

## Introduction

André Piganiol closed his *Empire Chrétien* with two sentences destined to become famous in the following decades: “La civilisation romaine n’est pas morte de sa belle morte. Elle a été assassinée” (The Roman civilization did not die a natural death. It was assassinated).<sup>1</sup> Half a century ago the frontier question was not really a question at all. The “decline and fall” of the Roman Empire was the dominant paradigm and had been firmly in place since the enlightened days of Edward Gibbon. Frontier drama loomed large in this fatalistic scenario which saw wave after wave of savage barbarians crashing through the Roman defenses and eventually plunging Western civilization into a dark cultural abyss. And yet there were important signs announcing a major historiographical shift. The articulation of Late Antiquity as an independent field and an unprecedented turn toward the study of social and economic phenomena forever changed our understanding of ancient frontiers. The Anglo-American school of Late Antique studies, the French “Annales School,” and indeed, the creation and expansion of the European Union have brought a renewed interest in frontiers as well as new and exciting vistas for the study of interaction between different cultures and civilizations.

Because of the uneven development of the field, only certain areas of the Late Roman frontier stretching on three continents have been thoroughly researched. The Western provinces enjoy the most privileged position as several generations of scholars painstakingly reassessed the dissolution of Roman structures and the transition to the Middle Ages. Important work has been done in other regions as well. The Early Byzantine frontier in North Africa has long been a central focus for historians interested in the transition from the Vandal to the Byzantine, and later Arab, domination. In the Near East our understanding of the role and function of the desert frontier is still very much influenced by the seminal thesis of Benjamin Isaac and the subsequent works built on his concept of an open frontier. On the other hand, there is still much to be learned about the evolution of

<sup>1</sup> A. Piganiol, *L’empire chrétien (325–395)* (Paris, 1947), 422.

the Danube frontier in Late Antiquity and its many functions, as it separated and at the same time brought together the Early Byzantine Empire and the northern *barbaricum*.

The argument in the following chapters operates on three different planes. The first is the broad debate surrounding frontier culture, the role of liminal spaces, and the creation of identities. Scholars have long been fascinated by Justinian's work of fortification in the Balkans and have used archaeological and literary sources to emphasize the emperor's efforts to create separation rather than foster communication between the frontier provinces and the world of "barbarians." Drawing on anthropological models I will argue that natural frontiers like the Danube are in fact multidimensional. Their political, geographic, demographic, and cultural aspects are complementary rather than conflicting but their study requires different research questions and methodological tools. The Early Byzantine frontier on the Danube can be perceived as a political and military border of exclusion due to its strategic advantages, but also as a cultural frontier zone open to negotiation and facilitating the circulation of ideas, objects, and people. The cultural dimension, however, remained subservient to the political one. The chain of fortifications fastened on the southern bank of the river ensured that Byzantine emperors would continue to hold the key unlocking cross-cultural interaction. In the sixth century when the empire was no longer able to launch major campaigns north of the Danube, cultural integration became a complementary strategy of protecting the Balkans used in tandem with physical defenses.

The second theme is the archaeology of cultural contact on the periphery with special emphasis on the role of Byzantine money outside the frontier. I argue that cultural interaction was essentially non-economic and relied on barbarians recruited in the Roman army to act as cultural brokers transmitting goods and fashions from the northern Balkans to *barbaricum*. I am using the latest developments in world-systems analysis to describe the Danube region as a semiperiphery where a unique type of culture was created in relation to the Byzantine core and the "barbarian" periphery. This fertile ground of cultural negotiation and hybridization sustained the development of identities and social values in *barbaricum* in relation to the Byzantine world. Communities from the lands north of the Danube competed for access to Byzantine goods and one of the main observations is that several other cultural frontiers can be identified beyond the classical antithesis, "Empire vs. Barbarians." Competition in *barbaricum* as well as the relative proximity to the frontier dictated what type of fashions would be adopted. Inclusion and exclusion are complementary rather than

antithetical notions as they both generated an increasing demand for Byzantine goods. Although channeled by different tastes and preferences, the circulation of ideas and styles across the Danube was closely related to the militarized nature of the frontier and depended on a fragile balance of power.

