

Mobility and Agency:

Understanding Late Antique Mobility and “Migrants” in Modern Thought.

“...[When] the Roman Empire fell, it was largely as a result of uncontrolled immigration... the empire could no longer control its borders... and we went into a dark [age]...”: British Prime Minister Boris Johnson, speaking at COP26 2021 (*New Statesman*, 1st November 2021).

Comments such as these highlight the ways in which outdated concepts of the Roman frontiers continue to influence ideas of population mobility. Scholarship since Luttwak’s controversial *Grand Strategy of the Roman Empire* (1976) have discussed the idea that militarised frontiers of the Roman Empire – such as existed along the Rhine River – were never intended as barriers to movement. However, this discussion often remains wedded to the ‘Romanisation’ debate. This is in direct contrast to Woolf, who in 1998 already astutely asserted that this term lacked any practical explanatory potential.

By reconsidering the current theoretical framework it is possible to reconcile the archaeological evidence with the exchange and interaction recorded by Tacitus, the *Historia Augusta*, and other primary source material. In particular, sociological approaches to the Roman military – put forward by scholars such as Gilliver, Haynes and James – complement new hypotheses of population mobility in antiquity set out by Isayev. This comes alongside the work of scholars such as Allason-Jones, who are restoring the presence of female populations of Roman military communities; the role of wider communities should not be underestimated in sustaining inter-communal social interaction.

It is plausible to reconstruct a self-contained, self-sustaining network of social, political and economic interconnectivity, opposing the assertion of economic underdevelopment in such regions by Heather. Non-Roman and Roman frontier populations drew closely together through cultural exchange and social contact; the frontier was explicitly sustained by movement, contrary to claims that such population mobility led to a Roman collapse.