

# On empires and frontiers

by Francesco Borri

Empires are theoretically limitless, given the difficulty in determining the nature, or even the existence, of their frontiers. This paper discusses some general issues on the perception, role, and function of imperial boundaries, using examples from the Carolingian Empire and from other imperial formations through history.

Middle Ages; 9<sup>th</sup> century; Italy; Carolingians; empires; comparative studies; frontiers.

## Abbreviations

LP = *Liber pontificalis*, ed. L. Duchesne, *Le Liber pontificalis. Texte, introduction et commentaire*, 2 vols, Paris 1886-1892.

MGH, AB = *Annales Bertiniani*, ed. G. Waitz, Hannover 1883 (MGH, SS rer. Germ., 5).

MGH, ARF = *Annales regni Francorum inde ab a. 741 usque ad a. 829, qui dicuntur Annales Laurissenses Miores et Einhardi*, ed. F. Kurze, Hannover 1895 (MGH, SS rer. Germ., 6).

MGH, Capit. I = *Capitularia regum Francorum*, vol. 1, ed. A. Boretius, Hannover 1883 (MGH, LL).

MGH, VK = Einhard, *Vita Karoli Magni*, ed. O. Holder-Egger, Hannover-Leipzig 1911 (MGH, SS rer. Germ., 25).

MGH, RGS = Widukind of Corvey, *Rerum gestarum Saxoniarum libri tres*, ed. P. Hirsch – H.-E. Lohmann, *Die Sachsengeschichte des Widukind von Korvei*, Hannover 1935 (MGH, SS rer. Germ., 60).

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An empire is a universally recognized political organization, suggesting rich variety and several associated ideas<sup>1</sup>. There is disagreement on what an empire is: an extended debate on the role and identity of empires has provoked a vast literature on the topic, cutting across disciplines, characterized by a strongly diachronic approach and by specific terminology, which differs slightly according to context<sup>2</sup>.

Surveys generally highlight structures common to empires in world history, only subsequently focusing on distinctive case studies: «[o]ne benefit of comparison is that it helps to clarify phenomena and to sharpen the distinctive nature of the objects under scrutiny»<sup>3</sup>. It is suggestive that, if all surveys on empires cover the Roman and the British, the Carolingian Empire is seldom included, or at least it was not until a few years ago; in a paper in 2006, Susan Reynolds still lamented this omission<sup>4</sup>. It seems to have reflected the perceived anomaly of the Carolingian Empire (together with its later incarnations), which led scholars to doubt the imperial nature of Charlemagne's polity. Reasons were found in diverse structural features, ranging from the empire's *Mittellage* to the rudimentary fiscal system, through to its ephemeral life<sup>5</sup>. Geoffrey Barraclough notably wrote that «Charles himself became an emperor; but the lands over which he ruled did not become “an empire”»<sup>6</sup>.

In the past few decades, however, important studies have appreciably altered this picture. Two volumes have been published in Vienna on the role of early Medieval *Staatlichkeit*, with the Carolingian Empire as part of the debate, especially in its relation to *ecclesia* as a comprehensive concept denoting a multi-ethnic polity<sup>7</sup>. The new developments on the empire's conceptualization were visible in numerous publications, such as the important textbook *The Carolingian World*, or edited volumes and monographs where the centrality of empire features already in the title; a recent issue of «Studies in Church History» was dedicated to the topic of Church and Empire; one of «Medieval Worlds» focused on empires in comparison, with the Carolin-

<sup>1</sup> Many colleagues and friends helped to get my thoughts straight. I would like to thank Stefano Gasparri, Matteo Proto, Katharina von Winckler, and Giulia Zornetta for advice and suggestions. I also like to express my deep gratitude to the anonymous reviewer, who thoughtfully went through my text offering generous comments and precious corrections.

<sup>2</sup> Bang, *Empire – A World History*, pp. 18-20; Münker, *Imperien*, pp. 11-34; Nolte, *Kurze Geschichte*, pp. 41-43; Gehler – Rollinger, *Imperien und Reiche*; Colás, *Empire*, p. 14. For a minimal position: Doyle, *Empires*, p. 45. See also: Kahn, *The Caliphates*.

<sup>3</sup> Vasunia, *The Comparative Study of Empires*, p. 223; also: Runciman, *Empires*; Bang – Bayly, *Tributary Empires*; Hurler, *Introduction*.

<sup>4</sup> Reynolds, *Empires*, p. 152: «[m]ost surveys of Empire tend to jump over the middle ages».

<sup>5</sup> Bühner-Thierry, *Centres et périphéries*; Pohl, *Editor's Introduction: Empires*, p. 2; De Jong, *The Empire*; Bernhardt, *Concepts and Practice of Empire*; Münkler, *Imperien*, p. 63; Runciman, *Empires*, p. 100; Burbank – Cooper, *Empires in World History*, p. 87. There have been, however, general surveys: Muldoon, *Empire and Order*; Wilson, *The Holy Roman Empire*; Weinfurter, *Das Reich*; Wilson, *The Holy Roman Empire*; Heer, *Das Heilige Römische Reich*.

<sup>6</sup> Barraclough, *The Crucible*, p. 49.

<sup>7</sup> *Staat im frühen Mittelalter; Der frühmittelalterliche Staat*; moreover: de Jong, *The Penitential State*.

gian formation featuring prominently<sup>8</sup>. Jinty Nelson's recent monograph also highlights Charles' imperial dignity<sup>9</sup>. In the most recent survey on empires, an important article by Rosamond McKitterick focused on the Carolingian *imperium* and its high medieval successors<sup>10</sup>.

In the following discussion, I shall focus on the Carolingian Empire, but I shall also look at its eastern Roman predecessor, together with the Ottonian and Hohenstaufen successors, relying on both the vast literature on empires and the more focused studies of Medieval Europe.

### 1. *Brief anatomy of a concept*

Empires stretched back in history for thousands of years, flourishing across the globe, rising, as pointed out by Michael Mann, on account of their superior military power and economy<sup>11</sup>. Ian Morris wrote that «the history of empire is the history of organized violence»<sup>12</sup>. They happen by chance; their success being determined by «luck» according to W.G. Runciman<sup>13</sup>.

Expansion seems semantically bound to the very notion of empire and imperialism<sup>14</sup>. In fact, empires rule over territories outside their original one, stretching from a dominant core, called in scholarly discourse “metropole”, to the more or the less distant peripheries: «they involve the exercise of domination by the rulers of a central society over the populations of peripheral societies without either absorbing them to the point that they become fellow-members of the central society or disengaging from them to the point that they become confederates rather than subjects»<sup>15</sup>.

Generally, empires aim to co-opt local elites in order to lead them to recognise the value of imperial ideology for their own advantage; they penetrate the fabric of their society in an uneven manner: some regions are loosely ruled, while others are firmly controlled. Peripheries are governed emphasising difference, rather than assimilation, so that imperial frontiers do not include a culturally and politically homogeneous and coherent space, as ideally

<sup>8</sup> Costambeys – Innes – MacLean, *The Carolingian World; Charlemagne*; Goldberg, *Struggle for Empire*; Davis, *Charlemagne's Practice; The Church; Empires: Elements of Cohesion*.

<sup>9</sup> Nelson, *King and Emperor*.

<sup>10</sup> McKitterick, *Charlemagne*.

