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INTRODUCTION

Empires Need Ethnography

Ethnography is actively situated between powerful systems of meaning. It poses its questions at the boundaries of civilizations, cultures, classes, races, and genders. Ethnography decodes and recodes, telling the grounds of collective order and diversity, inclusion and exclusion.

—JAMES CLIFFORD, “INTRODUCTION: PARTIAL TRUTHS”¹

Ethnography in the Imperial Toolkit

The elites who control empires require ethnography. They are driven not simply by curiosity about the various peoples they keep under their thumb or glare at across imperial borders. Rather, they need ethnography to help them rule, in fact to survive in the business of control and exploitation, expansion and defense. Ethnography is as important as soldiers and bureaucrats because it lets rulers put a face on outsiders, drawing them into imperial history and moral vision. It provides a structured way to find a place for foreigners in the imperial worldview and helps justify action regarding them, thus relating perceptions to imperial practice. It provides terms and concepts with which to make sense of challenging new circumstances and imposes a measure of order on them. It has the capacity to adjust and respond. At the same time, in articulating cultural contrasts and similarities with outsiders, ethnography voices the underlying attitudes of those who guide an empire’s course. Some sort of ethnographic vision comes into play every day while conducting the business of empire, whether making grand decisions about war and peace or simple ones about buying foreign goods in the marketplace. Always hurrying to keep up in a world of constant change, ethnography may be seen as “a discourse in anxious flux.”²

This book operates from a broad and inclusive definition of ethnographic thought as it was expressed by a wide range of Roman authors. The evidence embraces far more than the familiar and well-studied passages about the habits of particular groups, such as Julius Caesar’s picture of Gauls found in his war commentaries or Tacitus’s presentation of peoples beyond the Rhine found in the *Germania*, a self-standing essay. These works exemplify classical literary ethnography, a genre that was, as Patrick Amory put it, “only a small part of the story.”³

To tell more of the story, this book takes a wider view because in the Roman Empire ethnography appeared in a variety of guises and written formats. By

the term *ethnography* I mean any consideration of a foreign community that dealt at length or in passing with some aspect of its appearance or character, regardless of the genre in which the discussion is found. An organized set of ideas always lay behind the ethnographic texts, which displayed many interests. Roman authors, including Christian ones, dealt with such topics as social organization, religious practice, battlefield tactics, physical appearance, or geographical setting in which the foreigners lived. Rome was always the implicit or explicit reference point. As a descriptive medium, therefore, ethnography was more than a single genre and less than a complete, monolithic view of society. The communities under scrutiny often lay beyond imperial borders, yet an imperial presence always pervaded the description. Appraisal of outsiders was not random, though it was often highly tendentious or critical. Value judgments were never absent, and tempers often ran high.

In the epigraph at the head of this chapter, James Clifford describes modern ethnography's function as decoding and recoding critical information, turning it into knowledge with a working role in the worldview of the observer. The same may be said for ethnography in imperial Rome. From this perspective, the Roman ethnographer was a dragoman, a translator, interpreter, and guide, who explained "who's in and who's out" of the dominant Roman community. The voices encountered in this book express a wide range of opinion about what those distinctions signified. They bring to life a changing empire of diverse and discordant parts.

Rome's ethnographic infrastructure was a bundle of roughly integrated ideas regarding the significant differences separating Romans and non-Romans. It consisted of discrete and ethnographic discourses, each of which represented an ethnographic tradition serving a particular purpose. The discourses supported the imperial Romans' views of themselves regarding the many peoples of the world, shaping and reflecting interactions with them. The discourses did not always dovetail neatly, and the ideas expressed within them were not always congruent. Collectively, however, they constitute a coherent body of study. This book suggests that to understand how the Roman Empire changed and what it became, the evolution of its ethnographic underpinnings deserves to be examined. Over many centuries, Romans created a far-flung empire unified in part by an evolving ethnographic vision that renewed itself in Late Antiquity. I call this profoundly influential vision "the conqueror's gift." Roman imperial ethnography has a rich history and a fascinating story to tell.

Why Is This Book Called The Conqueror's Gift?

Books need titles that indicate their content, fit on the cover, and catch the reader's eye. *The Conqueror's Gift* meets those requirements. *Roman Ethnography and the End of Antiquity*, which follows the colon, tells the subject matter and suggests a chronological development. Calling Rome's ethnographic

infrastructure “the conqueror’s gift,” however, requires some explanation. Since the appearance of Marcel Mauss’s pathbreaking essay *The Gift (Essay sur le don)* in 1923, social scientists have recognized how gift exchange reveals complex, interactive social networks and hierarchies in different societies.⁴ The gift in the title of my book alludes to these insights and finds analogous networks and hierarchies of difference in Rome’s ethnographic infrastructure, suggesting that it was a gift in several figurative ways. Imperial Roman ethnography was a gift the Romans made for themselves, because it embraced concepts with which they could address the great cultural diversity of their world. It was a gift that came from the conquerors, reflecting their supposition of preeminence. At the same time, Roman ethnography was a somewhat less welcome present for the many peoples who found themselves trapped in Rome’s vision, needing to find a place within it that made sense to Roman demands. For moderns, Rome’s ethnography has proven to be a mixed legacy, not always welcome, but greatly influential all the same. The different parts of Rome’s ethnographic infrastructure are discussed in the pages that follow and are summarized, with further comments about the conqueror’s gift, in chapter 9.

