

Cultural Encounters on Byzantium’s Northern Frontier,
c. AD 500–700: Coins, Artifacts and History. By Andrei Gandila.
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The book under review, *Cultural Encounters* (abbreviated from *Cultural Encounters on Byzantium’s Northern Frontier, c. AD 500–700: Coins, Artifacts and History*), is a monograph by Dr. Andrei Gandila, currently associate professor at the University of Alabama in Huntsville. *Cultural Encounters* is the expanded and updated version of his PhD thesis, defended in 2013 at the University of Florida. The focus of the work is the Danube frontier of the Byzantine Empire in Late Antiquity (AD 500–700), which is today divided between Hungary, Romania, Serbia, and Bulgaria. Despite finishing his PhD research in the US, his background as a native of Romania, archaeological field work in Romania and Italy, and much research in museums and libraries in Europe and the US guarantee that the author’s work is of high quality and reliability, thus destined to be a great success in elucidating the complicated history of the interaction between the “Barbaricum” and Byzantium during the period under discussion.

Since its publication, *Cultural Encounters* has received much attention from academics.¹ Tracing the reasons for this, I think that—except for the author’s personal background and rich academic experience—the interdisciplinary analysis is its main merit. This guarantees that the author’s arguments are supported by strong written sources, material objects, and theoretical practice: these include rich historical sources (the works of more than 50 authors from antiquity are cited; see the bibliography on pp. 291–292), a wide range of archaeological evidence (including coins, pottery, amphorae, lamps, molds and metallurgical products, brooches and

1 It has been reviewed by seven scholars: White, “Review of Cultural Encounters”; Madgearu, “Review of Cultural Encounters”; Somogyi “Review of Cultural Encounters”; and Wołoszyn “Review of Cultural Encounters”; Baker, “Review of Cultural Encounters”; Decker, “Review of Cultural Encounters”; Freeman, “Review of Cultural Encounters”; Sarantis, “Review of Cultural Encounters”.

buckles, mainly described on pp. 33–100, 154–191), and other kinds of anthropological sources (mainly in chapter seven).² Among all this evidence, I believe the most fascinating is the archaeological data. The illustrations of the material objects, charts of statistical data, and distribution maps provide detailed information about the archaeological findings, and clearly show the intensive interaction of the Danube borderlands with Byzantium, while also showing the author's patience and diligence in dealing with the complicated data (most of the material objects are published in different languages, which are not easy to collect and sort out). One more thing I feel is attractive is that the author manages to avoid a national narrative. Although a native Romanian, he impartially criticizes the traditional national narrative of Hungarian, Bulgarian and Romanian scholars on the relations of these countries with the Roman-Byzantine Empire (continuity vs. discontinuity, autochthony vs. immigrationism). This avoidance of a national narrative is a welcome contemporary way of overcoming nationalism and culture-oriented theory.

Since the theme of the work is the frontier, our attention will no doubt turn to the field of frontier studies. Frontier studies about the Roman Empire (especially the military frontier) can be traced back to the nineteenth century.³ The establishment of the Congress of Roman Frontier Studies (the first meeting was held in 1949 in Newcastle upon Tyne) further promoted the field.⁴ However, previous studies focused much on the physical frontier in relation to its function of defense and separation, with less attention being paid to the cultural sense. The author of the work points out that the “birth” of Late Antiquity, a special and emerging field, challenged the argument of the “decline and fall of the Roman Empire raised by Edward Gibbon [and] changed our understanding of ancient frontiers”. Based on the author's further elucidation of the impact of the school of Late Antique studies and the French “Annales School” on frontier studies, we could summarize this phenomenon as involving a cultural turn that shifts our perspective of the frontier as political and military in nature to seeing the latter as associated with vivid cultural interaction. Especially with regard to Roman frontier studies, the author also rightly shows that the creation and expansion of the EU brought about “renewed interest in frontiers” and “new and exciting vistas for the study of interaction between different cultures and civilizations” (p. 1).

