virtus*” and for traversing “the frontiers tirelessly where the Roman Empire presses upon barbarian peoples.” The theme of indefinite expansion continues in this and subsequent panegyrics as emperors are praised for “so many frontiers pushed forward,” for pushing forward “the boundaries of Roman power by means of *virtus*,” and for traversing “the frontiers tirelessly where the Roman Empire presses upon barbarian peoples.”⁶²

Second, and partly in tension with the first usage, many panegyrics imply a static frontier along which Romans live and fight, a frontier they maintain against the harshest attacks. The rhetoric now highlights the strictly defensive nature of Roman frontiers. In one panegyric, Constantius I (r. 305–6), the father of Constantine, is praised for “protecting the whole frontier” near the Rhine “by the terror inspired by [his] presence.” In other panegyrics, speakers rejoice at all the “camps of cavalry units and cohorts reestablished along the Rhine, Danube, and Euphrates frontiers” and “the Rhine secure with armies stationed along the whole border”⁶³—certainly reasonable cause for rejoicing after the tumult that was the third century. Here, the medium of panegyric reveals, even if unintentionally, questions about world mastery that must have been on the minds of many Romans at all levels. The emphasis is on reestablishment in the face of hostile foes.

In the process of defining or redefining imperial power, a changing Roman attitude appears. One panegyricist goes into some detail on how living on these frontiers shapes the character of Romans at the periphery. He praises an emperor for coming from an area

whose frontier, exposed to the enemy (although a beaten one) and always arrayed in arms, has taught [him] the tireless habit of toil and patience, in provinces where all of life is military service, whose women even are braver than the men of other lands.⁶⁴

Third, alongside these images are indications of a belief that the Roman Empire was always (or at least should be) coterminous with the world and thus had no frontiers. One emperor is praised for having “conquered everywhere” and for conquering beyond the limits where the sun rises and sets.⁶⁵ This image also occurs in a speech by Libanius. Libanius presents the scale of empire as “from the west to the rising sun.”⁶⁶ A number of passages highlight Maximianus’ defense of the frontiers. In fact, among surviving panegyrics hardly any other emperor is more specifically associated with Roman frontiers than he, due to his momentous redrawing of the eastern frontier with his defeat of Narses in 298.⁶⁷ Continuing the theme, one panegyricist claims that Constantine the Great (r. 306–37) has made fortifications along what were once frontier zones into “ornaments to adorn” rather than to protect—the restitution was so complete that military defense was no longer necessary.⁶⁸ The variety among these usages of frontiers in the panegyrics suggests a highly diluted *imperium sine fine* ideology and a shift to something else.

Beyond the Boundaries of Empire

Much has been made recently of the idea that the Romans thought in terms of peoples, not territories. Therefore, it is claimed, Romans thought of themselves as conquering human groups rather than space when they moved beyond what once were frontiers. Isaac provides a clear example of such an assertion, claiming that “there can be no doubt that the focus of Roman imperialism tended to be ethnic rather than territorial or geographic. The Romans conquered peoples, not land.”⁶⁹ However true this may have been for the early Empire, it is not defensible universally for the later Empire.⁷⁰ Appian, for example, spoke of “the boundary of the peoples subject to the Romans” rather than “the boundary of the Empire.” But such a differentiation cannot hold completely past the third century.⁷¹ The problem, it seems, is that ideology and ideas of the early Empire are frozen in time and then read by recent historians into the later Empire.

A change occurred in the Roman way of thinking about territory, part of a shift to late Roman frontier consciousness. Specifically from the third century onward, Romans did begin to think of their holdings in terms of bounded territories and not just divisions between peoples. It was not until the third century, in fact, that Augustus was seen, anachronistically, as hedging the empire around with natural frontiers such as rivers, deserts, and mountains (on which more in the next chapter).

One way to assess the later Roman understanding of boundaries is to consider Roman analyses of the space beyond. An initial problem is that

conservatism in terminology makes it difficult to assess in some cases whether *Imperium Romanorum* in the sources refers specifically to Imperial rule of the Roman people or whether it reflected a transition to a strong territorial connotation. The shift in meaning from *imperium* to Empire, imperial rule to the bounded territory of empire, was gradual and followed the pattern of other Roman designations of space.⁷² The transfer in concept from the limits of one's rule or hegemony to a definite spatial area was perfectly natural to the Romans. A famous example is the change in meaning of *provincia* from the power prescribed to a given magistrate to what we know as *province*, a bounded territory whose borders were clearly demarcated.⁷³ Less known is the development in meaning of the provincial subdivision known as *conventus*. Beginning as a gathering of Romans for legal or commercial reasons, the *conventus* eventually became associated with the space covered by that central meeting and then the territory from which people could gather. Some provinces then were divided up into bounded *conventus* districts for purposes of administration.⁷⁴ So, the transition of terminology that once designated hegemony and/or administration exerted over a given space to the space itself reveals a general Roman pattern.