The Historical Frame

How the rich matrix of classical antiquity in the Roman Mediterranean developed into what we label the medieval world has remained one of the most intriguing questions of historical investigation since the Renaissance, one that has been explored in a host of different ways. In recent years, many historians have hunted for answers in Late Antiquity (roughly ca. 250–ca. 650 CE), an epoch of critical transition and transformation, during which time new societies coalesced and older cultural and political formations either adjusted to new circumstances or fell by the wayside. Remarkable changes throughout western Eurasia can be traced that were local as well as long-range and interconnected through time and space. The path across these centuries was not a straight line, however, and no single cause lay behind all that happened. No timely asteroid struck to finish off the dinosaurs of the classical world. Instead, a diverse array of percussive events—plagues, invasions, civil wars, dynastic collapses as well as sudden turns of heart and mind—helped jump-start changes at different levels of society that had long been percolating. The stakes in exploring this material have always seemed very high because so many of the great narratives of modernity rightly or wrongly find origins in the crucial late antique centuries.⁵ For good reason, exploration of this period has generated a vast literature, popular as well as academic. For those readers unfamiliar with the late antique era, a brief overview of key developments is warranted. I identify three great areas of change.

(1) First, Late Antiquity witnessed the dissolution of the Roman Empire in Western Europe in the course of the fifth century, accompanied by the development of new successor states basic to the formation of medieval Latin Christendom. The empire continued in the eastern Mediterranean, guided from the palace in Constantinople, the New Rome, where a new and distinctly Christian imperial culture emerged that we call Byzantine.⁶ At the same time, in northern Europe, in the lands that Romans called *barbaricum*—territories packed with menacing peoples whom they had never ruled—new political communities and cultures took shape.⁷ Farther to the east, nomadic peoples of the Eurasian Steppe, which reached from central Asia to the Great Hungarian Plain, asserted themselves as a lasting threat in European affairs, notably during the terrifying ascendancy of Attila the Hun (r. 434–53). Iran, under the direction of the Sasanian dynasty, reasserted its ancient role as a strategically important player in geopolitics, located as it was between Central Asia, Middle Eastern, and Mediterranean lands. It fell to Muslim armies in the seventh century, part of the same movement that displaced Roman rule from North Africa and the Middle East. With the rise of Islam and the establishment of the Umayyad Caliphate, Late Antiquity came to an end. As a result of these changes, the geopolitical map of western Eurasia was utterly transformed and the old Roman Mediterranean core lost its centripetal force. In Peter Brown's words, "The problem that urgently preoccupied men of Late Antiquity themselves was . . . the painful modification of the ancient boundaries."⁸

(2) In addition to the political changes and the social and economic refiguring that accompanied them, Christianity in its different forms caused a revolution in perspective across the board. Formation of Christian communities of faith began with Paul in the first century. By the end of the fourth century, the new religion in various forms had become dominant in Roman lands and extended its fingers beyond Rome's borders as well. The Christian writer Prosper of Aquitaine observed in the first half of the fifth century, as the empire collapsed around him in western Europe, "The grace of Christianity is not content to have the boundaries of Rome as its limits; for it has submitted to the sceptre of Christ's cross many peoples whom Rome could not subject with its arms."⁹ The expansion of Christianity produced new reasons and new ways for communities to unite—and disagree.

With its text-based understanding of universal mission transcending both the pull of local divinities and the unifying imperial cult, as well as its own internal organization, Christianity created meta-communities not dependent on imperial government that could reach lands beyond Rome's reach. Because it offered novel, integrated views of all aspects of human society and experience to its followers, Christianity placed great strain on the age-old determinants of community and identity that had shaped life in the Roman world. Within the religion lay the elements of a new ethnography. Determining the particular authoritative texts that invigorated communities of Christian

faith was a complicated process that had begun in the first century and that matured and found fiercely agonistic expression in Late Antiquity. The easy-going imperial approach to most forms of worship seen in the Augustan age vanished entirely.¹⁰ Just as Romans had written themselves into a vision of the inhabited world (what Greeks called the *oikoumene*) when their empire was getting under way in the second century BCE, Christian Romans in Late Antiquity produced a revised vision of the *oikoumene* defined by considerations of faith and doctrine as well as long-standing imperial goals. Elements of received classical traditions of history, geography, and other knowledge also played a major part in shaping this worldview. Christian writers claimed absolute moral authority and a new centrality for their beliefs in a varied and complex world. Zoroastrian Iranians, and later, Muslims, expressed similarly religion-based perspectives. “Empires of faith,” to borrow Peter Sarris’s term, confronted one another at the end of our period in a way unimaginable to Romans in the days of Augustus or even Constantine, the first Christian emperor.¹¹

Within the Roman state, Christians suppressed polytheism, and much of the associated intellectual legacy of classical antiquity drew suspicion and hostility from the new establishment. Christians also devised definitions of community that could stand independently of the Roman Empire. To be Christian, one did not have to be a Roman, though by the end of Late Antiquity within the empire it was necessary to be Christian (and, as ever, rich) to enjoy the full benefits of Roman life. No single interpretation of the Christian faith won absolute ascendancy, however. Bishops inside and outside the empire quarreled fiercely, hurling charges of heresy at one another as they pursued doctrinal correctness, which became a defining basis of their authority. Christian communities of various sorts established themselves inside the empire and beyond imperial borders as well, from the Atlantic to the Red Sea, to Iran and Tang China. Different doctrines and sacred texts, languages and cultural backgrounds, kept them distinct and defiantly self-aware ethno-religious groups. Heaven, not Rome and its gods, became the new center of attention with its own attendant social and moral peripheries.