<sup>11</sup> Mann, *The Sources*, p. 22; Burbank – Cooper, *Empires in World History*; Nolte, *Kurze Geschichte; Imperien*.

<sup>12</sup> Morris, *Empire and Military Organization*, p. 155; also: Burbank – Cooper, *Empires in World History*, p. 2.

<sup>13</sup> Runciman, *Empire*, p. 101: «luck – the contingencies, that is, of individual ability and temperament, or of the location and accessibility of valuable mineral resources, or of the nature and timing of technological advances in the means of waging war».

<sup>14</sup> Ludden, *The Process of Empire*, p. 134.

<sup>15</sup> Runciman, *Empire*, p. 99.

modern nation states do; Alexander Motyl compared empires to a wheel with a hub and spokes, but no rim<sup>16</sup>.

Among empires, military power is fuelled by a strong ideology and superior claims to non-imperial neighbours. This imperial mission is the main element which defines empires. To use a tautology, empires are such because they act in an imperial manner. Political acts seek to achieve prestige, which Max Weber would have called *Prestigestreben*<sup>17</sup>. It does not mean that, as political entities, they are not driven by strategic considerations, but ideology is securely embedded in their actions<sup>18</sup>. Imperial actors see their power legitimized through their mission, so that cosmologies, foundation myths and myths of military glory, together with clearly manifested destinies, are shaped to justify the imperial order. Claims for superior right to rule, a world-encompassing mission such as peace, religion, celestial harmony, civilization or democracy, generally follow the early conquests: they are all ideologies of just or benevolent rule<sup>19</sup>. These «Visions of Empire», to quote Krishan Kumar, are rooted in an asymmetric relationship between that empire and its surrounding polities. Asymmetry means a hierarchy of authority and legitimacy between empire and states. If relationships between nation-states are ideally based on equal rights and sovereignty, empires claimed higher status toward their neighbouring polities. Herfried Münkler wrote: «Staaten gibt es stets im Plural, Imperien meist im Singular», states are always in the plural, empires mostly in the singular<sup>20</sup>. Yet, an empire may adopt different strategies in order to relate to another, such as China and Rome, or Iran and the Steppe powers<sup>21</sup>.

To measure empires, alongside the self-representation of the actors ruling them, scholarly attention generally concentrates on external, measurable, characteristics, which may comprehend lifespan and expanse, both central to the empires. Yet, there are no absolute requisites<sup>22</sup>. As we shall see, empires are generally seen as ancient institutions; in Japan, empire was said to be as old as history itself<sup>23</sup>. In fact, there are major exceptions to this rule: Alexander the Great's conquests disintegrated into battling realms shortly after the king's death, but very few would contest the imperial nature of his polity<sup>24</sup>. Similarly, we can agree that empires are large, however vague this may be as an analytical concept<sup>25</sup>. The multi-ethnic nature, which is sometimes evoked as the clearest separation between modern nations and empires, is an obvious

<sup>16</sup> Motyl, *Imperial Ends*, pp. 12-24.

<sup>17</sup> As maintained by Münkler, *Imperien*, pp. 51-52; and Kumar, *Visions of Empire*, p. 31.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 6.

<sup>19</sup> Kagan, *The Benevolent Empire*; also: *Il potere del mito*.

<sup>20</sup> Münkler, *Imperien*, p. 17.

<sup>21</sup> Di Cosmo – Maas, *Introduction*.

<sup>22</sup> See i.e. Wilson, *The Holy Roman Empire*, pp. 3-5.

<sup>23</sup> Imatani, *The Strange Survival*, pp. 15-17.

<sup>24</sup> On the issue of short-lived empires: *Short-Term Empires*.

<sup>25</sup> Woolf, *Rome*, pp. 24-25.

reflection of this vast expanse<sup>26</sup>. In fact, extent is not a reliable parameter: years ago, Moses Finley complained about the tendency to define as empire every very large territorial state<sup>27</sup>. A good example is the huge democracy of Canada, the second largest country on the planet, which by no means is an empire<sup>28</sup>. The Empire of East Rome, progressively losing its borderlands through its history, never saw its imperial status challenged. The Holy Roman Empire furthermore, a pale reflection of the Roman one in size, claimed its status up to the nineteenth century<sup>29</sup>.

## 2. *Imagining frontiers*

Imperial frontiers are an elusive notion. In fact, different kinds of frontiers – military, institutional, religious, or cultural – could coexist, overlap, or vary in their range, character and longevity in the borderlands. Diocesan borders and areas of ecclesiastical jurisdiction may overstep political frontiers, linguistic frontiers could run elsewhere as the political ones. «Military, political, institutional, cultural, linguistic, ethnic, social and economic frontiers move spatially and temporally at their own pace, so that empire cannot be contained within definite parameters»<sup>30</sup>. As a concept, moreover, “empire” derives from the Latin *imperium*, which means the authority to command, exercise violence and judge; only in the end did it come to denote the territories militarily conquered by the Romans<sup>31</sup>. Dick Whittaker, in a book often quoted in this volume, showed how the frontiers of the Roman Empire were no more real than meridians and parallels<sup>32</sup>. Since Rome was the «parent of empire», the «archetypal one», or «das paradigmatische Imperium», its example was emulated over the following centuries<sup>33</sup>.

Their dimensions notwithstanding, empires could more properly and ideally be defined by a lack of frontiers, representing an unbounded, universal rule<sup>34</sup>. Imperial actors generally shared a vocation to world dominion because of their mission and higher stance<sup>35</sup>. According to the geographical imagination, empires encompass the complexity and diversity of the world, thus representing an ideal balance where the kaleidoscope of creation is made whole. Imagining and managing space become crucial in the making of empires<sup>36</sup>.

<sup>26</sup> Colás, *Empire*, p. 19.

<sup>27</sup> Finley, *Empire*.

<sup>28</sup> See, however: Findlay – Lundahl, *The Economics*, pp. 78-80.

<sup>29</sup> Folz, *Idée d'Empire*; see, however: Münker, *Imperien*, p. 23.

<sup>30</sup> Ludden, *Process of Empire*, p. 136.

<sup>31</sup> Bang, *Empire*, p. 12; Burbank – Cooper, *Empires*, p. 28.

<sup>32</sup> Whittaker, *Frontiers of the Roman Empire*.

<sup>33</sup> Kumar, *Visions of Empire*, p. 37; Woolf, *Inventing*, p. 312; Ruffing, *Rom.*

<sup>34</sup> Colás, *Empire*, p. 19; Münkler, *Imperien*, pp. 22-29.

<sup>35</sup> Pagden, *Lords of All the World*; Woolf, *Inventing Empire*.

<sup>36</sup> Colás, *Empire*, p. 31.

Frontiers represent, thereafter, an ostensibly static imagery needing to be constantly adapted to shifting realities; while modern states survive only with firmly demarcated borders, imperial frontiers are volatile<sup>37</sup>.

Clear lines of demarcation for imperial borders are exceptions; «no matter how physically demarcated, the edges of empire and the edges of the unmeasured “barbarian” realms outside mesh in many ways, and the walls are osmotic membranes establishing a flow of influences and interaction» in the suggestive and rich phrasing of Charles Maier<sup>38</sup>. Frontiers appear, in fact, as deep regions covering the wide spectrum of direct imperial rule, including both satellite polities and hostile ones. Among the Romans, the conception of *limes*, referred to as administrative districts, could «co-exist without problem with subject peoples beyond the frontier», to quote Benjamin Isaac<sup>39</sup>. The imperial-style villa in Oberleiser Berg, a late Roman settlement north of the Danube, illustrates this complexity<sup>40</sup>. Elva Johnston has discussed Ireland, famously an island beyond the imperial reach, as a frontier society of Rome<sup>41</sup>. Chinese emperors or Sasanian kings were able to project authority from the Ocean or the Mediterranean onto Inner Asia<sup>42</sup>.

