

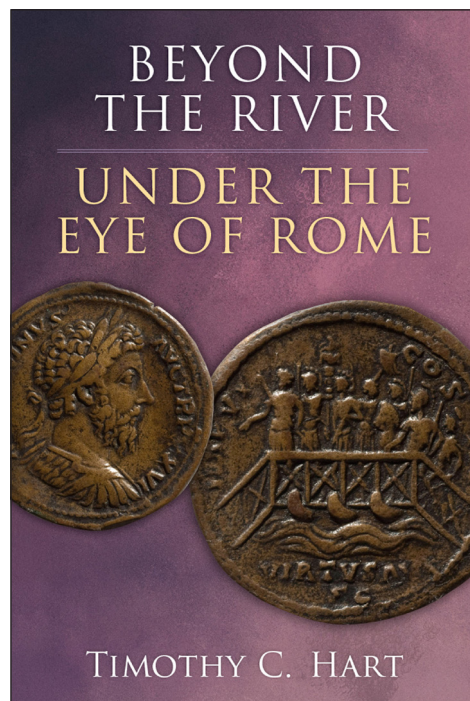
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## Book Review

Hart, Timothy C. 2024. *Beyond the River, Under the Eye of Rome*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press; 978-0-472-13353-6 hardback \$80 ebook Open Access.

The notion of a frontier in the Roman world has a wide spectrum of significance, meaning and context, even if the Roman Empire purported to be *imperium sine fine*. The different ways in which the Roman Empire created, changed and influenced perceptions of frontiers has been the subject of many books and articles with different approaches, from the static idea of the frontier as a fixed boundary to the frontier as a dynamic and continuously changing zone, relating to concepts of border studies and areas of interaction.

Timothy Hart's recently published monograph *Beyond the River, Under the Eye of Rome* focuses on the lower and middle reaches of the Danube, seen by the Romans as a barrier between civilization and barbarians living beyond. Using a combination of written and archaeological sources, he offers a highly detailed and nuanced analysis of the interaction between the Romans and these peoples from the first to fifth centuries AD. Hart's work understands the frontier as a zone, taking into account both sides of the Danube (understand as the drainage basin) as a



single, interconnected region. On one side, we are presented with the concrete actions of people and communities from beyond Rome's political sphere when they encountered and engaged with imperial power; while on the other side, the Romans are constructing their physical and mental frontiers, to explain and justify the shape of their Danubian *limes* and the decisions taken toward various borderland peoples. In other words, this book investigates how the disjunction between Rome's artificial boundary and its physical setting exerted a strong influence on the way Romans perceived and interacted with the people living beyond the river.

Seen from the perspective of the long span of history and analysed in the paradigm of border studies, this work gives us not only the perspective of mutual influences and interactions, but also the key to understanding why the Romans failed to maintain the border and the *status quo* on the Lower Danube. One of the key elements of Hart's analysis is the Scythian Logos, which refers to the set of ethnographic and ecological stereotypes about the Scythians and Scythia that label the Transdanubian peoples and contribute to the creation of an ideological frontier that influenced Roman politics throughout the period of the Roman Empire's presence on the Middle and Lower Danube.

The monograph is divided in two major parts. Part I (Introduction, Chapters 1–3) sets up the methodological framework for understanding the differences between political rhetoric and reality in the Danubian borderland. In Part II (Chapters 4–6), the author presents specific case studies that are illustrative for understanding the policy of the Roman Empire towards the populations north of the Danube, especially through the treaties negotiated concluded with them.

The introduction outlines the concept of the borderland. The author presents the theoretical apparatus that will be used throughout the book, and argues in favor of the concept of a border zone for the analysed region. At the same time, he makes an important historiographical examination of previous works on the subject. An important aspect on which he insists is the artificiality of the Roman idea of a frontier (p. 3). As Hart notes, this approach to the Danube has been lacking in the scholarly literature, with the focus previously being placed either on economic, political, or ideological aspects, or more recently on ecological factors in the interpretation of the border areas of the Roman Empire. In short, there has been a lack of recognition of the fact that the Romans themselves understood the frontier as artificial; scholarship has treated it as more 'real' than the Romans did. Moreover, Hart emphasizes the need to constantly reevaluate key concepts of Roman frontier studies, particularly traditional ideas about barbarian migration and ethnogenesis.

Chapter 1 provides a very useful survey of the geography and ecology of the Danube drainage basin, which is naturally divided into two subregions (each divided further

into micro-regions), separated by the Carpathian and Balkan Mountains. What characterizes the region is the gradual transition from one landform to another, and the resulting relatively easy travel routes. This part provides the needed background for readers to understand Hart's explanations of the movement and settlement of various trans-Danubian peoples in subsequent chapters. In this respect, the most important aspect to underline here is the relative isolation of the Middle Danube (the Hungarian Plain) from the neighboring micro-region, the Lower Danube, which remained exposed to the so-called 'Scythian Corridor', as we witness after the mid-third century AD.