(3) Against this backdrop of geopolitical and religious developments came a third general body of changes that are central to this book. A major ethnographic shift occurred in western Eurasia. From a Roman vantage point, this was a reworking of paradigms of perception, judgment, and inclusion of foreigners. In Late Antiquity, many new identities were ascribed to foreign groups, and some were even accepted by them. Such ascription or imposition of identities is the act of the ethnographer as well as the imperial administrator. New names for political and ethnic groups came into play, and old ones were repurposed. This process of identifying communities differently responded to political, religious, and social changes of many kinds, and it provided categories and language with which those changes could be interpreted

and explained. The scale of these shifts in perception and interpretation of cultural difference must be emphasized. Because new categories of identification spread over great distances, we must be on the lookout not simply for migrating people but for migrating terms of identification carried in different ways, probably the most significant movement across space in our period. From a geneticist's perspective, the populations of western Eurasia might seem remarkably stable.¹² From an imperial, political vantage point, however, the *oikoumene* might seem to have been largely repopulated. Rome's ethnography responded to the movement of terms that identified self and community, both foreign and domestic.

The ethnographic shift, so palpable in Roman contexts, came at a considerable cost. It brought change more pervasive than any damage caused by Huns, Goths, or Vandals. Greg Woolf, in his study of developments in Gaul after Roman conquest in the first century BCE, calls such disruption "epistemic violence," meaning the severing or rearticulation of ties with previous identities and previous pasts that accompanied them.¹³ During the period of expansion in the late Republic and early Empire that he examines, the Romans generated new knowledge about their history, community, and identity and especially about the rest of the world's populations. Other peoples reinvented themselves and their pasts as well, deeply responsive to the Roman presence. This book will show similar developments in Late Antiquity.

Since new kinds of religious self-identification became a more significant marker of identity of communities and polities than ever before, and since conflict among groups increasingly was justified in religious terms, I suggest that a major consequence of the ethnographic shift was the beginning of a sectarian age.¹⁴ Especially when wed to the state, communities of faith became aggressive communities of power, reflecting a major shift of perception and justification for action.

One dramatic manifestation of this shift still resonates today. At the beginning of the first century CE, Jews alone understood themselves to be the children of Abraham, with their remotest history narrated in the Bible. By the end of the late antique centuries, many millions of Christians, and then followers of Islam, believed Abraham to be the distant father of their communities as well, which connected them to biblical historical narrative through the medium of new and vigorous faiths. Communities from Ireland to Yemen, from the Atlas range to the Caucasus and beyond, acknowledged common biblical foundations. This was a true transformation in self-understanding for the peoples of western Eurasia, an imaginative leap about personal and community identity. As mentioned above, the shift was not based simply on the movement of peoples. It was based on the fact that some new, vital categories of identification and principles of evaluating collective difference had come to the fore and were being disseminated over great distances. In other words, Romans gained a fresh way of looking at the peoples of the world. Theirs had

become a sectarian world to the extent that primary markers of identity for individuals, communities, and larger polities rested on religious affiliation, though older ethnic identities were scarcely forgotten.

In the midst of all these transformations, many peoples familiar to us but new to antiquity climbed onto the stage of western Eurasian history, often grabbing the spotlight and stealing the best lines—Huns, Goths, and others whom we will encounter in the pages ahead. Yet, if barbarians sometimes chewed the scenery, Romans still owned the theater, and focus throughout this book remains on the Roman imperial impresarios. The Roman Empire and the ethnographic writing produced by its elites are the center of attention. This is partly because most of the written sources from the period were composed by Romans. More important, however, is the fact that Roman civilization had dominated the greater Mediterranean world and the westernmost reaches of Eurasia for more than half a millennium before our period came to an end. Its institutions, ideas, and vocabularies of description and analysis provided the starting point of subsequent developments in the medieval period, in eastern as well as western arenas. In Late Antiquity, the Roman Empire's ethnographic infrastructure supported reworkings of the social imagination of peoples over an enormous area.

Ethnography Ancient and Modern

Because of its Greek roots (*ethnos* means “a people” and *graphein* means “to write”), the word *ethnography* looks ancient, but it is not. Never uttered or written in antiquity by any Greek or Roman, it is a modern coinage that emerged only in the second half of the eighteenth century, the creation of German scholars who explored Siberia at the behest of Russian authorities¹⁵ and who believed that scientific terms should be rendered in Greek.¹⁶ One of these intrepid scientists, Gerhard Friedrich Müller (1705–83), developed a research program for the orderly “description of the world's peoples” (*Völker-Beschreibung*) for the purpose of systematic comparison.¹⁷ The term first appeared in German as *Ethnographie* by 1767, in English for the first time in 1811, and again in an English encyclopedia in 1834.¹⁸ Ethnography became a recognized academic discipline in the course of the nineteenth century, deeply enmeshed in the exploration and colonization of the globe by imperial European powers. It often reflected the biological racism then in vogue. Understanding of ethnography has evolved significantly since then. There are many schools of ethnographic theory and practice today, some of which contest the legitimacy or even the possibility of ethnographic description of other peoples because of its place in modern colonial activity.¹⁹ As this book shows, its roots ran far deeper.

Ethnographic *interest*, by which I mean displaying curiosity moreover about foreign peoples and developing shared ideas about their differences,

must be a habit as old as humanity. Emma Dench calls it the ethnographic gaze.²⁰ We can be sure that there existed, as Joseph Skinner points out, “ethnography before ethnography,” meaning ethnography even before it began to be written down by Herodotus, considered the first historian in the Western tradition, and others in the ancient Greek world.²¹ When Greeks started to record their observations and elaborate their thoughts about foreigners in the fifth century BCE in historical, geographical, dramatic, and other narrative genres, they did so with no particular word matching our modern *ethnography* to mean the specialized examination of a foreign group. In his great historical work, which he simply called “investigations,”²² Herodotus included many long descriptions of foreign peoples. Following his lead, later writers sometimes referred to the locations, customs, laws, or origins of peoples in their titles, such as Tacitus’s *De situ et origine Germanorum* (*On the Location and Origin of the Germans*). Similar formulations continued to be employed for descriptive literature through the Middle Ages into the modern period. Ethnography was off to a running start.