2 As the author proclaims, “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,” (p. 5).

3 Freeman, “Review: Roman Frontier Studies,” 465.

4 The next congress (LIMES Congress) will be held in Nijmegen in 2022; for further information please check: <https://limes2022.org/>.

As the author further shows, compared with other frontiers, the Danube frontier has attracted less attention; this is due to its complexity in history and modern reality. Furthermore, if we compare the research on it associated with the Roman Empire and the Byzantine Empire, less focus has been placed on the latter—the reason for this is similar to that for its general neglect. As far as I know, in recent years, except for the work reviewed here, the following excellent pieces focus on the same region: Alexander Sarantis' *Justinian's Balkan Wars*, Georgios Kardaras' *Byzantium and the Avars, 6th–9th Century AD*, and Alexandru Madgearu's *Byzantine Military Organization on the Danube, 10th–12th Centuries*.⁵ The publication of this work shows the rising interest in the region—and more generally, in the Balkans—in recent years.

The whole work consists of an introduction, a conclusion, and seven main chapters. I now introduce these in order.

The introduction is an excellent summary of the whole work: if one is time-constrained, reading through it will be enough to pick up the main argument and understand the theoretical basis and content. The author first points out the causes (discussed in the second paragraph of the review) of the recent interest in frontier studies; under this, he shows that, compared with other areas of the Late Roman frontier, “there is still much to be learned about the evolution of 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” (p. 2). With this in mind, he lists his main argument that form the core of the work in three areas: “the broad debate surrounding frontier culture, the role of liminal spaces, and the creation of identities; the archaeology of culture contact on the periphery with special emphasis on the role of Byzantine money outside the frontier; the creation of Early Medieval ethnicities, languages, and states in Eastern Europe” (pp. 2–3).

The first chapter could be regarded as theoretical preparation, and includes a discussion of the historical background for the role of the Danube frontier in Late Antiquity. In the first part, the author points out that the frontier theories by Gibbon, Turner, Lattimore, and Alföldi are all linear, then—through discussing the “Grand Strategy” theory of Luttwak, who believes in the “view of a rational, pragmatic, and well-informed frontier policy, which adapted to external threats” (p. 12)—claims that due to much debate about the “Great Strategy” theory, its appearance really “reshaped and refined the frontier paradigm. In the light of growing

5 Sarantis, *Justinian's Balkan Wars*; Kardaras, *Byzantium and the Avars*; Madgearu, *Byzantine Military Organization*. The last two works were included in the series “East Central and Eastern Europe in the Middle Ages, 450–1450,” which is edited by Florin Curta and Dušan Zupka—of whom Florin Curta, a distinguished scholar of Byzantium and the Slavs, was also the PhD supervisor of Dr. Andrei Gandila.

interest in social, economic, and religious issues, military strategy has been forced into the background” (p. 13). In the next part, the author traces back the situation of the Danube frontier from the Roman Empire to the Justinian period, and in the following part brings into focus the Lower Danube frontier and its political role of separation, as illuminated by ancient texts (p. 15). In this part, his emphasis is on the claim that “in the sixth century static frontiers mattered more than ever. Separation, rather than inclusion, seems to have been the order of the day” (p. 31).

Analysis of the archaeological evidence is the main feature of his work. As general background (chapter two), with the help of the archaeological findings, the author intends to show the cultural diversity in the Danube region and beyond. It should be admitted that this part plays a really important role in the whole work (pp. 33–100). It provides rich archaeological data and descriptions of material objects with detailed analysis. The author uses ceramics (amphorae, lamps), metal items (brooches, buckles, and jewelry), and a number of Christian objects that cut across these categories and constitute the main type of goods found north of the Danube) (p. 42)—which he defines as Byzantine imports and imitations—to show that Byzantine items were frequently transferred to the north of the Danube, and local Byzantine imitations were made, which consequently leads to the identification of a specific region with mixed cultural features.

Christianity to the north of the Danube frontier is the focus of chapter three. With the help of textual and archaeological evidence, the author discusses the spread and existence of Christianity in the north of Danube from the Constantine the Great to Justinian. He believes that the spread of Christianity was driven by political force, not religious, and that “through analyzing as far as the sixth century is concerned, we can only conclude that Christianity was hardly an unequivocal phenomenon in the lands north of the Danube and it will take more solid archaeological evidence to change this conviction” (p. 130).