Carolingian aristocracies shared similar expectations with authors keen to portraying their empire as boundless<sup>43</sup>. Great interest was shared in the measuring and representation of the world, a subject thoughtfully discussed by Rosamond McKitterick a few years ago<sup>44</sup>. The Irish scholar Dicuil may be the most know case, but Emily Albu notably suggested that also the *Tabula Peutingeriana* should be considered a creation of Charlemagne’s court, an empire’s depiction modelled on the glorious ages of Augustus and Theodosius<sup>45</sup>. Einhard recorded the existence of silver tables in the emperor’s treasure: on one was engraved a depiction of the world in three concentric circles: a precious artefact whose imperial symbolism was straightforward<sup>46</sup>. This was an ideology developing tropes already present during the Merovingian period: in a revealing entry, the Metz Annalist described the *nationes* once subjected to the Franks: although beyond the frontiers, they owned loyalty to the emperor.<sup>47</sup> Tom Noble depicted the Carolingian frontier as «a rich, diverse

<sup>37</sup> *Ibidem*, p. 62.

<sup>38</sup> Maier, *Among the Empires*, p. 81; Münker, *Imperien*, p. 16: «[s]olche präzise Trennungslinien sind im Fall von Imperien eine Ausnahme».

<sup>39</sup> Isaac, *The Meaning*, p. 134; also: Luttwak, *The Grand Strategy*.

<sup>40</sup> Stuppner, *The Oberleiserberg*.

<sup>41</sup> Johnston, *Ireland in Late Antiquity*.

<sup>42</sup> Canepa; *Sasanian Iran*; Di Cosmo, *The Relations*.

<sup>43</sup> See, however, Müller-Mertens, *Römisches Reich*, suggesting that in the Carolingian and Ottonian era, *Romanum imperium* referred to the imperial rule over Rome and Roman Italy only.

<sup>44</sup> McKitterick, *Charlemagne*, pp. 372-380.

<sup>45</sup> Dicuil, *Liber de mensura orbis terrae*; Albu, *Imperial Geography*.

<sup>46</sup> MGH, VK, 33, p. 37.

<sup>47</sup> *Annales Mettenses Priores*, pp. 12-13, *ad annum* 691; Noble, *Louis the Pious*, pp. 336-338; Werner, *Les principautés périphériques*, pp. 483-484. Fischer, *Fredegars Welt*. Moreover, on the annals: Hen, *The Annals of Metz*.

and dynamic region with complicated relationships both with the heartlands and with the external borders»<sup>48</sup>. Brittany was a province constantly negotiating its balance of power with the Carolingian heartland<sup>49</sup>. Recent studies have forcefully framed Dalmatia and Southeastern Europe as a Carolingian frontier<sup>50</sup>. In a thoughtful discussion of the eastern frontiers of the Franks' kingdoms, Matthew Innes wrote how their: «rule shaded away at the edges, from aristocratic frontier commanders through clients who were in a sense part of the Frankish Empire to more independent rulers subject to Frankish influence»<sup>51</sup>. I will return below on this topic.

Beyond the empires' reach stretched the territory of the barbarians; empires are symbiotic to the concept of barbarian<sup>52</sup>. Boundaries often became loaded with ethnic and moral significance, as a shift between civilization and savagery, between our world and theirs<sup>53</sup>. Carolingian intellectuals inherited some of this vision: in the 840-entry of the *Annales Fuldenses*, we read how Louis the Pious persecuted a contender of his «usque ad terminos barbarorum»<sup>54</sup>. For the previous year, the *Annales Bertiniani* narrated the perils beyond the empire reported by the legates from Constantinople: «inter barbaras et nimiae feritatis gentes inmanissimas»<sup>55</sup>. As a concept, barbarism was adjusted, both spatially and chronologically: the further the empire stretched, the more distant the barbarians were cast. In the *Vita Karoli Magni*, we find barbarians only at the very fringes of empire, between Rhine and Vistula and north of the Danube<sup>56</sup>. The inclusion of new subjects into the empire changed their barbarian condition. Yet, in the Carolingian Empire, imperial actors were conscious of their pluralistic origins and even Einhard defined himself as barbarian in one among the most official imperial narratives<sup>57</sup>. Ian Wood showed how, during the Middle Ages, monstrous creatures inhabiting the borders of civilization became an increasingly central topic as the imperial boundaries advanced<sup>58</sup>. In Carolingian discourse and imagination, imperial territories could overlap with those of Christianity, barbarism could collide with paganism; the dichotomy between creeds had become stronger than the divide between the civilized and the barbarians.

<sup>48</sup> Noble, *Louis the Pious*, p. 338.

<sup>49</sup> Smith, *Province and Empire*.

<sup>50</sup> *Migration, Integration and Connectivity*; Gioanni, *Gouverner le monde*.

<sup>51</sup> Innes, *Review article: Franks and Slavs*, p. 202.

<sup>52</sup> See Heather, *Empires and Barbarians*; Dueck, *The Augustan Concept*; Burbank – Cooper, *Empires*, pp. 11–12; Nolte, *Kleine Geschichte*, p. 43.

<sup>53</sup> On the Roman Empire: Dueck, *The Augustan Concept*. Moreover: Colás, *Empire*, pp. 30–31; Pohl, *Frontiers and Ethnic Identities*; on the moral significance: Pohl, *Conclusion*, p. 252; on the Danube: Gandila, *Cultural Encounters*, pp. 20–32. See also: Kulikowski, *Ethnicity*.

<sup>54</sup> MGH, AF, p. 30, *ad annum* 840; Goetz, *Concepts*, p. 80.

<sup>55</sup> MGH, AB, pp. 19–20, *ad annum* 839.

<sup>56</sup> MGH, VK, 15, p. 24: «deinde omnes barbaras ac feras nationes, quae inter Rhenum ac Visulam fluvios oceanumque ac Danubium positae».

<sup>57</sup> MGH, VK, prol., p. 4: «homo barbarus».

<sup>58</sup> Wood, *Categorising the Cynocephali*.



### 3. *Reaching frontiers*

Notwithstanding imperial ideologies and missions, empires were constantly «in a state of tension between imperial pretences and limited means»<sup>59</sup>. If imperial discourse portrayed an empire without limits, borderlands had always to be established<sup>60</sup>. These became fundamental to understanding empires, conflating the chronological and geographical dimensions of their existence. Empires adopted different strategies to gain and control borderlands, most recently discussed in a comprehensive comparative analysis by Ronald Findlay and Mats Lundahl<sup>61</sup>.

As W.G. Runciman wrote, empires «are easier to acquire than to retain»<sup>62</sup>. In fact, reaching the peak of territorial expansion and establishing frontiers have been seen as among the most fragile phases in the process of empire building. This was the moment when the military drive at the start of great imperial formations began to lose momentum, giving way to radical change, and confirming the transition from a phase of expansion to a stable, long-enduring empire. This moment has been called the «Augustean Threshold» by Michael Doyle<sup>63</sup>. It is both a spatial and chronological shadow line to be crossed for an empire so that it can survive the end of military expansion. The name clearly echoes the first Roman emperor Octavian, as his reign is taken as a watershed between Republican Rome, characterized by constant conquest, and the imperial stability which followed. The Roman and Chinese Empires are the most emblematic among those able to survive this transition, while the Steppe Empires of Central Asia, although with notable exceptions, are generally given as examples of empires unable to make this transition<sup>64</sup>.