In the modern world ethnographic interest started to come into focus in the sixteenth century as European conquerors, settlers, merchants, missionaries, and other travelers encountered peoples new to them around the globe, with the Americas providing an especially rich field of interest. When their observations found their way into print, they were generally labeled accounts of “laws, customs, and beliefs.” For example, an influential compendium by Johannes Boemus, first published in Latin in Augsburg 1520 and translated into Spanish in 1556, had the title *The Customs, Laws, and Rites of All Peoples*,²³ following Latin models. Everyone composing such works was an amateur, because the formal discipline of ethnography did not yet exist. Like Romans before them, the ethnographers of the early modern age came from many backgrounds and wrote for many purposes.

Tacitus, or indeed any of the Roman writers considered in this book, would have been bemused at the disdain of modern scholarship that sees ethnography in negative terms as a creature of imperialism, colonialism, and oppression of all sorts. Though he may have disagreed with specific military policies or noted wryly how Rome’s recently conquered subjects could be seduced by Roman culture for which they innocently sacrificed their own freedom, Tacitus thought Rome’s expansion to be glorious and worthwhile,²⁴ and from his own military experience, he knew a barbarian when he saw one. Our job is not to dismiss his enterprise because he espoused values out of fashion in our postcolonial age, but to try to understand his descriptive concerns within the context of his own times. It is also important that we not be bound by modern assumptions about what constitutes ethnography. There is room for a broader understanding of the phenomenon of writing about foreign peoples without anachronistically imposing the strictures of genres developed only in the last two hundred years or agreeing with ancient attitudes.²⁵ Writers today in

many academic fields other than anthropology unapologetically use the word *ethnography* to refer to the practice of describing the habits and customs of peoples in other historical periods without involving themselves directly in the current debates of anthropologists and other social scientists.²⁶

What Was Roman about Roman Ethnography? Three Basic Functions

Romans knew they lived in a world of great cultural diversity. Pliny the Elder, the scholar and military commander who died in Vesuvius's blast at Pompeii in the first century, marveled that the "manners and customs [of humanity] are beyond counting, almost as numerous as the groups of mankind."²⁷ Members of the ruling elite like Pliny believed that their empire brought civilized order to a world of constant movement and instability. Images of defeated barbarians filled public spaces throughout the empire as reassuring reminders of Roman control. Writers likewise filled their pages with descriptions of foreigners in a wide variety of genres. In response to the grand variety of the inhabited world, ethnographic writing served three general functions. First, it described foreign peoples, placing them in established and accessible systems of knowledge. Second, it judged them on various registers of distance from Roman norms, with "most like us" the best possible evaluation. Third, ethnography indicated explicitly or implicitly what the possibilities of participation within the imperial community might be. In other words, writers could imagine transformation of societies through imperial agency.²⁸ All three had in common an aspect of self-representation. We will look at each of these three functions briefly. Together they indicate how notions of Romanness changed over time.

FUNCTION 1: DESCRIPTION

When Romans contrasted their civilization to barbarism,²⁹ they invoked broad assumptions about their innate superiority and dominant place in the world. Informed by writers of previous generations as well as by their own experience, authors focused on different aspects of foreignness, such as physical characteristics, cultural habits, or forms of government. Most obviously, Romans wrote in a world in which the blight of biological racism did not yet exist, and where—for the Roman governing class, at least—imperialism brought great rewards. Their default observations were not ours.

The act of describing foreigners in words (or depicting them in paint, metal, or stone) made them intelligible and lent a measure of coherence and order to the rush of information that would otherwise seem chaotic and unmanageable. Thus, Roman ethnographic description stood between the

Roman world and foreign lands, a protective barrier as formidable as any barricade or fortress. Yet it was a defensive wall with many gateways. Foreigners might enter Roman lands and even become Romans, as long as they did so on Roman terms.

For the purposes of this book, I am not concerned with the ethnographic representation as a truth-telling enterprise (that is, not with whether the Huns were ugly or the Persians lazy) but with what the representation may tell us about the Roman on the flip side of the ethnographic coin. More often than not, ethnography somehow linked perception of non-Roman communities to Roman political dominion. It infused what the empire's leaders considered to be normative into a vision of the world, enabling judgment of others and justification for imperial action. Thus, ethnographic descriptions were as much a statement of Roman values and assumptions about society as a description of a non-Roman people. As Guy Halsall has remarked, "In constructing the barbarian world the Roman Empire defined itself."³⁰

FUNCTION 2: JUDGMENT

Descriptions, no matter how finely tuned, were never value blind. Ethnographers of all stripes were confident that imperial Rome established and embodied the norms of civilization. (Many Christian writers would take exception to such claims, as we will see). These norms, stated and unstated, were the starting point for judgment of foreign groups. They anchored registers of difference that radiated outward to the edges of the inhabited world. For example, closest to the Roman ideal of normative life were people like the Greeks, who enjoyed the benefits of civilization. At the farthest point along the continuum of distance from Rome were beings with feet on backward who wrapped themselves in their ears every night to sleep. These were creatures of fantasy.³¹ By marking degrees of difference from Rome, ethnographic material indicates the possibilities of inclusion within Roman society. These registers of distance indicate degrees of belonging. Taking a place within a greater Roman community could be imagined.