The analysis of coin finds reveals a chiefly non-economic function of Byzantine money outside the Empire. The social value of Byzantine coins resided in their direct association with the Roman way of life and the emulation of Roman practices. Against current economic interpretations of the numismatic evidence, I argue that low-value bronze coins had little or no monetary function. They did not sustain an exchange system fueled by coinage, nor did they support the development of a market economy. Communities in *barbaricum* treated coins like any other Byzantine object and invested them with social meaning. In addition, precious-metal coinage crossed the frontier through political channels. Early Byzantine emperors employing a well-honed *Realpolitik* used diplomatic gifts to create alliances or tilt the balance of power in their favor and lavished barbarian leaders with large quantities of *solidi* and ceremonial silver. Byzantine gold and silver coins were subsequently woven into the social fabric of communities from the frontier region, being melted down to produce jewelry and other objects which became an index of social distinction. Some were included in graves to highlight the social status of the deceased, while others were hoarded as symbols of wealth.

Finally, the third theme is an important historiographical question – and, indeed, a highly politicized issue – regarding the creation of Early Medieval ethnicities, languages, and states in Eastern Europe. The debate is one of “continuity vs. discontinuity” or “autochthony vs. immigrationism,” best illustrated by the opposing views of the Romanian and Hungarian schools, although historians, archaeologists, and linguists across the Balkans had to grapple with this question in their struggle to understand an important formative period in their nation’s past. For it is political ideology that really stood behind this fierce polemic, from eighteenth-century enlightenment to nineteenth-century nationalism and twentieth-century communism. On the basis of linguistic and archaeological evidence, Romanian scholars have emphasized the continuity of Roman culture in the territory of present-day Romania, striving to demonstrate that the ancestors of modern Romanians successfully preserved their Latin language, Christian religion, and Roman identity against centuries of pressure from incoming barbarian groups. Under the aggressive nationalism promoted by the communist regime in the 1970s and 1980s the discourse became

radicalized into one proclaiming the cultural superiority of the autochthonous population and the inevitable assimilation of the newcomers. Unaware of the ongoing debate over the political and cultural function of Roman frontiers – a popular topic in western scholarship at that time – Romanian researchers underscored the permeability of the Danube frontier for purely ideological reasons, because it served their chief purpose of proving the uninterrupted contact between “proto-Romanian” communities and the Byzantine Empire.

Such views continued to be opposed by Hungarian scholarship, and occasionally Bulgarian – to be sure, with equal bias. Nineteenth-century Austro-Hungarian imperialism had described Transylvania as a *terra deserta* at the arrival of the Magyars, so no Romanic continuity could be accepted as it could undermine the Hungarian claims over this province. Still, medieval Romanians had to be accounted for somehow so an immigrationist solution was offered. The polemic was reignited during the communist decades when the Hungarian school felt compelled to provide an inflammatory response to the nationalistic distortions tirelessly cultivated by Romanian historians. Unsurprisingly, Hungarian scholars revived the “immigrationist” thesis stating that Romanian ethnicity (and the Romanian language, by extension) was a creation of the lands south of the Danube, exported north of the river much later in the 12th to 13th centuries.

Those who look for partisanship in this book will be disappointed. Furthermore, the present analysis will not attempt to establish a “golden mean” – for the theories are mutually exclusive – but to propose a different paradigm of interaction that cuts across ethnicities and sees the process of cultural interaction in light of the Empire’s pragmatic political agenda. This has less to do with ideology, propaganda, or the imperial rhetoric often invoked by historians. Byzantine emperors divided the world of *barbaricum* into friends and foes regardless of ethnic background – a fluid concept always susceptible to unexpected and radical change as dictated by political expediency. Throughout the sixth and seventh centuries the Empire fought and made up with the Gepids, the Avars, the Lombards, and the Antes, to name only the most conspicuous cases mentioned in contemporary accounts. Previous conflict never precluded future collaboration against common enemies and it often appears that aggression against the Empire was the necessary test for being taken seriously by the imperial administration (i.e. the extraction of tribute or subsidies). The Latin-speaking and Christian communities north of the Danube – the main obsession of Romanian scholarship – were hardly the only target for the