In the Middle Ages this trajectory could be observed in the Islamic Empire. After the rapid expansion led by Muhammed's successors and the Umayyad caliphs, the new rulers from Baghdad were able to maintain a shrinking, although prestigious empire, for almost three generations, while the ideological legitimacy shaped during the conquest lasted until 1258, and even beyond<sup>65</sup>. Yet, notwithstanding Louis the Pious' succession to his father's realm and adoption of the essential title «imperator Augustus», it has been questioned if the Carolingian Empire survived the end of conquest. Here, a long shadow has been cast by two highly influential articles of Tim Reuter, published almost fifty years ago, where the «end of Carolingian expansion» was seen as the prelude to the empire's breaking apart, as in the great survey of Geoffrey

<sup>59</sup> Pohl, *Editor's Introduction: Empires*, p. 2.

<sup>60</sup> Smith, *Fines imperii*, p. 176.

<sup>61</sup> Maier, *Among the Empires*, pp. 78-111; also: Maier, *Die Grenzen des Empire*, pp. 126-137; Findlay – Lundahl, *The Economics of the Frontier*, pp. 27-95.

<sup>62</sup> Runciman, *Empire*, p. 99.

<sup>63</sup> Doyle, *Empires*, pp. 93-97.

<sup>64</sup> Burbank – Cooper, *Empires in World History*, p. 93.

<sup>65</sup> Kennedy, *The Caliphate*.



Barraclough<sup>66</sup>. This relations between the closing of a frontier and loss of political power have a venerable tradition in medieval studies: Archibald Lewis, building on Walter Prescott Webb's studies, saw the year 1250 as a watershed in the history of the Medieval world, as the end of expansion signed the «crisis of a suddenly frontierless society»<sup>67</sup>.

Yet, the idea has been thoughtfully nuanced in the last years. Tom Noble discussed the continuity of Carolingian frontier politics since Pippin II as a constant effort to integrate the peripheral *regna* into the Frankish heartland; and showed that Louis the Pious was no exception<sup>68</sup>. Simon MacLean demonstrated how the paradigm of an empire that was always decaying influenced historiography for decades, bringing to question the very notion of a Carolingian imperial mission; instead, he showed how the imperial title remained central for competing members of the later dynasty<sup>69</sup>.

#### 4. *Ruling frontiers*

Once established, frontiers may have been visible in the landscape: many might immediately think of the Great Wall of China or Hadrian's Wall as barriers separating the empire from the outside; a monument to greatness and majesty. The Carolingian empire and its later incarnations, however, were seldom characterized by the monumentality of the *limes*. Certainly, fortifications were built on the river Elbe, as elsewhere: Matthias Hardt suggested the *limes Saxoniae* was a system of hillforts erected thirty or forty kilometres from each other, as «a large region protected by a system of fortresses and sanctuaries on both sides of the boarder», which may have echoed Rome's masonry – although the reality of this fortified frontier has been debated<sup>70</sup>. In the North, we learn, there was a «vallum» open by one gate, a fortification built by the Danes<sup>71</sup>. *Castella* dotted the border between the Saxon march and the land of the Sorbs, while another «uallum» signed the entrance in the territory of the Avars<sup>72</sup>. Often demarcations were far less spectacular; they nevertheless maintained a function in controlling people's movements<sup>73</sup>. Ba-

<sup>66</sup> Reuter, *Plunder and Tribute*; Reuter, *The End*; Barraclough, *The Crucible*, p. 36.

<sup>67</sup> Lewis, *The Closing*, p. 483; quoted by Noble, *Louis the Pious*, pp. 334-335. Webb, *The Great Plains*. See moreover: Burns, *The Significance*.

<sup>68</sup> Noble, *Louis the Pious*.

<sup>69</sup> MacLean, *Kingship and Politics*, p. 9; De Jong, *The Empire*, p. 13. See also: Goldberg, *Struggle for Empire*.

<sup>70</sup> Hardt, *Hesse, Elbe, Saale*; Hardt, *The Limes Saxoniae*; *Der Limes Saxoniae*; and Marco Franzoni's contribution in this volume. See also: Squatriti, *Moving Earth*, for rich evidence of ditches and barriers in Southeastern Europe.

<sup>71</sup> MGH, ARF, p. 126, *ad annum* 808; Goetz, *Concepts*, p. 79.

<sup>72</sup> MGH, AB, p. 23, *ad annum* 839; *Epistolae variorum*, n. 20, p. 528.

<sup>73</sup> Gasparri, *La frontiera*.

varian eastern borders were defined in terms of precisely named places, *loca*; *villae* may have marked the border between Saxons and Abodrites<sup>74</sup>.

Authority in the borderlands made them much harder to cross when entering the imperial territory than when leaving it<sup>75</sup>. Entering the empire required harsher conditions; leaving it was generally much easier, because of the perceived difference between imperial and outside-the-empire life according to the above-mentioned asymmetry. The Carolingian capitulary of Thionville (805) refers to the regions of Saxony and Bavaria, in Lauriacum where strongholds and royal officials to control exchange and the merchants travelling to the territories of the Slavs and Avars, forbidding the commerce of some wares, while permitting the exchange of others. Such an outpost was still the «*limes certus*» at the eve of the Avar campaigns and further conquests in the East<sup>76</sup>. The control of merchants and travellers was not peculiar to the West: the *Itinerarium* of Bernard the Monk suggestively shows the great complexity of entering the Caliphate at the end of the ninth century<sup>77</sup>.

Subsequently, frontier regions were places of military power and tax extraction, which could have been marked by defensive structures: powerhouses of imperial authority. The Carolingian rulers left a certain autonomy to the various kingdoms of the empire, while trying to enforce direct authority on the borderlands<sup>78</sup>. Emperors themselves thrived on these liminal spaces; fourth century Roman rulers seldom abandoned them, making the strongholds at the empire's very fringes their abode. In the middle of the seventh century, Constans II remained for years in Syracuse to oppose the Arab conquests in the Central Mediterranean<sup>79</sup>. Charlemagne, although growing older, nevertheless undertook voyages to the Western and Northern frontiers in 810 and 811: his horse fall, with the consequent loss of sword and brooch, became the omen of imminent end<sup>80</sup>. Widukind of Corvey narrated how it was on the frontier, in the aftermath of the battle at the Lechfeld, that Otto was proclaimed emperor by his army<sup>81</sup>. Rulers despised in the metropole could have been acclaimed at the frontiers, such as Phocas or Justinian II<sup>82</sup>.

Emperors could not simultaneously be on each frontier with authors developing the fantasy of omnipresent rulers. Notker of Saint Gall imagined a window in Charlemagne's palace in Aachen from which every location around him could have been scrutinized, even inside the buildings; an all-seeing eye

<sup>74</sup> *Loca*: MGH, ARF, p. 87, *ad annum* 790 (an entry in the revised version of the annals). See Walter Pohl's contribution in this volume. *Villae*: MGH, AB, p. 17, *ad annum* 839.