FUNCTION 3: INCLUSION

Romans understood that the many peoples of the *oikoumene* constantly moved about and were susceptible to changes caused by all the forces, earthbound and celestial, that affect human affairs. Furthermore, Romans understood themselves and their empire to be one of the possible agents of change. This transformative role must be emphasized. Turning barbarians into Romans always was a possibility and sometimes even an expectation of imperial rule.³² At other times, keeping them at arm's length was preferable.³³ Imperial Rome offered entry into a cosmopolitan world of stability and peace

(as they understood their civilization) to all the outside “barbarians” not yet part of their community. Roman notions of what some might call a civilizing mission were based on the capacity to bring about change.

From an early stage in the development of the empire, Romans took an interest in how cultural contact or political control could alter a foreign culture. Strabo, for example, the great geographer of Augustan Rome, illustrates this idea in his description of the transformation of the Iberians (in Spain) under Roman rule: “for both the Cantabrians . . . and their neighbours have been subdued by Augustus Caesar; and instead of plundering the allies of the Romans . . . now take the field for the Romans. Further, Tiberius, his successor, has set over these regions an army of three legions . . . and it so happens that he already has rendered some of the peoples not only peaceable but civilised as well.”³⁴ By the end of the period discussed in this book, the emperor positioned himself not only as the greatest agent of change but also as the agent of Christ in making the changes.³⁵ Procopius, who wrote in the sixth century in Constantinople, described how the emperor Justinian caused the Tzani, a remote people in the Caucasus region, to adopt Christianity. He built new roads to connect them to a cosmopolitan outside world, built churches for them, and enabled them to discover their full humanity.³⁶

The Shape of the Book

THE CHRONOLOGICAL FRAME IN RECENT STUDIES

The story told in this book has a beginning and an end. Two most helpful recent works of scholarship provide rough chronological bookends and raise important methodological concerns. Greg Woolf’s *Tales of the Barbarians: Ethnography and Empire in the Roman West* deals with Roman territories in western Europe from their initial conquest until the end of the first century CE,³⁷ offering a number of key ideas that underlie the pages ahead. Woolf’s concern is to examine how new knowledge was created about recently subjugated peoples. He describes an ethnography of the lived experience of conquest and assimilation built on the shoulders of literary convention, noting how “barbarian *érudits* and Greek grammarians rubbed shoulders with Roman conquerors across a vast and variegated contact zone.”³⁸ Woolf treats ethnography as an “artefact of Roman power”³⁹ that involved the erasure of the pasts of conquered people and the slow emergence of new mythic histories and traditions through interaction with Roman patterns of thought and explanation.

Woolf uses the powerful term *epistemic violence* to indicate the severing of ties between the knowledge worlds of local societies before and after Roman conquest. In doing so, he brings attention to the cultural consequences of ethnographic description for both the describers and the described. We will see

the same thing happening with imperial describers of the world around them in Late Antiquity. These disruptions provoked profound reassessment for all concerned.

Next, Woolf emphasizes that “authors and readers inhabited the world their texts describe.”⁴⁰ This is a wise cautionary reminder. We must not forget that even though many of the tropes of Roman ethnographic discussion had become hoary with age by Late Antiquity (and some of them were already venerable in Greek contexts when Rome first began to expand its empire), it was through those conventions that contemporary circumstances and the evident differences between Romans and other peoples were interpreted and through which change could be imagined and managed to some degree. This leads to two important insights. The first is that while ethnographic writing can have a long shelf life and appear to be constant, its traditional elements may become inadequate in the face of new realities. This is important because the repertoire of classical ethnographic genres lost initial vigor by the end of antiquity to be supplanted or augmented by new categories of analysis energized by Christianity. The second insight to which Woolf leads us is that while the readers of the late empire may have recognized that some of their analytical models were outmoded and no longer did justice to their own reality, their choice to use anachronistic tropes represents historically contingent cultural choices that call for explanation. It is important for the discussion that follows to remember that in Late Antiquity even writers blanketed by the heavy weight of the past did not stop thinking about contemporary events. Quite the opposite was the case.

The task is to see how late antique writers reworked and reapplied elements of their own inheritance to questions of their own day. When Woolf speaks, furthermore, of “enduring fictions”⁴¹ to indicate that much of the knowledge formed in the first century CE remained in play well into the Middle Ages and beyond, he sets the stage for the ethnographic innovations of Late Antiquity that reimagined the inhabited world and that continue to influence us today.

In his emphasis on ethnographic writing as a literary construct, Woolf guides us away from the narrow positivism that caused many scholars well into the twentieth century to take surviving textual evidence at face value. By raising the question of how the facts were made, his work encourages examination of how new verities about foreign peoples were hammered out in Late Antiquity. Woolf discusses how various ethnographic paradigms existed in the early Roman Empire that reflected a variety of experiences on the ground as well as writing practices. He makes the important point that these paradigms framed the construction of new knowledge and were not mutually exclusive or competitive, but parallel. We will see that in Late Antiquity the situation was somewhat different: over time, the ethnographic paradigms came

together under the influence of Christianity and ignited a revolution in Roman worldview.

Perhaps the salient element in Woolf's discussion is that he ties ethnography to the practice of empire. Without denying the literary constraints that conditioned authorial voices, Woolf sees the production of ethnography as current, in step with the demands of contemporary explanation of events. This was no less true of Late Antiquity than of the early Roman Empire. He does not directly discuss the transformative elements encoded within ethnographic writing, however. Though he deals only with the western provinces, Woolf lets us see that an imperial ethnographic apparatus was in place in the Roman Mediterranean world by the end of the first century CE. Methodologically as well as chronologically, *Tales of the Barbarians* makes one reliable bookend for my discussion.