Empire's cultural tactic expressed in the surge of Byzantine goods across the frontier. While the descendants of the Roman colonists never disappeared from Transylvania and the Danube plain, Byzantine emperors did not pay special attention to their welfare. Elucidating the ethnic profile of communities living in the empire's shadow is beyond the scope of this book – the author wonders if it can be achieved at all – but it seems clear that Romanization, in the wide sense of the concept, was available to anyone willing to help defend imperial interests on the Lower Danube. This is not a question of massive population movement (immigrationist thesis) or stubborn cultural survival against all adversity (continuity thesis); it is a political game whose cultural consequences transcend modern perceptions of frontiers, clear-cut ethnicity, and nationalism.

The source material which forms the basis for discussion in the following chapters combines evidence drawn from the written record, archaeological and anthropological data, as well as my own research in numismatic collections from various museums and the field work undertaken since 2001 at Capidava, an important Late Roman fortress on the Lower Danube frontier. The main methodological goal is to highlight the numismatic evidence as the primary source of a monograph which attempts to weave numismatics, archaeology, history, and ethnographic research into a homogeneous interdisciplinary narrative. In many ways this book is an invitation to dialogue. A common thread of all chapters is the realization that only by pulling together various strands of information, often the province of diverse disciplines and specializations, can we build a nuanced and multifaceted narrative of frontier history. The reader will not find a brand new theoretical framework for analyzing frontiers and cross-cultural interaction but a long overdue fusion between concepts and definitions which often seemed mutually exclusive. Indeed, the frontier in its complexity and chameleonic nature defies total encapsulation by a single universal model.

The book has seven chapters organized thematically. The first chapter is a reinterpretation of the Roman frontier in Late Antiquity. In the last decades historians have described frontier rivers as primarily facilitating communication and cultural contact and less as borders of exclusion; contrariwise, archaeologists still concentrate their efforts on the military dimension. Under the spell of the postmodernist turn the former have approached frontiers through a polysemic kaleidoscope of cultural, intellectual, and symbolic lenses, while the latter remained entrenched in the traditional focus on fortifications and lines of defense. In many ways this dichotomy was engendered by insufficient conversation between historians

and archaeologists and has delayed the development of a conceptual model which could help bridge such disciplinary divides. The chapter is an attempt to offer such a model, drawn from the anthropological study of frontiers. By doing so it is necessary to intrude upon several of the major and still outstanding questions of Byzantine history. What was the Byzantine worldview on frontiers? Is there any change from the early Roman centuries? Was there a Grand Strategy in Late Antiquity? A careful comparative study reveals enduring literary *topoi* but also an ongoing concern to use reinforced natural obstacles as political frontiers able to act as convenient barriers against “barbarians.” This chapter reemphasizes the strategic role of the Danube in Late Antiquity and its political function of separation. This reality must be acknowledged before anything else if we hope to understand the cultural dimension of the Danube frontier in all its complexity.

Drawing on post-colonial theory and new directions in world-systems analysis, the second, third, and fourth chapters offer an archaeological interpretation of the Danube region as a cultural interface between Early Byzantium and northern *barbaricum* based on a variety of Byzantine goods found outside the Empire. The study of archaeological evidence confirms the fact that economic, cultural, and political borders are not coterminous; the Empire’s influence can be traced far beyond its administrative limits. The surge of Byzantine artifacts across the frontier, such as amphorae, lamps, brooches, and buckles, points to different channels of distribution and particular preferences associated with the creation of elite identity and social prestige in relation to Byzantium. This cultural dynamic reshaped the nearby *barbaricum* into a “negotiated periphery” due to the active agency of “barbarians” in taking control of their cultural identity, while interaction itself brought benefits to both sides. However, it also developed into a “bipolar periphery,” since cultural contact was equally the result of cooperation and conflict, of “barbarians” drawn into the empire’s service and “barbarians” drawn by the empire’s wealth and bent on plunder. In the end both helped spread Byzantine goods, fashions, and religious ideas in the northern world. More importantly, it becomes clear that the Danube’s political function of separation could not function unless there was sufficient cultural interaction between the two sides of the river to avoid a permanent state of conflict. Byzantine emperors could not muster the material and human resources needed to support a 1,000 km-long frontier from Belgrade to the Danube Delta, if continuous pressure from *barbaricum* was not prevented through diplomatic action and the implementation of long-term cultural strategies.

