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News and Frontier Consciousness in the Late Roman Empire

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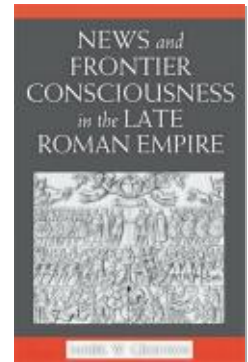
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Introduction



A little over fifty years after the Roman emperor Jovian (r. A.D. 363–64) ceded the frontier city of Nisibis to the Persian Empire in A.D. 363, St. Augustine sat musing far away in North Africa. “Almost in living memory,” he wrote, Terminus, the god of boundaries, had given ground. Jovian’s surrender of Nisibis and more than a dozen other frontier cities followed on the death of the emperor Julian the Apostate (r. A.D. 361–63), the mastermind of this disastrous campaign against the Persians. The Nisibis episode in particular was to Augustine much more than the surrender of a city; it signaled, in fact, the transformation of the crucial eastern frontier. Jovian’s concessions established the boundaries of Empire (*imperii fines*), said Augustine, “where they still are today.”¹

Putting the episode in a larger context, Augustine looked back to the last time something like this had happened. Nearly two and a half centuries before Jovian, the emperor Hadrian (r. A.D. 117–38) likewise had shrunk the boundaries of the Roman Empire (*termini imperii romani*), but the regions he had lost (Armenia, Mesopotamia, and Assyria) had, to some extent, been regained, Augustine related. Jovian’s loss thus was more crippling and more permanent and certainly more impressed on the Roman collective memory.²

The point of the Nisibis exemplum, alluded to three times in the *City of God*, is to underscore the weakness of Terminus, whose job it was to guarantee that “no one would be able to disturb the Roman frontiers [*Romanos terminos*].”³ Augustine taunted that Terminus was not supposed to yield even

to Jove but had in fact yielded not to Germans or Persians but to the “will of Hadrian,” “the rashness of Julian,” and now, apparently permanently, “the necessity of Jovian.” These passages reveal much about late Roman frontier consciousness. The amount of interest shown by Augustine and many others in this frontier shift demonstrates an unprecedented focus on frontiers, even by those far from them. This interest likewise shows a break from the earlier empire, when even larger concessions could be all but forgotten.

The loss of Nisibis, *Oriens firmissimum claustrum*, was etched deeply into Roman memory. From the moments immediately afterward until long after the “fall” of the western Empire, writers reflected on its implications.⁴ Their accounts show how indelibly the later Roman frontier consciousness was written into the history. Zosimus, writing in the early sixth century, records that after the emperor Augustus had established the Tigris and the Euphrates as the limits of the Roman Empire, “never was this territory abandoned” until Julian’s death, which occasioned Jovian’s retreat. Again, any earlier concessions, such as Hadrian’s and even more recently Aurelian’s in the late third century, seem forgotten completely. And Agathias, writing in the later sixth century, characterizes Jovian’s “shameful and disgraceful” truce as so bad that it is “even now a cause of ruin to the Roman state, by which he withdrew it into new boundaries, having cut off further the hinder parts of his own empire.”⁵ Such descriptions of the redrawing of boundaries begin only in the historiography of the later Roman Empire.

Historical Research Problem

At the heart of Roman thinking about their imperial frontiers was the notion of *imperium sine fine*—the imperial power without limit, without bound. According to a dominant ideology from at least the second century B.C. and continuing into the later Empire, the Roman Empire was an organic entity that never had to define frontiers as it fulfilled its destiny to expand throughout the whole world, the *orbis terrarum*. But by the third century A.D., Romans began to express their empire more often in terms of a defined territory. There were some immediate precedents, pointing to a transition in the second century, but by the third century, there is a distinct late Roman frontier consciousness. Behind such reconstructions as the one from Augustine—one voice among many, Christian as well as pagan—lies a “frontier consciousness,” those beliefs and ideas that Romans held about their frontiers and how they were perceived. These beliefs, mediated against background knowledge,⁶ were specifically challenged and confirmed by news and information coming from those frontiers, especially during the later Empire.

From the third century onward, the flow of news from the frontiers intensified, reaching people and places on a regular basis in unprecedented ways, gradually shaping an image of frontiers different from that held by Romans of the early Empire.⁷ Increased threats or perceived threats at the frontiers can help explain this—but only in part. At this time emperors began to frequent the frontier regions, largely in response to internal insurrections and/or external threats, generating more news. This study analyzes the origin, volume, and character of news from and about the frontiers.