Chapter 2 sets the general framework for understanding how the Scythian Logos offered a convenient ideology for justifying the establishment and maintenance of the Danube *limes* as an artificial boundary in a geographically connected land. Constructing the image of the trans-Danubian peoples, whom Romans collectively labeled Scythian, Hart analyses a wide range of sources, from Herodotus to Dexippus. He arrives at the conclusion that Roman writers gradually erased the more accurate world view from the Hellenistic era, which had pictured the Danubian Basin as populated by a mixture of Thracians, Celts and Scytho-Sarmatian nomads (p. 124–126). The Romans thereby created a new perspective by homogenizing all the Transdanubian peoples under a single set of ethnographic *topoi*. The author demonstrates the impact of this slow process and the coinciding change in Roman perceptions with two key moments in the history of the region, namely, the conquest of Dacia by Trajan in the early second century AD and the Marcomanic Wars towards the mid-late second century.

The Roman presence in the area was constantly challenged; ongoing conflicts between the Romans and the Dacians are strong arguments for Trajan's decisive action. At the end of the war with Decebalus, only part of Dacia is turned into a province, at which point official rhetoric was forced to explain why only a part of the Dacians had joined the Empire. The remaining Dacians, living in the eastern part of modern Transylvania and Moldavia, along with the Iazyges on the Hungarian Plain to the west, and Roxolani in the eastern part of Wallachia, continued to be labelled as dangerous Scythian nomads, by authors like Florus for example. The later Marcomanic Wars mark a shift in the stereotype characterizing the populations on the other side of the Danube. The war that broke out in the Middle Danube area in AD 166 stems from Marcus Aurelius' dissatisfaction with the client allies, who proved incapable of fulfilling one of their duties, namely to intercept raiders from farther afield, before they reached the Danube. Marcus Aurelius accordingly fought a long series of punitive campaigns against Rome's former client allies, the Marcomanni, Quadi and Sarmatian Iazyges. More than a decade of brutal conflict did not result in any major changes to the Roman border area and the idea of expanding the empire with two more provinces did not materialize.

The conflict did, however, lead to an intensification of the ethnographic stereotypes that characterized Rome's Transdanubian enemies. The Romans were also unable to respond to the new challenge caused by the arrival of the Goths in the area, who managed to defeat the Romans at the Battle of Atritus in AD 251, killing the emperor Decius and Herennius Etruscus, his son, and sacking major cities, like Philippopolis and Athens. While Scythians were raiding south of the Lower Danube, the Iazyges, Quadi, and other peoples of the Hungarian Plain did not take part in this, as a result of their arrangements with the Roman Empire. Although, by the end of the third century AD, the Roman emperors succeeded in re-establishing control in Danube region, a radical change also occurs with Aurelian's abandonment of Dacia in AD 271. This date is given by the author (p. 205), we should note however that Romanian historiography dates this moment somewhat earlier, during the time of Gallienus.

Chapter 3 provides a theoretical model characterizing the Sarmatian Iazyges of the Hungarian Plain as a borderland society. They lived in close dialogue with the Roman Empire since the establishment of the *limes*. The chapter examines archaeological evidence for settlement patterns and surviving domestic architecture from the second to third centuries AD, pastoral and dietary habits as well as burial practices, based on the analysis of pollen and faunal remains. The access to marketplaces for livestock trade with Roman military units settled in Dacia and along the Danube *limes* was the most important pillar of the Iazyges' economic system. At the same time, in the other direction the flow of Roman goods is steady and increasing, as can be seen in the funerary inventory of burial tombs, where jewelry or other goods are deposited. We are given the impression of a relatively stable population, in permanent contact with the Roman world. This sedentary mode of life is a slightly different impression of the Iazyges, and in an obvious contrast with older archaeological interpretations, which focused on tracking certain types of material culture through space and time as clear evidence for the movements of ethnically defined population groups. Hart demonstrates the benefit of viewing older migration narratives with a critical eye, especially when it comes to interpretation of archaeological evidence, by providing convincing arguments in favour of a regular contact between the Romans and sedentary or semisedentary communities engaged in a mixture of agriculture and short-distance transhumance.

Chapter 4 focuses on the Lower Danube region and explores the important repercussions of Aurelian's decision to withdraw from Dacia. The army and administration are moved from Dacia and transferred south of the Danube, where the emperor creates the provinces of Dacia Ripensis and Dacia Mediterranea, which maintain, at least in theory, the appearance of the integrity of the Empire. Moreover,