The second book that frames my study is Anthony Kaldellis's *Ethnography after Antiquity* (2013).⁴² It is of chronological significance because it points to the "crashing end" of the classical ethnographic tradition in the seventh century when a new, characteristically Byzantine tradition began.⁴³ Thus he provides an appropriate bookend to enclose my discussion. Kaldellis's argument for this end date is convincing. His approach differs from mine in several respects, however. The first difference is in the scope of what he considers ethnography to be. In his first chapter, "Ethnography in Late Antique Historiography," he explains his subject matter.⁴⁴ He deals with the "classicizing" ethnography, that is, writing that self-consciously mimicked the writings of authors like Thucydides, conventionally found in historical writing in Late Antiquity. He sees this as an essentially secular and primarily literary discourse to be distinguished from explicitly Christian approaches that came to the fore in Late Antiquity and predominated in the Byzantine period. As noted above, my approach views ethnography more broadly. I consider genres other than history writing, taking ethnography beyond the sphere of classicizing literature.

Kaldellis focuses in his first chapter on the ethnographic digressions found in classicizing historical texts of the sixth century (especially Procopius, Agathias, Menander, and Theophylactus Simacotta), and he rightly notes that they were "self-conscious literary artefacts created for a competitive literary scene."⁴⁵ Although reliant on traditional modes of description, the late antique authors had considerable room for variation, giving their work a personal stamp, part of a "multi-faceted authorial performance." Thus Kaldellis distinguishes "generic autonomy" and the "textual environments" in which they rested.⁴⁶ This is a useful approach to genres other than the historical in the late antique corpus. When he turns to ethnographic description found in the accounts of embassies (Priscus, Peter the Patrician, and others), he notes both the practical uses for which they were originally devised and the wide

readership that they found among elite Romans. This gives special force to his observation that the descriptions with all their literary contrivance could be highly political and anything but “a mental straightjacket.”⁴⁷ Exploiting the differences between Roman and barbarian was central to the ethnographic writing that Kaldellis analyzes. He shows that the contrast lay precisely at the heart of political dispute and subtle commentary on imperial policy. In his hands, ethnography illuminates the thought world of its writers. Just as they had been for Tacitus, the barbarians could be a foil for the Byzantines to view their own society.⁴⁸

If the classicizing approach to ethnography stopped in the seventh century, what came in the new Byzantine tradition? Only a few words can be written here to suggest the complex “after” that followed the seventh-century break. Kaldellis develops a few characteristics, and we will see their gestation to some extent in the pages that follow. Orthodox Christianity, as embodied in the imperial state, had become the chief marker of Byzantine superiority over other of the world’s peoples. Christian beliefs would be a lens through which foreigners would be judged and political communities distinguished. As was the case in Late Antiquity, furthermore, ethnographic writing would be a mirror of its writers’ self-examination.

CONTINUITY AND CONNECTIVITY

Before describing the chapters of this book, I want to emphasize the truly remarkable chronological depth of the various intellectual and literary traditions drawn upon by authors of all types throughout the late antique centuries. Such men as Homer and Aristotle, who were active centuries before Rome came on the scene, and Ptolemy and Strabo, who flourished as the imperial system took shape, continued to be profoundly influential placeholders in the intellectual universe of Justinian and Isidore of Seville, who lived when Late Antiquity was drawing to a close. Their ethnographic ideas reverberated throughout this enormous time span. In the same way, the Hebrew Bible and the Christian Scriptures remained a constant source of inspiration for late antique Christians. These materials from a far distant time remained as an immanent presence in the thought worlds of late antique writers and the elites who guided affairs. They were a deep and nourishing well from which to draw as need demanded and education permitted. In this sense, the malleable written legacy provided a welcome lifeline of continuity and connectivity to the authoritative voices of the deep past. At the same time, we should also pause to appreciate the equally remarkable ability of late antique writers to adjust this rich literary inheritance to the requirements of an ever-changing present.

This book follows only one red thread through this vast literary canvas, that of ethnographic thought as linked to the Roman Empire. To do this, I have

explored many texts written over a long period of time in many genres, all of which contributed to the ethnographic infrastructure. I have not directly investigated visual representations. The voices we will hear have been selected to show how writers of many backgrounds perceived, judged, and accommodated foreign peoples, often ascribing new identities to them. An *index locorum* at the end of the book lists the ancient and early medieval sources mentioned in the following chapters.

In addition to recognizing the remarkable longevity of the written tradition under examination, it is useful to remind ourselves of the astonishing breadth of territory embraced by Roman power. The empire at its greatest extent reached from Morocco to northern Britain and from Cherson to Upper Egypt. Some of its inhabitants of this enormous space knew about Ireland and India, Nubia and China, places they would never visit. Traveling beyond imperial limits was always dangerous, and moving within the borders between major centers of population also meant traversing vast tracts of territory full of recalcitrant populations speaking endless dialects and languages. Access to imperial culture and an interconnected, legible world, eventually a Christian world, meant everything. The writers who generated late antique ethnography knew this disjointed social landscape with all its rough edges very well. For them, isolation and lack of connectivity implied barbarism.

