

*News and Frontier Consciousness
in the Late Roman Empire*



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Mark W. Graham

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For Don and Kim Graham,
parentes carissimi et fideles



τοιαῦτα πολλάκις ἐγένετο καὶ γίνεται,
καὶ πῶς ταῦτα συντελείας σημεία;
Julian, *Fragmenta* 1



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

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.

The following friends and colleagues read and commented insightfully on earlier outlines and drafts: Jan Bulman, Carol Cole, Robert Gee, and Alicia Walker. At later stages, conversations with Cindy Nimchuk and Steven L. Jones have helped me sort through some thorny issues involving communication and culture. Bruno Ferrer-Higueras provided some fascinating references and lively exchange on the book's argument. David Naugle graciously read and insightfully commented on sections handling worldview issues. Christine Zitrides and Alicia Walker gave helpful advice on illustrations. Two students at Grove City College, Leah Ayers and Mary Baldauff, provided editorial assistance and helped prepare the General Index. Andrew Welton prepared the *Index Locorum*.

My wife, Becky, has been an ardent supporter at all levels and stages. In addition to proofreading help, she skillfully navigated our trips to both the Roman North African and the eastern frontiers. Estelle May and Sarah Ellen must be thanked for so often and graciously agreeing to share daddy's lap with a computer.

Most of all, I thank Don and Kim Graham, beloved and faithful parents, who have encouraged learning and growing in many ways. The dedication is but a small token of gratitude for your sacrifices, great and small, in my education.

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Abbreviations



- Amm. Marc. Ammianus Marcellinus. *Res Gestae*. Ed. and trans. J. C. Rolfe. 3 vols. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1982 (Loeb Classical Library).
- ANRW *Aufstieg und Niedergang der Römischen Welt*. Ed. H. Temporini and W. Haase. Berlin: W. de Gruyter, 1972–.
- BAR British Archaeological Reports, Oxford.
- CC *Corpus Christianorum*, series *Latina*. Brepols: Turnhout, 1953–.
- CIL *Corpus Inscriptionum Latinarum*. Berlin, 1863–.
- CSCO *Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium*. Louvain, 1903–.
- CT *Codex Theodosianus*. Trans. C. Pharr. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1952.
- D&L Dodgeon, M. H., and S. N. C. Lieu, eds. *The Roman Eastern Frontier and the Persian Wars (A.D. 226–363): A Documentary History*. London: Routledge, 1991.
- De Civ. D. Augustine. *De Civitate Dei: The City of God against the Pagans*. Trans. W. M. Green. 7 vols. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1963.

- ep.*; *epp.* *Epistula* (epistle); *epistulae* (epistles).
- frag.* fragment
- ILS* *Inscriptiones Latinae Selectae*. Ed. H. Dessau. Berlin: Weidmannos, 1892–1916.
- JRA* *Journal of Roman Archaeology*. Ann Arbor, 1987–.
- JRS* *Journal of Roman Studies*. London, 1911–.
- LA* Bowersock, G. W., P. Brown, and O. Grabar, eds. *Late Antiquity: A Guide to the Postclassical World*. Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999.
- or.* *Oration* (oration).
- Panegyrici*, N&R Nixon, C. E. V., and B. S. Rodgers, eds. *In Praise of Later Roman Emperors: The Panegyrici Latini: Introduction, Translation, and Historical Commentary with the Latin Text of R. A. B. Mynors*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994.
- Zosimus* *Zosimus. New History: A Translation with Commentary by R. T. Ridley*. *Byzantina Australiensia* 2. Canberra: Australian Association for Byzantine Studies, 1982.