the continued maintenance of Roman military fortresses in Dacia could suggest, in Hart's opinion (p. 207–210), that the Romans never really considered the province as lost. The main focus of the chapter is Constantine's treaty from AD 332 with the Goths (Tervingi), who are settled partly on the terrain belonging to the former province of Dacia. The most important part of this treaty was an agreement for free trade. Apparently, the border area was reverting to an earlier status quo, with the Goths playing the same role as the Iazyges earlier, enjoying a privileged status and a special relationship with the Roman Empire. This is the main period for the so-called Sântana-de-Mureş/Černjachov culture, which in the Romanian historiography has a somewhat uniform character and has been linked to the period of Gothic domination after the Roman administration's withdrawal from Dacia. Based on the extensive archaeological excavations in the last years, one should — in Hart's opinion — interpret the variations in quantity and quality of grave goods that do appear within individual cemeteries of Sântana-de-Mureş/Černjachov culture as reflecting differences in gender, status, and perhaps religious belief, rather than origin or ethnicity because the disparate origins of elements of Sântana-de-Mureş/Černjachov material culture strongly argue against viewing the complex as the product of a single, cohesive ethnic group. Hart is arguing in favor of Constantine who legitimized the settlement of the Tervingi in the Wallachian Plain and parts of Transylvania, and granted them some sort of semi-provincial status. Taking into account the increasing availability of archaeological data, Hart offers us the image of a sedentary agrarian culture with intensive contact with the Roman world. This contrasts with what written sources suggest, with authors like Ammianus or Zosimos describing a rigid separation between the two along the border. The new order was not to last, however.

When Goths decided to help the usurper Procopius, Valens started a military campaign against them, taking place between AD 367–378. Chapter 5 describes the events at the end of the campaign, with the Goths being admitted into the Empire. The treaty concluded in AD 369, at the end of a conflict with an indecisive outcome, has nothing in common with Constantine's treaty from AD 332. Valens ended the open trade policy across the Danube, took hostages, and revoked the former practice of giving gifts to Gothic leaders. Moreover, the conflict between Athanaric and Fritigern, and Valens' meddling between the two, ultimately led to the emergence and imposition in the area of another population, the Huns, who lived further away on the Pontic steppe. Valens' policy failed to bring the Goths under Roman control, a consequence of his inability to understand that the Goths had become accustomed, under Constantine, to interacting with imperial authority. All these events eventually led to Valens' death and defeat at Adrianople in AD 378.

In his analysis of this period, Hart places particular emphasis on the relations between the Goths and the Huns and concludes that they formed an important link between the Lower Danube and the more distant power on the steppe (p. 300). The balance between the two disappeared when the Romans intervened between the different groups of Goths, affecting their prestige as those who represented the interests of the Empire beyond the Danube. This interpretation by the author of the events unfolding during Late Antiquity in the Lower Danube region differs from the general traditional view, which understands the barbarian invasions as merely the result of a domino effect, which would eventually lead to the fall of the Empire.

Chapter 6 describes developments from the late fourth century to the end of antiquity. Hart examines the impact of the Gothic War of AD 376–382 and the successive invasions by Goths, Huns, Avars, Slavs and Bulgars. Periods of invasion were followed by brief periods of peace and reconstruction, but recovery never came even close to restoring the territory to its condition before these invasions. During this period, we witness the increasing integration of the Goths into the Empire, after Theodosius' treaty of AD 382 on the one hand, while the Huns 'put on the Scythian mantle' (p. 17) on the other. In other words, we see the survival of the Scythian Logos, which will be applied to the subsequent barbarian populations arriving in the area and which, at the same time, will remain active in the imagination of Roman and even Byzantine authors, as we see in the author's references to Constantine Porphyrogenitus and Anna Komnena.

Overall, *Beyond the River, Under the Eye of Rome* examines the edges of empire, the borderland region along and beyond the Middle and Lower Danube *limes* of the Roman Empire, as a dynamic place of interaction between Romans and their so-called 'barbarian' neighbors, characterized by shifting intersections of environmental, ideological and political forces. Reading this work, one can only agree that Timothy C. Hart succeeds in shedding new and comparative light on contemporary borderland issues.

The author employs a straightforward and accessible writing style, leading to extremely enjoyable reading. The great merit of the book is represented by the talent and ability of the author, who, by consulting and analysing a whole series of written and archaeological sources, manages to present coherently the ethnographic discourse the Romans used for their 'official' policy towards the populations beyond the frontier. The book convincingly argues that that ethnographic *topoi* were much more than mere rhetorical flourishes. Instead, we are witnessing the power of the *topoi* to shape Roman perceptions of barbarians at a basic level, and how they encouraged certain actions and policies in the Danubian *limes* region, which frequently led Roman actors to make disastrous decisions.

I also wish to emphasize the particular attention given by the author to the ways 'barbarian' societies developed in dialogue with Roman power. As Hart argues, it was Rome's long relationship with the societies of the Transdanubian Plains which ensured the perpetuation of specific ethnographic ideas, which shaped Rome's politics on the Lower Danube *limes* and beyond. This book demonstrates once again how important it is to go back to the written sources, to (re)read and reinterpret them carefully in relation to archaeological evidence.

The author claims that, of all the Empire's borderlands, the military border along the lower and middle reaches of the Danube exerted the strongest influence over the cultural imagination and political destinies of the Roman Empire (p. 8). Whether you agree or disagree with his claim, it is almost certain that this work proposes a model of interpretation which can certainly be applied in other peripheral regions of the Roman Empire.

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