<sup>75</sup> Münkler, *Imperien*, p. 16.

<sup>76</sup> MGH, Capit. I, nos 43-44, cc. 23-24, pp. 120-126. Steinacher – Winckler, *Merowinger und Karolinger*, see also the contribution of Walter Pohl and Katharina von Winckler in this volume.

<sup>77</sup> *Itinerarium Bernardi*.

<sup>78</sup> Štih, *Pippin*; Bühner-Thierry, *Centres et périphéries*.

<sup>79</sup> Kaegi, *Muslim Expansion*, pp. 166-199.

<sup>80</sup> MGH, VK, 32, p. 36; Fichtenau, *Das karolingische Imperium*, p. 186.

<sup>81</sup> MGH, RGS, III, 49, p. 128.

<sup>82</sup> Brown, *Officers and Gentlemen*, pp. 148-150.

to keep the empire firm in grasp at the moment of its break apart<sup>83</sup>. In Chris Wickham's words the story reflected «the concrete operation of [...] power, that is, knowledge, and, when necessary, coercion based on that knowledge»<sup>84</sup>. In the *Chronicon Salernitanum*, we read how once, «olim», the Romans possessed seventy-two bronze statues, held in the Capitol, each representing a people subject to them: if one of these *gentes* rebelled the statue representing it began to vibrate, «commovebatur», and a little bell, «tintinnabulum», on them rang, so that the Romans could intervene in no time<sup>85</sup>. Dreams born by the insurmountable difficulties of ruling imperial vastities.

In fact, when the emperors were too far away, frontier control may have been delegated to powerful persons rooting to the territory. Lords in charge of boundaries were traditionally among the wealthiest and militarily powerful, such as the governors of Merv, the *strategoi* of Anatolikon, the dukes of Friuli and Bavaria. Charlemagne was himself a product of the frontier because of his Austrasian origin. «The existence of great military commanders along the frontiers, with powers far in excess to the ones of the counts» made them the empire's masters after the Carolingians' demise<sup>86</sup>. Imperial frontier regions could, thereafter, become a reason for the instability for the imperial core<sup>87</sup>. Under given circumstances, frontier officers escaped the metropolitan authority in many ways, as in terms of fiscal indiscipline, secessionist projects, or refusing to obey the ruler's rally and deserting the battlefield. One example is duke Cadolah of Friuli during Bernhard's revolt in 817; another is Henry the Lion three hundred years later during Barbarossa's last descent into Italy in 1166<sup>88</sup>. Often usurpers emerged from the frontiers. The story of Byzantine Italy in the seventh century is dotted with *tyranni* whose race for the imperial title demonstrates the strong bonds of frontier societies with the centre, as well as the strength of the empire's lure at the frontiers<sup>89</sup>. The short duration of each Exarch's service was a deliberate imperial precaution to enable them controlling the frontier regions. It eventually became among the reasons for local armies' lack of effectiveness<sup>90</sup>. This is what has been called the principal/agent problem<sup>91</sup>. Agents have their own priorities and agendas and were often resistant to do as they were told, so that rulers in the imperial frontier regions developed their own agency<sup>92</sup>. A suggestive example is that of the incident concerning the exarch Olympius, who was supposed to persuade

<sup>83</sup> Notker, *Gesta Karoli* 30, p. 41.

<sup>84</sup> Wickham, *The Inheritance*, p. 245.

<sup>85</sup> *Chronicon Salernitanum*, 132, p. 143.

<sup>86</sup> Barraclough, *The Crucible*, p. 109.

<sup>87</sup> Ludden, *The Process of Empire*; Runciman, *Empire*, p. 103.

<sup>88</sup> Krahwinkler, *Friaul*, pp. 183-185; Gasparri, *Istituzioni e poteri*, pp. 118-119; Lyon, *Princely Brothers and Sisters*, pp. 89-119.

<sup>89</sup> Brown, *Gentlemen and Officers*, pp. 159-163.

<sup>90</sup> See the similar considerations on the *Varusschlacht*: Münkler, *Imperien*, p. 44.

<sup>91</sup> Morris, *Empire and Military Organization*, p. 166.

<sup>92</sup> Münkler, *Imperien*, p. 47; also: Mudden, *Process of Empire*.

the Italian army to the eastern emperor's cause before imprisoning the pope. Loyalty was by no mean to be taken for granted: Olympius ended up proclaiming himself as emperor, with the local forces refusing to obey the ruler of Constantinople<sup>93</sup>.

It was in the frontiers that the very idea of empire could have been claimed, questioned, or challenged. Borderland areas could put forward a poignant symbolic language. In Italy, we read of rituals and liturgy, and we can still admire the remnants of monuments meant to enforce allegiance, as in Torcello or in Rome; the *Liber pontificalis* provides examples of the means by which Constantinople displayed authority on the Italian peripheries in an effort to ingratiate itself with the local aristocracies in a richness of imperial imagery<sup>94</sup>. The *Libellus de imperatoria potestate in urbe Roma* was probably composed in Spoleto during the second half of ninth century and the middle of the tenth, at the imperial southern frontier aiming to assess Louis II's lordship in Central Italy<sup>95</sup>. Frontiers could also host imperial quarrels<sup>96</sup>. In the famous words of Tacitus, before the battle at the *mons Graupius*, Calgacus, chieftain of the Caledonian confederacy, questioned the very idea of *pax Romana*, thus turning upside-down the Roman claim to universal rule<sup>97</sup>. In a similar though less dramatic fashion, the same critic of the empire came from the Syrian frontiers in the Monty Python film *Life of Brian*. In the delightful "what have the Romans ever done for us" scene, the zealots meet to discuss the overthrow of the Roman government:

REG: All right, but apart from the sanitation, the medicine, education, wine, public order, irrigation, roads, a fresh water system, and public health, what have the Romans ever done for us?

XERXES: Brought peace.

REG: Oh. Peace? Shut up<sup>98</sup>!

The borderlands of empire were the first to seek various degrees of autonomy, such as Umayyad Al-Andalus, the first region of the Caliphate to escape Baghdad's authority<sup>99</sup>. The second version of Gregory II's life collected in the *Liber pontificalis* narrated the riot of the imperial armies spreading across Byzantine Italy in 727<sup>100</sup>. The idea of promoting a new emperor was mooted, but eventually the project abandoned, and the frontier provinces fragmented

<sup>93</sup> LP, I, p. 337; Stratos, *The Exarch Olympius*.

<sup>94</sup> See LP, I, pp. 363, 392, on this: McKitterick, *The Papacy and Byzantium*. On the *Liber pontificalis*: McKitterick, *Rome*. See moreover Borri, *The Lagoons as a Distant Mirror*.

<sup>95</sup> *Libellus*.

<sup>96</sup> See here: Shepard, *Countering Byzantium's Shadow*.

<sup>97</sup> Fraser, *The Roman Conquest of Scotland*.

<sup>98</sup> *Monty Python's Life of Brian*.

<sup>99</sup> Kennedy, *Muslim Spain and Portugal*.

<sup>100</sup> LP, vol. 1, p. 408. On the different versions of the life: McKitterick, *Rome*, pp. 207-210.

into increasingly autonomous polities, the imperial symbols and lexicon of power bent to local realities, as in Rome, Ravenna or Venice<sup>101</sup>.