What did Romans of the later Empire think about their Imperial frontiers? Did these Romans think differently about frontiers than did Romans under the Principate? Did the average Roman of this period without administrative or military connections care about frontiers or even think at all in terms of them? How did news of or from frontiers reach interior areas? Did the so-called Christianization of the Empire cause a change in the perception of frontiers? These are the questions that undergird this study.

The late Roman frontier consciousness was negotiated through a process that took into account background knowledge (along with inherent world-views) and news from and about frontiers. Particularly between the third and fifth centuries, Romans understood frontiers more as physical and/or territorial than as just divisions between people or ethnic groups. The change came about from the heightened proliferation of frontier news concurrent with the Roman Empire's decline in relative power. A now-dominant school of frontier studies claims that "frontiers cannot be shown to have performed any historically recoverable function other than to have accommodated the contact of Roman and indigenous society."⁸ This book counters by arguing that static frontiers did play an important role in the worldview of Romans of the later Empire.

Regional Considerations

It has long been acknowledged that the frontier took on different forms in different regions of the Roman Empire. There never was one paradigm against which all frontiers were measured.⁹ This study focuses primarily on two regions—Anatolia to the eastern frontier and North Africa—while including other areas as well.¹⁰ Larger debates concerning Romanization and cultural unity within the Empire have set the contours for much of the research presented here. This account attempts to acknowledge local variations while positing generalizable "Roman" attributes. The extent to which the later Roman Empire represents a cultural unity becomes an issue when looking at news as well as the official and unofficial infrastructures that served as the essential vehicles for that flow.¹¹

Focusing away from Western Europe allows for a perspective that de-emphasizes the traditional preoccupation with Germanic settlers who would transgress the western frontiers into oblivion. One can read texts without inserting into them our own expectation that “the barbarians are coming” and that they are going to stay. A regional studies approach can help clarify more globally held Roman views and can help qualify generalizations that have been shaped disproportionately by a traditional focus on the Rhine-Danube frontier.

To be sure, Anatolia and North Africa developed in different ways. Anatolia has throughout recorded history offered routes for conquerors, travelers, armies, and traders. Here, civilizations mingled at the crossroads of civilizations, the meeting point between East and West, establishing patterns of information flow across cultural boundaries.

North Africa, conversely, lacked the change and interchange that were the hallmarks of the Anatolian scene. Certainly, a variety of civilizations had occupied common space here over time—Phoenician, Carthaginian, Numidian, Berber, Roman, Vandal, Byzantine. A long history of transhumance highlights the moving, “bedouin” character of a large portion of the population, especially at the frontier zone. Rarely, however, has North Africa served as a crossroads or a point of blending between civilizations. Here there were no long-term frontier markets at the limits of civilizations and at which groups mingled. The real story of North Africa has been one of continuity. The Roman architecture here, such as temples at Dougga and the famous tricapitol at Sbeitla, maintains a certain Numidian character, for example. North Africa lacked the volume of Roman travelers passing through and had far fewer troops moving through (or stationed here) and fewer pilgrims.

Yet in both the East and North Africa, there was consciousness of a frontier that ended the holdings of the late Roman Empire. The eastern frontier dominates available accounts. Ammianus Marcellinus, Julian, Libanius, and others refer to this frontier and tell, to a certain extent, how armies and civilians related to it. The North African frontier is much less visible in extant sources, and the threats here, although real, were not as momentous as on the eastern frontier or as reported on throughout the rest of the Empire. North Africa thus serves as a test not only for an East/West comparison but also for an “active versus passive” frontier.

These two frontier zones themselves required different immediate methods to maintain them in Roman antiquity. In the East, the great rivers of Mesopotamia had always formed a part of a frontier, if only ideologically. Mountains and open spaces often served as the limit, but it is clear enough in sources and in a growing body of recent studies that the rivers were imagined as barriers

in the Roman Empire. In North Africa, there was some recognition of mountains, but the frontier was seen more as an artificial boundary. The extensive *fossatum* and *clausura* (ditch and wall) networks there continue to provoke much discussion, but their function(s) remain(s) far from clear. Nevertheless, their presence does suggest an idea in the minds of North Africans of a physical limit to Roman holdings.