A VARIETY OF ETHNOGRAPHIC DISCOURSES: THE ORGANIZATION OF THE BOOK

Roman ethnography did not offer a single view of society. It was written by people who held a stake in the empire and identified with it in often conflicting ways. We will encounter pragmatic diplomats, ideologically driven courtiers, zealous churchmen, triumphant generals, careful lawyers, and learned historians, setting down their opinions in different modes. The constraints of each genre produced different ethnographic discourses, which, while not incompatible or in conflict with one another, were not interchangeable, either. They maintained separate profiles. As noted above, all shared three basic elements. Each contained descriptions of one sort or another, registers of evaluation, and implicitly the possibility of transformation. In their particular ways they created distance from Rome and Romanness. Together they constituted the empire's loose-limbed ethnographic infrastructure. I treat them separately in the chapters ahead for the sake of discussion, though I am well aware that considerable cross-pollination among them occurred. Christianity challenged and then transformed all of them during Late Antiquity.

Chapter 1, "Conquest and Curiosity: Creating a Roman Imperial Ethnography," discusses the elements of Roman ethnography that would be put to use in Late Antiquity. From the tradition of ethnographic writing begun by Greek scientists in the fifth century BCE, Romans inherited a well-developed contrast

between “civilized” and “barbarian” society. They tailored this literary construct to fit their imperial practices of conquering, governing, and assimilating new populations by developing the idea that contact with the empire would alter the ways of life of their subjects and neighbors. They also maintained a deep-seated antagonism to barbarians as a type, often making them the foil for Roman vice or virtue. In many cases barbarians stood for everything that was not understood to be Roman, such as lawlessness, political instability, or isolation from the rest of the world. Reconciling these contradictory needs to incorporate and exclude created a lasting and invigorating tension in Roman imperial ethnographic thought. The key to understanding this dilemma is to know that distinctions were never absolutely insurmountable in the imperial Roman view of the world, though admittedly resistance could merit the total destruction of a hostile population. Aspects of foreign cultures could be attractive and worth adopting; bridging cultural gaps was always possible and perhaps at times even desirable.⁴⁹ Foreigners were not always monsters, after all, just not yet Romans.

This chapter follows the development of the imperial ethnographic toolkit as it took shape from the time of Julius Caesar through the high empire. Sketches of certain representative authors reveal basic ideas in the ethnographic corpus that came into play. We will see how interest in the customs of foreign peoples became intermeshed with imperial self-awareness and purpose. Some aspects of foreign life carried less weight than they would in Late Antiquity. Religious practice, for example, was only one curiosity among many that caught the Roman eye, and religious communities (other than Rome’s divinely protected state) had no political agency or place in a religious view of history. The occasional positive judgment of foreigners did not curtail confidence in Rome’s superiority that permeated the observations of elite writers. These men claimed center stage morally and politically for Rome in world affairs, and the figure of the emperor emerged as the chief artisan of cultural change. These elements found in literary ethnography would be fundamental to late antique developments. The opposition of Roman civilization and foreign barbarism found in elite writing constitutes the first of the ethnographic dossiers considered in this book.

Chapter 2, “‘Hostiles and Friendlies’: Diplomacy and Patterns of Subordination to Rome,” shows that international relations produced a second ethnographic discourse. Roman diplomatic activity grew in importance and sophistication in Late Antiquity in step with the appearance of formidable new opponents. There emerged an elaborate discourse of friendship and enmity through which questions of the status of negotiating groups relative to Rome were worked out. Hierarchies of friendship and subordination to Rome emerged that were essential in treaty making, where precise evaluation of diplomatic partners was necessary. This chapter focuses on some of the late antique diplomatic arenas in which scenarios of subordination to Rome played out differently: the western European territories, where newcomers,

often in league with local populations, developed new political communities in the fifth century;⁵⁰ the steppe land that was home to predatory nomad cultures; the Sasanian Persian Empire, Rome's only rival in power and prestige; and Arab groupings on the margins between Rome and Persia that served as proxies for them. When Christianity began to spread beyond Rome's borders, the empire could find a new sort of common ground with some of its neighbors. By rearranging some alliances on religious lines, shared Christianity could be a basis for new modes of interaction.

Chapter 3, "Include Me Out': Ethnography, Settlement, and Law at the Edges of Empire," turns to the imperial problem of how to settle outsiders on Roman soil. Just as military necessity required Romans to remain vigilant in the face of external neighbors, the practicalities of government required careful management of foreigners settled on imperial lands. The edges of the empire were a particularly vital site of activity, because in Late Antiquity many "barbarians" wished to enter the empire or were forced into it, and identities had to be ascribed to the newcomers as a measure of control. Imperial law, of course, had no direct role to play in the lives of people beyond the borders, but it did provide a somewhat uniform set of terms that provided a recognizable social visage and above all a legal status to outsiders once they had entered the empire. These newly ascribed group identities depended upon tasks the authorities required them to perform after settlement. Every decision made by Roman authorities about the status of newcomers into the empire was a function of the power relations of the moment. Newcomers kept their ethnonyms, but another status category was assigned to them in laws and official documents. The term *barbarian* was not used.

The new formal labels, agreed upon prior to settlement, were applied fairly systematically. They constituted an ethnographic discourse that delineated the extent of participation in the empire in a new way. The terms of differentiation within it were not physical, moral, religious, geographical, or above all ethnic, but had to do with military obligations, legal access, and land. They were occupational labels. The newcomers' responsibilities put them under imperial control, but—and this is the most important point—at the same time deliberately kept them formally apart in some way from the broader provincial populations. In this regard, Roman citizenship continued to play its ancient role as a primary marker of identity and full participation in the state, but now with important modifications. The newly ascribed statuses for incomers to the Empire came only with a partial measure of citizenship, and deliberately so. The late antique terms of inclusion were meant to limit full participation, not enable it.