After 774 and the conquest of the Lombard kingdom by the Franks, Carolingian authors highlighted the peace following the conquest of Italy, whereas dissonant voices from the frontiers told a different story during the succeeding decades<sup>102</sup>. In 983 the newly conquered regions beyond the Elbe revolted, and the very idea of empire was dramatically challenged: a new allegiance was formed, relying on non-imperial patterns of power, and pagan in religion<sup>103</sup>. Agnellus wrote in Ravenna in the ninth century, a town at the crossroad of empires, where privileges and punishments are evoked in a continuum, even as the imperial centre shifted from the Byzantines to the Carolingians; the empire could be a divine source of authority or a poisonous dragon rising from the sea<sup>104</sup>.

Empires needed loyal peripheries to survive. Payments, dignities, and prestige goods were, together with violence, among the means used by the imperial centre to achieve this aim. Harsh punishments emerge from our evidence. Powerful and rebelling officers were dealt with publicly and mercilessly; reports survive of surrendering barbarians brutally executed in the frontier regions, such as at Cannstatt, Verden or in the aftermath of Stoinef's defeat<sup>105</sup>. Steppe powers, notably the Mongols, adopted violence as a strategy of rule, using concentrated military power as leverage to assuage defiance<sup>106</sup>.

Yet coercion was only one of the tools, though an extreme and unwieldy one, that empires had in their armoury; co-option was the favoured choice. Charlemagne's Saxon wars reached an end when local aristocracies finally joined the imperial cause. Einhard was bluntly outspoken on this imperial policy of assimilation, recording a «union with the Franks to form one people»<sup>107</sup>. Saxon aristocracies were eventually won for the empire, crushing the *Stellinga* revolts of the mid-ninth century<sup>108</sup>. Other than coercion, empires paying standing army could rely to other tools. Since a failure to pay soldiers was among the first causes of riots, Henry I of Saxony seem to have dealt with this problem by building a line of fortifications on the eastern edges of the empire, assigning land to the men in charge and making them self-sufficient<sup>109</sup>.

<sup>101</sup> West-Harling, *Rome, Ravenna, and Venice*. See also: Borri, *The Lagoons as a Distant Mirror*; Noble, *Louis the Pious*, p. 347.

<sup>102</sup> Gasparri, *Italia longobarda*, pp. 172-176.

<sup>103</sup> Fritze, *Der slawische Aufstand*; Lübke, *Das östliche Europa*, pp. 232-252.

<sup>104</sup> Martínez Pizarro, *Writing Ravenna*; Schoolman, *Representations of Lothar*.

<sup>105</sup> *Annales Petaviani*, p. 11, *ad annum* 746; MGH, ARF, p. 62, *ad annum* 782; MGH, RGS, III, 55, pp. 134-135.

<sup>106</sup> Münkler, *Imperien*, pp. 89-90; also: Burbank – Cooper, *Empires in World History*, pp. 97-99, 105.

<sup>107</sup> MGH, VK, 7, p. 10: «unus cum eis populus efficerentur».

<sup>108</sup> Goldberg, *Popular Revolt*; Rembold, *Conquest and Christianization*, pp. 85-140.

<sup>109</sup> MGH, RGS, I, 35, pp. 48-51; Henning, *Civilization versus Barbarians?*; Schlesinger, *Zur Gerichtsverfassung*.

It was a traditional method for cutting military costs. Yet, all granting autonomies, inevitably led to the empires' loss of leverage in the frontier regions.

### 5. *Living frontiers*

In many narratives the space beyond empires was the adobe of the unknown and the weird, as Marlow met in Joseph Conrad's novella *Hearth of Darkness*. A wonderful medieval example stems from Bruno's letter to Emperor Henry II where the progression from the imperial frontier became a descent into barbarism and paganism<sup>110</sup>. In recent times boarder zones were places of colonial adventure as in many fictions of Rudyard Kipling; perhaps the Epic *Waltharius* is an early example of this attitude; Mary Garrison suggestively wrote of Carolingian «frontier literature»<sup>111</sup>.

These fringes could have been characterized by specific cultures, possibly militaristic and exotic, contrasting or similar to the barbarians' one. Eric Goldberg suggestively described the Christian and military habits of the eastern kingdom of Louis the German, in constant conflict with Slav and Hungarian neighbours<sup>112</sup>. On the other hand, when looking at the late Roman frontier on the Rhine, it becomes difficult to disentangle the origin of peculiar habits, appearances and identities which seem to mix cultural elements of both Roman and barbarian origin<sup>113</sup>. In borderlands «the language of power» can be multiple, creolised and available only in translation or indirectly<sup>114</sup>, a middle ground, where different cultural elements merged into a new discourse of power characterized by «creative misunderstandings»<sup>115</sup>. Strategies of identity were possible due to the deep knowledge of the barbarians. Frontier regions were places of cultural encounters: Latin epigraphy on the Rhine and in other frontier regions documents the exchanges taking place there; in 782 the embassies of distant polities joined at the emperor's war-camp close to Paderborn, bringing gifts and knowledge, such as the names of the Saxon ruler or the dignities of the Avar leaders<sup>116</sup>. The first appearance of Rhos in Ingelheim was followed by a keen investigation, meant to gather information on the new *gens*<sup>117</sup>.

<sup>110</sup> Bruno of Querfurt, *Epistola*; Falkowski, *The Letter*.

<sup>111</sup> *Waltharius*; on the narrative as a Carolingian product: Stone, *Waltharius*. Quotation is from: Garrison, *The Emergence*, p. 134.

<sup>112</sup> Goldberg, *Struggle for Empire*.

<sup>113</sup> Halsall, *Barbarian Migrations*, pp. 101-110.

<sup>114</sup> Ludden, *The Process of Empire*, p. 136.

<sup>115</sup> White, *The Middle Ground*.

<sup>116</sup> Lee, *Information and Frontiers*; MGH, ARF, pp. 58-60, *ad annum* 782: «Saxones venientes, excepto rebellis Widochindus [...] Nordmanni missi Sigifridi regis, id est Halptani [...] Avari [...] missi a cagano et iugurro».

<sup>117</sup> MGH, AB, pp. 19-20, *ad annum* 839; Shepard, *The Rhos Guests*.



Imperial armies were often a product of the exchanges running through the border regions<sup>118</sup>. Indeed, “ethnic soldiers” recruited in distant frontiers became a feature of empires<sup>119</sup>. It was because of this relationship to the frontier regions and the barbarian world that imperial armies often gained an aura of invincibility, with soldiers ideally originating from harsh regions thought to increase their fighting capabilities and resilience<sup>120</sup>. The late Roman army recurred to ethnic groups, such as Illyrians and Goths, and eventually Isaurians, stemming from the cold mountainous regions of central Asia Minor<sup>121</sup>. The efficient armies of the Caliphs were settled in Merv, in the open frontiers to Transoxiana and the nomadic powers of Central Asia; the inclusion of the Turks in the Abbasid armies and their conversion to Islam was among the momentous episodes in medieval history<sup>122</sup>. The British Empire shaped the reputation of the Gurkhas, a brigade raised in Nepal, fighting the imperial battles from 1857 to the Malvinas/Falkland campaign and Afghanistan<sup>123</sup>. Ethnic soldiers, with one foot in the imperial military tradition and the other in their barbarian heritage, rose to legendary status through history; empires manipulated ethnic identities, celebrating diversity, and enforcing hierarchy.