Likewise, thinking of what was on the other side of the frontier differed for both regions. To many North Africans, the other side of their frontier teemed with raiding nomads and mythical peoples such as the “outermost Garamantes,” caricatured in Roman literature from Vergil onward. With so few campaigns beyond North African frontiers, Romans had very little idea of what actually existed there. On the other side of the Eastern frontier was a long-established people, the Persians, conceded by Romans to be in the range of “civilized” and with whom it was possible to negotiate treaties over frontier boundaries. Romans traveled to many parts of the Persian Empire, particularly in military campaign or embassies, and some left accounts of the geography, topography, and people of the Persian Empire.

Along with these differences, it is important to note the commonalities that held together diverse regions of the Roman Empire. In his recent study of imperial ideology and provincial loyalty in the Roman Empire, C. Ando makes a case that the Roman Empire was held together by a consensus between the imperial center and its far-flung provinces. Inhabitants of the Roman Empire, he argues, did participate in a certain intellectual and cultural unity backed up by Rome’s mechanisms of control. I explore one aspect of the “profound and widespread redefinition . . . of individuals’ relations with each other, their localities, and the larger community of their empire” that Ando postulates.¹² Likewise, in her influential study of Late Antique ceremony, S. MacCormack concludes that a marked Roman unity was expressed and cemented in acts of consensus articulated in ceremonies.¹³ Although much recent work has questioned the degree of cultural unity within the Roman Empire, it seems clear that at some ideological level, being a Roman involved sharing a certain set of beliefs or participating in certain aspects of the ceremonial life of the Empire.

Chronological Focus

Finally, a few words on the specific time period of this study. In his seminal work, *The World of Late Antiquity*, P. Brown characterizes the period as a time of “shifting and redefinition of the boundaries of the classical world after AD 200.”¹⁴ This observation, written at the dawn, so to speak, of Late Antique studies, continues to fuel research on this fascinating period. Brown himself

extends the period from this starting point to the mid–eighth century. The periodization of the present study is a bit shorter, bounded on one extreme by the “third-century crisis” and on the other by the major barbarian invasions of the early fifth century. The term *Late Antiquity* is retained throughout in spite of the difficulties of applying this term to this limited time period.¹⁵ In the title I have used “Late Roman Empire,” which I deem more appropriate since this study deals with the third through the early fifth century and since I focus almost exclusively on Romans and not on non-Roman barbarians, Persians, or Arabs. Even so, I realize that this designation is not free from problems either, since, of course, the Roman Empire was nowhere near its end in the East at this time, and my designation itself would seem to privilege the view of the West.

Beginning with the later part of the third century seems natural enough as a starting point—there is much precedent for beginning here. Importantly, the phenomenon that I analyze—frontier consciousness—was solidified during this time. Taking the early fifth century as my ending point is not so obvious. In some ways this might appear to be turning back the historiographical clock forty to fifty years to a time when everything wonderful and praiseworthy about Rome was seen as crashing down with the onslaught of the savage barbarians. But my focus as well as my conclusions, I trust, lead far away from this outmoded picture.

Much has been and continues to be written about the barbarian incursions into the later Roman Empire. This book intentionally keeps its focus off of the barbarians and on the ways that Romans conceived of their frontiers. Of course, the perceived “violation” of those frontiers by barbarians is a major issue, but it is possible, I think, to keep the focus on Roman perceptions of frontiers even after the barbarian settlements. Also, I have tried to balance analysis of active versus inactive frontiers. A tale only of transgressed frontier zones to the exclusion of inactive or less active frontiers would be imbalanced and would detract from a reconstruction of a general late Roman worldview.

Violated frontiers are well presented in sources, focused as they are on military engagements and other disasters on the frontiers. Getting past such bias might be impossible, but recognizing how it shapes the sources is a crucial step toward understanding Roman frontier consciousness. If S. Mattern is correct about a Roman worldview/value system during the Principate—and I rather suspect she is—that Romans of this earlier period relied on honor, competition, and revenge in pushing frontiers outward, then when that system fell apart in the third century, another mind-set must have risen to challenge it, at the least, if not replace it altogether.¹⁶ That new mind-set is the topic of this

book. During this period, people came to imagine their *imperium* as an Empire with literal spatial and territorial reference as opposed to the exclusively ethnic focus of earlier times. Looking at this period provides a window into the changing perceptions of frontiers and into the emergence of a distinct late Roman frontier consciousness.

