News and Frontier Consciousness in the Late Roman Empire

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Preface and Acknowledgments

This book investigates the place of imperial frontiers in a late Roman worldview. The volume argues that as the Roman Empire declined in terms of relative power, consciousness of the physical boundaries of the Empire increased. While this might seem obvious from a modern perspective in which clearly defined boundaries, traced on maps, define nations, it constituted a profound and unprecedented shift in thought. The ancients were not accustomed to thinking about frontiers as physical or static boundaries. Accompanying and motivating this mental shift was the proliferation of news from and about the frontiers.

This is not a study of foreign relations, military strategy, or propaganda, although recent works in these fields are indispensable to my book. The focus, then, is not limited to policymakers, political figures, and military leaders, although such persons shared assumptions about the world with Romans of all types. This study looks beyond official functionaries and explores the perceptions of people of various backgrounds. Unlike most Roman frontier studies, this book examines religion and belief, pagan and Christian, in the late Roman Empire. Too often, recent historians have projected their own modern beliefs onto the Roman past. The assumption that clear-thinking people—army leaders, for example—did not let religious beliefs or cosmological assumptions influence their defense of the Empire is evident in nearly all studies of imperial frontiers. While most self-professed studies of Late Antiquity see spiritual aspects at its core, most late Roman frontier/military studies
completely ignore religious and cosmological elements. Why this occurs is a central question that prompted this study. A variety of very recent works helped in formulating answers.

Originally, I employed a comparative approach to show that perceptions of the frontiers varied in different regions of the Empire. Ultimately, however, this proved inadequate. The study of news proliferation demonstrated instead that the Empire possessed a significant amount of intellectual and cultural unity—a sense of Roman identity that trumped specific local identities, real as they were. A comparative approach, though, did reveal that focusing on other locales instead of Western Europe (which most frontier studies have examined) suggests an alternate picture of the Roman Empire. Barbarian studies of the late western Empire, significant in their own right, are not the same as frontier studies. Focusing on the North African and the eastern frontier suggests that there was a general late Roman frontier consciousness.

One’s first book, of course, is a place to acknowledge a large number of debts, some rather long-standing, accumulated along the way.

One of my oldest debts is to a community to which I no longer belong. Like those people living in Late Antiquity, I grew up in a world full of prophetic speculation. As a child who was raised and nurtured in fundamentalist churches both on the American West Coast and in the Deep South, I was entranced by the frequent sermons on how the violation of one crucial frontier—that between the United States and the “Evil Empire”—was a tangible indicator of the coming of the Antichrist, the Rapture, the Battle of Armageddon, even the Apocalypse itself. Preachers claimed that ancient prophecies involving Israel, the armies of Gog and Magog, and the “Great Bear from the North” were literally being fulfilled before our eyes. I knew what it meant to live with a frontier consciousness in that Cold War world. Sunday after Sunday, I heard that scriptural prophecies were crucial for interpreting current and future events. I would later learn that Romans of the third, fourth, and fifth centuries used Hebrew prophecies in much the same way. Many of the questions that produced this book were, I suspect, gestating in my young mind before I ever encountered a historical source.

Three teachers laid the groundwork for this book well before the research began. My undergraduate mentor, John Matzko, taught me by word and example what it means to be a historian. Ralph Mathisen, my master’s adviser, introduced me to the exciting period of Late Antiquity. My research and teaching interest in cultural and intellectual history was sparked by Kenneth Gouwens.

More recently, several institutions have been crucial for this book. The College of Arts and Letters at Michigan State provided two dissertation
Fig. 1. The Roman Empire, ca. A.D. 395.
grants for research in North Africa and Turkey and for finishing the dissertation. The library, staff, and residents at the American Research Institute in Turkey—Ankara afforded helpful resources and stimulating conversation. The Introduction to the Humanities Program at Stanford University provided a generous research leave from teaching in the fall of 2002 that was essential for transforming my dissertation into book form. Grove City College provided a subvention grant to help with design costs.

My doctoral mentor, John W. Eadie, shaped the project throughout, especially by his interesting and challenging questions, which regularly sent me scurrying off in new directions. Somehow, he also helped me realize that I could answer some of the more intriguing ones. Joseph Scholten and Christopher Celenza read my dissertation thoroughly and posed questions that have guided my years of rethinking and revision. Peter Vinten-Johansen taught me much about rewriting.

Two anonymous readers for the University of Michigan Press provided very helpful and encouraging reviews that both challenged and clarified my thinking in foundational ways. Both saved me from some egregious errors and omissions and improved all of the chapters.

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