The fifth and sixth chapters reevaluate the flow of Early Byzantine coins beyond the political border by analyzing their distribution on a wide geographical area from Central Europe to the Caucasus, with special emphasis on the Lower Danube. When properly placed in their historical and archaeological context coins can illuminate some of the outstanding issues regarding the nature of cultural contact in the frontier region often obscured by the limitations of the written evidence. The coin is not only the most widely and frequently circulated Byzantine object in *barbaricum*, but also the most reliable and chronologically sensitive. If conclusions drawn on the basis of other artifacts often command no confidence because of their erratic nature, the standardized and bureaucratic aspect of Byzantine coins, often dated with the regnal year of the ruler, provides a unique type of evidence. Notwithstanding its own limitations, numismatic material affords the rare opportunity to analyze vast frontier regions in comparison through the lens of a single historical source. Gold is most abundant in the Carpathian Basin where the Avars – just like the Huns in the previous century – received millions of gold *solidi* in the form of annual tribute; this immediately developed into the most potent symbol of the khagan's power and the main instrument for maintaining the loyalty of the peoples under his suzerainty. In the Lower Danube region copper coins dominate the numismatic corpus, as a testament of the significant pressure exerted by the frontier system whose influence projected over wide regions south and east of the Carpathians. Finally, silver predominates in Transcaucasia where ceremonial *miliarensia* were used to buy the loyalty of Caucasian tribes, while the hexagram became the main unit of payment for the troops fighting against Persia in the seventh century, particularly in Armenia and Iberia where the Sasanian silver drachm had been for a long time the dominant coinage.

The last chapter explores the problem of economic vs. non-economic functions performed by coins. While precious-metal coins have been connected with political payments, current interpretations of Byzantine copper coins found outside the frontier are chiefly economic. Given the fiduciary nature of Byzantine bronze coinage, the question therefore ineluctably arises as to how they could act as monetary media of exchange outside the confines of the issuing authority. Previous arguments have been couched in preconceived notions regarding the Early Byzantine monetary economy and the untested assumption that parts of *barbaricum* followed the same conditions prevailing in the imperial provinces. Ethnographic research assessing the impact of money on traditional societies in the colonial period can shed some light on the Byzantine case. Although set

in a different time and space, the situations discussed in this chapter are brought together by a common denominator, which is cultural contact between monetized empires (“world systems”) and small rural communities (“mini-systems”). Drawing on such anthropological parallels for the use of monetary instruments by traditional communities, I argue that coins served mainly non-economic purposes. From an economic, but non-monetary, perspective coins were more attractive for their intrinsic value as raw material for the production of jewelry. As one moves farther from the border, the social appropriation of coins as amulets, souvenirs, and objects of prestige increases.

A note on terminology is required. Historical periodization can be notoriously confusing and Late Antiquity makes no exception. The book covers its final phase from the late fifth to the late seventh century, or the *spätere Spätantike* as Peter Brown defined it. The weight rests on the “long sixth century,” from the accession of Anastasius (491–518) to the reign of Heraclius (610–641), which roughly corresponds to the renewal of the Byzantine frontier on the Danube and its ultimate demise, respectively. Depending on region, language, and intellectual tradition Late Roman, Early Byzantine or Byzantine may be used as labels for the period covering the sixth and seventh centuries. Archaeological terminology such as Roman-Byzantine in the Balkans, Late Byzantine in Near East, and Early Medieval or Late Migration for cultures from the Central European *barbaricum* only add to the general confusion to which the non-specialist may easily succumb. In the following chapters only Roman and Early Byzantine will be used, the former for general statements (e.g. Roman way of life, Roman tradition, “Romans and barbarians”) and the latter for chronologically sensitive contexts and in relation to the fact that sixth-to-seventh-century coinage is universally described as Early Byzantine. I am using Latin terminology for names or the English equivalent long established in scholarship (e.g. Anastasius, Justinian) and Latin or Greek terms for coinage, reflecting the evolution of this technical vocabulary during Late Antiquity (e.g. *solidus*; *hexagrammon*). “Copper” designates the low-value Byzantine coinage, although the metal itself is a copper alloy, sometimes described as “bronze” in the numismatic literature, where the terms are used interchangeably.