Chapter four acts as a summary of the previous two chapters’ analyses. In this chapter, building on the archaeological evidence analyzed in the previous chapters, the author tries to show that the Danube in much of the period under discussion acted as a real frontier which the empire tried to hold, even though it was also a region with cultural encounters, but ultimately not a homogeneous zone of culture.⁶

6 “The Danube remained a daunting natural and political barrier regardless of the facet we wish to emphasize, be it demographic, economic or religious. Continuous cultural interaction was not meant to engender some kind of ‘open frontier’ but to reinforce and secure the existing one. Byzantine goods filtered through the deliberate—and, indeed, inevitable—permeability of the Danube frontier and embarked on a journey which took them through several levels of value and meaning, from functional, close to the frontier, to symbolical in more distant regions in barbaricum.” (p. 152).

The reason for the special conditions in the Danube frontier is the cultural strategy which was reluctantly chosen by the Byzantine emperors (p.152).

Chapter five mainly analyzes the flow of Byzantine coins beyond the Danube frontier in the context of the literary and archaeological evidence. With the help of numerous charts and maps of the distribution of coins, the author conducts multivariate analyses in time and space which are used to highlight clusters of small change in one region, the predominance of gold coins in another, the frequency of distant mints, and comparisons between the age-structure of single finds and hoards.

Following the analysis in chapter five, chapter six compares the coin finds in the Danube frontier, Transcaucasia, and the Carpathian Basin. The author points out that because of the different geographical environment and political goals, the coins indicate the different policies in each frontier. Regarding the Danube frontier, "coin finds as well as other categories of artifacts reveal a cultural policy of inclusion as a more sustainable long-term solution for ensuring the security of the Balkans" (p. 216).

Chapter seven discusses the function of money in societies living beyond the frontier of Early Byzantium. The author first discusses the function of different Byzantine coins in their own society, and the research background for them in the discussed regions. Then, using the archaeological data and through comparing the function of the coins in "more recent traditional societies in contact with capitalist states using a carefully regulated currency" (p. 248), the author shows that Byzantine coins in the Danube borderlands lost their function as currency, but were used as "souvenirs, apotropaic amulets, jewelry, objects of prestige, or simply raw material for the production of copper-alloy items" (p. 279).

In the conclusion, the author points out the contradictions between the written sources and archaeological evidence in interpreting the role played by the Danube frontier. In emphasizing the significance of coins for elucidating the issue with the world-systems paradigm, the author concludes that, "on one hand, Roman emperors were interested in securing the Balkans by closely guarding the river [while] on the other communication and contact with barbaricum became integral to the frontier strategy which included interaction, exchange, and the recruitment of 'barbarians' in the Roman army. No 'Grand Strategy' was applied on the Danube frontier but a larger repertoire of solutions depending on the balance of power and the Empire's agenda at one time or another" (p. 280).

In reading the work, two limitations may easily be noticed. The first is the handling of the academic terms. Though the author confesses that "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" (p. 8), it is still a little confusing to find Roman, Late Roman, and Byzantine used in the same paragraph, and even the same sentence, especially for the lay reader. In addition,

problems are associated with the coins. The author mentions that, “many unprovenanced coins from museum collections may not have been found locally but brought by collectors from Byzantine provinces” (p. 156) and that “information about hoards is equally incomplete. More than half of the total number of hoards have been dispersed, either divided between finders or otherwise lost in unknown circumstances” (p. 156). This surely puts the author in a dangerous position and reduces the reliability of the analysis and argument.

Regardless of these limitations, this work will be very helpful to readers who have a deep interest in the Danube frontier in Late Antiquity, which topic has still not been fully studied. The vivid narration, in-depth discussion, and especially the rich and hard-won archaeological evidence, as well as the long bibliography, will be a good guide, leading readers into an intriguing adventure into the “jungle of history.”

Literature

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