The Romans of the late Empire clearly had a concept of an end to their claims, the influence of the ideology of *imperium sine fine* notwithstanding. Many available sources, particularly of the later Roman Empire, refer to Romans going outside of space that was the *Imperium Romanorum* by going beyond its boundaries. Libanius, for example, in summarizing the campaign of Julian, claimed that he “passed beyond the boundaries of the Roman Empire and still ruled over it: physically he might be in enemy territory, but he retained his own empire under his sway, and whether present or absent, he had the same ability to enforce universal peace.”⁷⁵ The emphasis is on Julian's projection of power—a perfectly Roman notion in any period—but there is a definite spatial aspect embedded in this reference. From the perspective of one inside the bounds of empire, Julian had gone beyond the Roman frontier and into the territory of another. It seems impossible to read the *ges* as anything other than a territorial description of the Roman Empire. *Imperium* might be read as “power” with no territorial connotations, but *ge* is a bit more difficult to deal with this way. The *basileia* also might be open to multiple readings, but it is clear that Libanius, at least, conceived of the Empire as a territorial and space division and not just as a people. Furthermore, the substantive use of *te polemeia* clearly refers to enemy territory; the phrase is common enough with the *ge* or *chora* understood. If not, then Libanius' rhetoric must necessarily have fallen on deaf ears. For what was Julian's accomplishment if it were not ruling the land, not just the people, of the Romans even while he was

specifically outside of it? Although hard data on worldview shifts are necessarily elusive, such references do suggest a change in frontier consciousness as well as a consequent change in ways of imagining territory. Other examples come from a variety of late Roman sources. Sozomen records that Julian, after he had defeated Ctesiphon, was “no longer desirous of proceeding further, but wishing only to return to the Roman Empire,” burned his vessels. A guide, a secret Persian sympathizer, volunteered to take Julian’s “army very speedily to the Roman frontiers.”⁷⁶ The implication, again, is that there was a definite point at which they would be in Roman territory, not just among the Roman people rather than among the Persian people.

A further example comes from a letter of Libanius to a certain Aristainetos concerning an ambassador to the Persians named Spectatus. Libanius records that on Spectatus’ return from the embassy, many saw him as very fortunate because he had seen the land, mountains, and rivers of the Persians.⁷⁷ Such examples as these could be multiplied many times over for the later Empire to show that Roman audiences conceptualized boundaries as literal divisions among the space claims of various peoples. The ancient knowledge of space seems not to have been limited to the concept of hegemony over peoples occupying a given space.

Egeria’s account of her pilgrimage also provides examples. When she asks a bishop the whereabouts of Ur, she is told that “the place you seek is 10 staging-posts from here, inside Persian lands. From here to Nisibis is five staging-posts, and it is five more from there to Ur, which was the city of the Chaldees; but at present, Romans are not allowed to go there, since that whole area belongs to the Persians.” “This area in particular,” the bishop continues, “lies on the border between Roman, Persian or Chaldean lands” and “it is called the Eastern province.”⁷⁸ Such descriptions are difficult to imagine absent literal boundaries that were known and appreciated by Romans locally at the frontier.

Did Frontiers Matter?

Since almost nothing is so unimportant that it does not obtain the greatest forethought from Our Clemency we consider that especial care must be bestowed upon the borders, by which the whole state is protected.⁷⁹

Compare this late Roman legal assessment with the words of a modern writer.

It is not at all clear that the concept of an imperial frontier as such was of great importance. It was not marked by any boundary stones and the

only ancient map we have, the Peutinger Table, nowhere indicates the boundary of the empire as such. . . . The only boundaries which had actual relevance were those of provinces.⁸⁰

What role did frontiers play in the late Roman worldview? Worldview, as spelled out in the previous chapter, is often tacit; crucial elements of it rarely are spelled out in the sources. One of the key ways of assessing frontier consciousness is to look at how Romans of the late Empire viewed a loss of territory. To return to an example used throughout this study, after the famous surrender of Nisibis in 363, Ammianus, far from the only one to find the occasion arresting, gives the following analysis.