Since this is a work about frontiers, the reader may be puzzled by the variety of seemingly synonymous words used to describe them. I am using “frontier” as a general term which has been unofficially applied to this academic subfield (frontier studies), while “border” specifically designates a linear political demarcation (i.e. the Danube river). “Danubian



borderlands” signifies a region corresponding to the cultural semiperiphery described in the second chapter, while *barbaricum* is a northern periphery outside the empire’s direct political control. No clear cultural delimitation exists between these two regions as they were constantly negotiated and subject to change. For the sake of brevity, *barbaricum* will therefore be used to designate lands outside the Byzantine provincial administration, although no uniformity must be expected. Throughout the book regions beyond the frontier are sometimes labeled *Gepidia*, *Avaria*, or *Sklavinia*, but their political and cultural boundaries are hard to define in the ever-changing world of *barbaricum*. On the other hand, the term “barbarian” will be used sparingly and only in generic contexts, lest the reader should be left with the impression that various groups may be lumped together under the same cultural umbrella. Finally, I am using Romanization to describe the adoption or imitation of Roman practices; this venerable concept no longer fashionable in many academic circles should be understood here in light of more recent developments in post-colonial theory and archaeological research.

# 1 | The Roman Frontier in Late Antiquity

## 1.1 The Frontier Question

For more than a century historians and archaeologists have struggled to define Roman frontiers. Frontiers and borders have always been unwieldy notions as they belong to two different worlds and yet they are their own cultural universe.<sup>1</sup> Since separation is one of the most enduring themes in human history, one of the major challenges has been the negotiation of modern realities which constantly distort our understanding of what frontiers meant to the ancient Romans. Running the risk of falling into the trap of presentism, a number of scholars based their argumentation on implicit or explicit comparisons with modern frontiers. Nineteenth-century efforts to redraw the map of Europe based on nationalistic views of political, cultural, and linguistic identity have prompted historians to rethink the function of Roman frontiers by projecting modern concepts onto ancient contexts. The ensuing debate has shaped two schools of thought. Scholars had to grapple with several frustrating questions: was the Roman frontier a linear barrier separating two worlds or was it an area of economic, cultural, and religious contact? What was the role of geography in sustaining imperial policy in frontier regions? Did frontier rivers unite or divide? Although the static frontier thesis has fallen out of favor with historians of the Roman Empire, the main goal of this chapter is to show that political conditions in Late Antiquity favored frontiers of exclusion and the Danube river will be used as a compelling example of a natural linear border which Roman emperors desperately tried to

<sup>1</sup> The quest for a proper terminology has not yet yielded a universally accepted vocabulary. For the problem, see H. Elton, *Frontiers of the Roman Empire* (Bloomington, IN, 1996), 3–9. For an interdisciplinary approach, see L. Rodseth and B. J. Parker, “Introduction: theoretical considerations in the study of frontiers,” in *Untaming the Frontier in Anthropology, Archaeology and History*, eds. B. J. Parker and L. Rodseth (Tucson, AZ, 2005), 9–11. See also B. A. Feuer, *Boundaries, Borders and Frontiers in Archaeology: A Study of Spatial Relationships* (Jefferson, NC, 2016), esp. ch. 1. For post-colonial theory on the polysemic nature of borderlands, see H. Bhabha, “Culture’s in-between,” in *Questions of Cultural Identity*, eds. S. Hall and P. du Gay (London, 1996), 52–60.