In this way, Roman law provided a symbolic portal for foreigners to enter Roman space and take on a formal status they did not have before. It enabled and marked transition into Roman society at some determined level of subordination and service. Roman ascription of identifying labels to foreign groups imposed a specific place within the empire's structure, encoded in the law.

This ethnographic representation was in step with the entrenched belief of the Roman governing elite in the transformative and stabilizing power of Roman law within a world in constant flux.

The historical stakes implicit in this discursive system about law and inclusion were high. When Romans lost the power to ascribe identities, that is, to label incoming peoples in terms of their service to the state, the newcomers and their descendants inevitably revised their own identities to form new communities independent of Rome.

Chapter 4, “Divine Providence and the Power of the Stars,” and chapter 5, “The Controlling Hand of the Environment,” turn to Christianity’s contribution to ethnographic thought by examining how Christian writers neutralized ideas about the control exercised by the stars and the geographical environment over human affairs and made God’s Providence the operative force instead. They radically recast identity as a choice, not a consequence of astral or geographical influence. Astral and environmental determinism were in dialogue, but were discrete enough to be treated separately.

In antiquity it was widely held that the character of human communities was shaped by the stars and by the earth’s terrain. These natural forces were invoked to explain how and why people lived as they did. In Late Antiquity, however, Christian theorists largely discredited astral and environmental determinism. They nevertheless appropriated these ethnographic discourses by pulling the power of the stars and the earthly environment into a Christian realm of explanation. Rough terrain could still be the breeding ground of barbarism, but its force could be overcome by the introduction of Christian worship. At the same time, for many people, inhospitable geography became a site where holiness might be found through ascetic practice. It no longer was simply the breeding ground of barbarism. The stars still shone, but as no more than signs of divine authority. Such changes point to a reimagining of the cosmos in Christian terms and the appearance of new rationales for ethnographic judgment. Displacing old forms of determinism reflected a recentering of humanity’s place in a Christian cosmos and provided new possibilities for the creation of communities of Christian belief.

Chapter 6, “Christianity and the Descendants of Noah,” is the first of two chapters that address how Christian interpretations of verses in the Book of Genesis significantly contributed to the Roman ethnographic corpus. The biblical story of the Table of Nations (Gen. 10) provided new genealogies for the world’s peoples and an explanation of their dispersal and, indirectly, a place in salvation history. Christian writers redrew the mental map of the world and its populations as it was divided among Noah’s three sons and their progeny, creating a new narrative of origins for the *oikoumene* that would be a foundational element in medieval historiography.

Chapter 7, “Babel and the Languages of Faith,” deals with the account of the Tower of Babel (Gen. 11:1–9), which let Christian thinkers find new

meaning in the world's linguistic diversity. Combined with the Gospel story of Pentecost in which divine instruction was comprehensible in all languages, the story of Babel provided opportunities for the spread of the faith. With speakers of all languages able to receive religious truths, communities of interpretation of sacred texts found voice in different languages. Powerful communities emerged that claimed correct understanding of the faith and jostled for political agency. Consequently, previously marginal languages that were now yoked to expression of belief undercut the primacy of Latin, the language of imperial power. By making language difference a high-profile concern, Christian writers profoundly recast Roman ethnographic certainties.

Chapter 8, "The New Ethnography of Christian Heresy," discusses another far-reaching Christian contribution to the ethnographic corpus. This was the discourse of heresiology, which offered entirely new criteria of differentiation, judgment, and inclusion within the imperial community. Differences about belief and practice had been present in Christian communities since their beginning, but in the hothouse atmosphere of late antique political and religious life, heresiology came into its own. It sprang from Christians' understanding of their sacred texts and fueled endless arguments.

Heresiology was anchored in the idea of correct belief, determined through interpretation of text and formulated in doctrine. By providing distinct criteria of difference among Christian communities, the discourse of heresiology not only politicized heterodoxy, it also provided new definitions of community within the Roman Empire as it came to understand itself as a Christian enterprise. When the state claimed to be the enforcer of Orthodox belief, heresy became a crime. At the same time, heresiology provided a different set of standards for judging and interacting with foreign cultures.

Churchmen were essential in articulating and enforcing these ideas about difference among Christian communities. We can see them as ethnographers, in their own way the equals of Caesar and the other elite writers of the pre-Christian age. In the eyes of pious believers in this reimagined world, heretics became in a sense the new barbarians, beyond the pale of acceptability.

"Conclusion: The Conqueror's Gift" summarizes long-term developments in the Roman ethnographic universe. It reviews the various ethnographic dossiers that Romans used in evaluating foreigners. Together they constituted the imperial ethnographic infrastructure that supported imperial practice and self-awareness.

Next, the chapter reviews the contributions of Christianity. When the religion entered the imperial scene, it deeply affected the existing ethnographic registers, giving them a new focus through a Christian lens. At the same time, the faith brought to the ethnographic table vibrant new possibilities for seeing and evaluating differences among communities and individuals. Roman ethnography was transformed. By the end of our period, the revitalized ethnographic corpus collectively underwrote something not seen before in antiquity,

namely a world in which faith became a primary identifier not just for individuals or local groups but for large-scale communities of worship and states as well. The Roman state in identifying itself with certain Christian interpretations of text and belief, took a leading role in shaping a new, sectarian world order.

The chapter turns finally to the question of what constituted the conqueror's gift of this book's title. The ethnographic infrastructure that had developed over the centuries constituted the gift. We will consider it in three ways: as something beneficial to the Romans and well received by them; as an unwelcome set of ideas imposed on outsiders; and finally, as a legacy for us.

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