The feared *scarae* mostly stemmed from the imperial heartlands. Nevertheless, newly conquered people joined the Frankish armies in pushing forward the conquest, Carolingian armies were designed after ethnic names, as an indication of the territory where they were risen. In the annals is normal to find *Alamanni*, *Gothi*, *Langobardi* or *Saxones*. Groups were recruited even further fighting imperial wars by proxy<sup>124</sup>. Frontier elites were enticed into taking positions unreachable times of peace; joining imperial enterprises offered the chance for satellite polities and other ethnic groups to climb through the ranks<sup>125</sup>. The presence of the duke of Istria in the Avar campaign of 791 is revealing; on some occasions, the burden of war was left to the bordering aristocracies, as in the case of successive campaigns against the Avars, one led by the reclusive Vojnomir; or in 788, when the fight against the Eastern Empire was delegated to the Lombards of Spoleto and Benevento led by the duke Grimoald, although observed by trusted Frankish men<sup>126</sup>.

Imperial agency worked in the shaping of frontier identities, as in Bavaria or Dalmatia<sup>127</sup>. Max Diesenberger has shown how the Saxons’ forced transfer

<sup>118</sup> Morris, *Empire and Military Organization*, p. 161.

<sup>119</sup> Enloe, *Ethnic Soldiers*; Bang, *Empire*, p. 39; Burbank – Cooper, *Empires and the Politics of Difference*.

<sup>120</sup> Bang, *Empire*, p. 9; Cólás, *Empire*, p. 9; Morris, *Empire and Military Organization*.

<sup>121</sup> Amory, *People and Identity*, pp. 277-313; Van Driel-Murray, *Ethnic Soldiers*; Feld, *Barbarische Bürger*.

<sup>122</sup> Kennedy, *The Armies of the Caliphs*; Gordon, *The Breaking of a Thousand Swords*.

<sup>123</sup> Caplan, *Warrior Gentlemen*.

<sup>124</sup> On the organization of Carolingian armies, see now: Haack, *Der Krieger der Karolinger*; moreover: Halsall, *Warfare*, pp. 40-133.

<sup>125</sup> Münkler, *Imperien*, p. 43.

<sup>126</sup> MGH, ARF, p. 82, *ad annum* 788, p. 82; p. 98, *ad annum* 796. Borri, *The Duke of Istria*.

<sup>127</sup> Reimitz, *When the Bavarians Became Bavarian*; Lienhard, *Les combattants*.



and settlement was conceived as imperial policy<sup>128</sup>. Tenth-century emperors acted in similar ways: in a story of Widukind of Corvey, Henry I installed in Merseburg a band formed of rogues and robbers: he remitted their punishment and instructed them to plunder the neighbouring Slavs<sup>129</sup>.

## 6. *Imperial awe*

An imperial sense of mission, aspiring to ultimate authority, made it imperative for the emperors to intervene beyond their comfort zones. The rulers of empires tended to act outside their territory, while outsider intrusions into their own were unthinkable<sup>130</sup>. Empires seem to prosper in their status with political and military action validating the asymmetric relationships between them and neighbouring polities; failure to act then becomes a loss of authority and creates a potential danger of defeat. In some cases, empires extended their moral authority through coercion, in others through hegemony cast beyond their armies' reach.

It seems that intervention on the frontiers stretched imperial resources and often backfired. We could see it in different occasions: the episode of Pope Martin's capture in 649, which must have deeply embittered the relationships of Constantinople with Rome; likewise the events of 788, when Byzantine forces incurred a major defeat at Lombard and Carolingian hands in Southern Italy: it was not an economic move, but a confrontation between the old empire and a rising one in Central Europe<sup>131</sup>. Otto II's inglorious defeat at the Battle of Stilo was the consequence of the imperial drive to assert authority in the frontier regions of the empire, confronting the other empires in the region: its consequence was a major loss of prestige and the downfall of the Northeastern frontiers<sup>132</sup>.

More frequently, empires held sway beyond their borders with only marginal military intervention; taking «their superiority for granted» and projecting it «down the ranks and out into peripheries, to generate consensus that leaders lead because they are more enlightened, and that better off people naturally have privileges and responsibilities to lead lesser folks»<sup>133</sup>. This could be seen as «the acceptance of that dominance by the dominated, the internalization of the value-system of the ruling class, including those parts of the system which allow rulers to punish the dominated for not obeying the rules»<sup>134</sup>. Between the fifth and eighth centuries, kingdoms and other polities

<sup>128</sup> Diesenberger, *Die Zwangsumsiedlungen der Sachsen*. See also: Melleno, *Between Borders*.

<sup>129</sup> MGH, RGS, I, 38, pp. 48-51.

<sup>130</sup> Münkler, *Imperien*, p. 30.

<sup>131</sup> On the 649-happenings: Booth, *Crisis of Empire*, pp. 290-312; sources are collected in: *Seventh-Century Popes and Martyrs*. For the clash of 788: MGH, ARF, p. 82, *ad annum* 788.

<sup>132</sup> Bernhardt, *Concepts and Practice*, p. 153; Banaszkiwicz, *Ein Ritter flieht*.

<sup>133</sup> Ludden, *The Process of Empire*, p. 134.

<sup>134</sup> Wickham, *Framing*, p. 440.

around the Mediterranean adapted forms of authority, at least to some extent, from imperial patterns of power, contributed to the formation of the Mediterranean, then European, political entities, often recognizing the emperor in Constantinople as the head of a hierarchy of sovereigns, able to grant gifts and imperial dignities to affirm his superior stance<sup>135</sup>. The Caliph was, until 1258, the highest authority of the Muslim world. Different emirs and sultans, although politically independent, recognized Baghdad's primacy<sup>136</sup>. Garth Fowden portrayed a Mediterranean world of empires, as the Byzantine and the Muslim with its hierarchies of rulers, where monotheism became strongly embedded in imperial visions<sup>137</sup>.

Also in Carolingian Europe and the Mediterranean imperial authority reached distant peripheries from the metropole. The famous fifteenth chapter of Einhard's *Vita Karoli Magni* listed Dalmatia, the two Pannonias and even Dacia, the land north of the Danube, as the eastern fringes of the Carolingian realm. We grasp imperial echoes from the past, but also distant, ill-defined frontiers<sup>138</sup>. As in Roman times, imperial power overflowed the *limes*; it became intertwined with eschatological expectations early on, with Charlemagne claiming the ultimate secular authority in the Christian world<sup>139</sup>. In the following chapter of his work, Einhard claimed that the emperor's dominance extended to Alfonso, king of the Asturias and Galicia, and the kings of Ireland<sup>140</sup>. We know that Alfonso sent Charlemagne spoils he collected from pillaging Lisbon, a stronghold even further in the Iberian Peninsula<sup>141</sup>. In the same narrative, we read of Charlemagne's money, sent «trans marina» to support the churches of Africa, Egypt and Syria, Jerusalem, Alexandria, and Carthage<sup>142</sup>. The Basel Roll, a list of Jerusalem's Christian foundations, composed at the beginning of the ninth century, shows the deep imperial involvement in the Holy Land<sup>143</sup>.