Never (I think) since the founding of our city can it be found by an unfolder of chronicles that any part of our territory has been yielded to an enemy by an emperor or consul; but that not even the recovery of anything that had been lost was ever enough for the honor of a triumph, but only the increase of our dominions.⁸¹

This passage is helpful in a few different ways. For one, it shows that Ammianus, an avid reader of history himself, had come across no indication that Roman territory had shrunk previously. In fact, it had, and the ignoring of that shrinkage in territory fits in well with the model of *imperium sine fine*, so prevalent up until the third century. In the worldview of writers and readers in the early Empire, the idea of losing territory was unthinkable, and hence it had gone unrecorded in earlier times. Hadrian's concessions following Trajan's expansions, noted more clearly by St. Augustine than Hadrian's own contemporaries, is but one example.⁸² For another, this passage shows that in the later fourth century, people were thinking of the Roman Empire in terms of a bounded territory, not just people (the people of Nisibis, in fact, were moved into another city, which was then named Nisibis).⁸³ And that is specifically what makes the loss of Nisibis so poignant—it caused Roman frontiers to shift and led to a consequent loss of territory. St. Augustine's assessments well express Hadrian's concession in a way that Ammianus seems to not have known or to have ignored. Again, the key to the disaster was specifically the loss of territory and the establishment of a new frontier.⁸⁴ Later, Agathias would connect the loss of territory and the establishment of a new frontier, both of which were devastating to the Roman state. The shameful and disgraceful truce was so bad that it "is even now harmful to the Roman state, by which means he made the empire contract into new boundaries and cut off the outer parts of [Jovian's] own territory."⁸⁵ Here, space, territory, and

boundaries are brought together to suggest the impact that the loss had on the Romans. Clearly, Romans of the later Empire did, in fact, find the concept of an imperial frontier significant.

Other references to the loss of territory are found in the *Orations* of Libanius. As speeches, these would have had a wide audience and would reflect at some level the expectation and knowledge of the audience. On two different occasions, Libanius praises emperors at the expense of Constantius, whose postmortem memory Libanius and others handled less than gently. In the funeral oration of Julian, he records how Constantius would generally arrive after engagements in which Roman territory had been lost to the Persians, and then Constantius would just express thanks that they did not do worse. The point is that Constantius was an ineffective emperor for allowing territory to be lost. Echoing the same sentiment, in more direct wording, Libanius records that even as the Persians came every year to “nibble away bits of our territories and increase theirs at our expense,” Constantius enjoyed favor because he had the eastern cities on his side.⁸⁶ Again, the implication is that Constantius was a bad emperor because he allowed Roman territory to be lost, regardless of his reputation in the East. Romans clearly were interested in territory, and that interest, especially during the later Empire, strengthened a frontier consciousness.

A later universal history looks back on how the Roman people could be distressed by the loss of regions. Zonaras, a twelfth-century Byzantine writer, records how the emperor Philip the Arab (r. 244–49), on learning that the Romans were upset by the loss of Armenia and Mesopotamia, broke a peace treaty in order to regain them.⁸⁷ Philip had acted on the idea that Romans were disappointed by the loss of territory. It is important to note, however, that Roman reactions to such losses were not consistent. Reactions would have had something to do with available news. Nowhere in our sources, for example, is there recorded any negative reaction to the surrender of the province of trans-Danubian Dacia by Aurelian in 282.⁸⁸ A new Dacia, cis-Danubian, was then founded and seems to have taken its place. In such regions, it appears that the Roman memory of borders could be short term. It would be difficult to assess whether Romans cared about this loss because there survive absolutely no sources reacting to the concession. The absence of references, juxtaposed with the abundant references to anything that happens near frontiers afterward, attests to the fact that, soon after, the Tetrarchs, led by Diocletian, reorganized the frontiers.

Memories of the recovery or addition of territory could provoke joyful reactions and demonstrate that Romans were interested in territory and were attuned to frontier shifts. In his *Satire on the Caesars*, for example, Julian

presents Constantine as claiming to rank equal to Trajan “on the score of that territory which he added to the empire, and I recovered.”⁸⁹ The reference is obviously tongue-in-cheek, but the humor would have to be grounded in the idea that late Romans accorded greatness to one who added or regained territory. Orosius records that Aurelian overcame the Goths and established rule within the “former boundaries” of the Empire; Orosius had a clear idea of where they ran.⁹⁰ Diocletian specifically is singled out in panegyric for his restoration and advancing of Roman frontiers, although in fact some sections were abandoned under him.⁹¹ Later, Zosimus would record that the “Antonines were good men because they recovered [territory] their predecessors had lost and even added to the empire.” Such a description is obviously based on Zosimus’ own notion of territoriality; similar references are much more prevalent in his own context and do not exist from before the third century. A famous passage, which Zosimus uses to criticize Constantine by contrast, praises Diocletian for restoring Roman frontiers by setting up extensive defensive systems along them.⁹²

In their haste to distance Roman frontier studies from nineteenth-century notions, nurtured mainly in a British imperialism focusing on “territorial control, defined frontiers, clear divisions of responsibility, and channels of communication,”⁹³ recent historians have overcorrected. To suggest, as foremost scholars have done, that frontiers did not matter much to Romans, ignores the role they did play in a late Roman worldview. Frontiers loomed large in a late Roman worldview, specifically because of their connection to cosmology and to a growing sense of bounded territory. As will be seen in subsequent chapters, such a growing consciousness of frontiers would come about in part because of a heightened proliferation of news throughout the later Roman Empire, much of it from and about the Roman frontiers.