Louis the Pious offered military alliance to the people of Mérida in the Guadiana River Basin, a town under Muslim authority deep in the Andalusian southwest<sup>144</sup>. This kind of intervention could also be seen in the imperial kingdom of Italy. In the famous letter in which Lothar's son Louis II wrote to his eastern colleague Basil a few years later, the western emperor lamented the Greeks ravaging of the «*Sclaveni nostri*», probably settled on the Dalmatian coast, well beyond the kingdom's boundaries<sup>145</sup>. The successors of the

<sup>135</sup> Wolfram, *Das Römerreich*; Esders, *In the Shadow*; Scholl, *Imitatio Imperii*.

<sup>136</sup> Kennedy, *The Caliphate*.

<sup>137</sup> Fowden, *From Empire to Commonwealth*; Sarris, *Empires of Faith*; Höfert, *Kaisertum und Kalifat*. Also: Burbank – Cooper, *Empires and the Politics of Difference*, p. 4.

<sup>138</sup> MGH, VK, 15, p. 18.

<sup>139</sup> Alberi, *The Evolution*; Bühner-Tierry, *Centres et périphéries*, pp. 146-147.

<sup>140</sup> MGH, VK, 16, p. 26: «*Scottorum quoque reges*».

<sup>141</sup> MGH, ARF, 798, p. 104.

<sup>142</sup> MGH, VK, 27, p. 40.

<sup>143</sup> McCormick, *Charlemagne's Survey*.

<sup>144</sup> Einhard, *Epistolae*, 12, pp. 115-116. Conant, *Louis the Pious*.

<sup>145</sup> Louis II, *Epistola ad Basilium*, p. 392.

Carolingians shared similar visions. In the tenth century, Widukind of Corvey narrated how Henry, the father of his Emperor Otto, became overlord of the Danes, extending his (proto)imperial authority on a territory beyond the German kingdom's borders<sup>146</sup>. In the twelfth century, John of Salisbury denounced the arrogance of the Teutons pretending to rule over all the nations, reflecting at the same time the emperor's claims of higher authority<sup>147</sup>. A letter often attributed to King Henry II of England similarly suggested the emperor's wide-reaching authority<sup>148</sup>.

Emperors, moreover, were willing to see themselves as the incarnation of political authority. Even on the eve of Pippin III's rise to kingship, the emperor of Constantinople saw his own role as the fundamental source of power: in a revealing brief entry in the *Annales regni Francorum*, Emperor Constantine V gave an organ as a gift to the Frankish *major*: it was an ancient symbol of kingship<sup>149</sup>. His ability to grant artefacts, whose technology was not available to recipients, aimed to demonstrate the sender's higher stance. This action also responded to the imperial «informelle Zwang» to excel in every field in which power and prestige are expected<sup>150</sup>. Emperor Constantine chose to represent himself as the ultimate source of authority at the very moment when Pippin III was closing his alliance with the bishops of Rome<sup>151</sup>. Yet, recipients could read the exchange differently, nuancing or altering the power relations that the gifts were meant to affirm; after all, «the more important the gift, the more easily, its gift could be contested» and «[d]iplomatic gifts were open to all sorts of readings»<sup>152</sup>. The Franks were glad to see Constantine's gift, as many others, as a tribute and a reflection of *their* own greatness. In turn, Carolingian emperors often eased or endorsed the rise to power of neighbouring rulers, as in 805 with Venice and Dalmatia, or in 817, when the emperor appointed the rulers of different polities at the empire's frontiers<sup>153</sup>. It is suggestive that in different Slavic languages, the word “king” – *kral* – stems from the name Charles (Germ.: *Karl*), the ruler *par excellence*<sup>154</sup>.

The Gospel book known to scholars as the Codex Aureus of St. Emmeram (Munich, Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, Clm 14000) features two full-page miniatures representing the enthroned Charles the Bald in his imperial aspiration<sup>155</sup>. For the first time in Western art, the illumination represents the

<sup>146</sup> MGH, RGS, I, 40, p. 59.

<sup>147</sup> Fuhrmann, *Quis Teutonicos constituit iudices nationum?*

<sup>148</sup> Leyser, *Frederick Barbarossa*.

<sup>149</sup> MGH, ARF, p. 14, *ad annum* 757: «[m]isit Constantinus imperator regi Pippino cum aliis donis organum, qui in Franciam usque pervenit».

<sup>150</sup> Münkler, *Imperien*, p. 54.

<sup>151</sup> Herrin, *Constantinople*.

<sup>152</sup> Wickham, *Conclusion*, p. 240.

<sup>153</sup> MGH, ARF, pp. 120-121, *ad annum* 806: «[e]t facta est ibi ordinatio ab imperatore de ducibus et populis tam Venetiae quam Dalmatiae»; p. 147, *ad annum* 817.

<sup>154</sup> Lübke, *Das östliche Europa*, p. 52.

<sup>155</sup> Many art historians have discussed this iconography. See most recently: Pizzinato, *Vision and Christomimesis*. Moreover: Nelson, *Charles the Bald*, p. 14.

personifications of provinces paying homage to the rulers; inscribed verses run «Francia grata tibi, rex inclite, munera defert» and «Gotia te pariter cum regnis inchoat altis»<sup>156</sup>. As Charles authority reaches the western provinces of the Carolingian Empire, an iconography portraying the ruler in a Christ-like fashion suggested limitless authority. The *Reichskrone*, today in the *Schatzkammer* of Vienna, is one among the most important of the imperial *regalia*; the artefact was crafted between the tenth and eleventh centuries, and, since the reign of Conrad II, used in the imperial coronation rituals. One of the eight arched plates is inscribed with «per me reges regnant» (by me kings reign), a quotation from Proverbs (8:15) of the Vulgate Latin Bible: the emperor too was a maker of kings.<sup>157</sup> Otto III at Gniezno in 1000 may have created the king of Poland, although the meeting's significance is debated. On this occasion, a copy of the Holy Lance, which the emperor had given to the Polish ruler Boleslaw, symbolized his authority<sup>158</sup>. In a similar fashion, it was after the destruction of Milan that Emperor Barbarossa developed the cult of the biblical Magi as part of the imperial theology<sup>159</sup>. The Three Magi were kings of distant lands, who recognized the superior authority of the Saviour; like them, the rulers of Europe, which Friedrich loved to call *reguli* or *reges provinciarum*, were ideally supposed to obey to the emperor's authority<sup>160</sup>. Marc Bloch tersely wrote how frontiers did not halt the aspirations of the Hohenstaufen emperors willing to present themselves as lords of the all world: «[m]ais précisément les frontières de l'Empire, au sens étroit du mot, ne bornent pas les aspirations de l'Empereur. Successeur des maîtres du monde antique, il est, comme eux, *dominus mundi*»<sup>161</sup>.

## 7. Conclusion

Only a tentative conclusion can be offered on this vast subject.

Imperial authority was theoretically unlimited, but regions remained beyond it; in any case manifestations of imperial authority were not permanent. Frontier regions represented the balance between this world encompassing authority and a circumscribed political order. It was a temporal as well as a spatial divide. In a context of fluctuating frontiers, empires thrived.

We can by now agree that imperial frontiers were not clear-cut lines. On the contrary, they represented deep zones with diverse functions, a complexity of entities enriched by the assorted interpretations of the thin divide between empire and hegemony – a concept diversely interpreted by different

<sup>156</sup> Dutton – Jeaneau, *Verses of the Codex Aureus*, p. 91.

<sup>157</sup> Kugler, *Die Reichskrone*. Also: Erdmann, *Das ottonische Reich*.

<sup>158</sup> Grabowski, *The Construction of Ottonian Kingship*; Erdmann, *Das ottonische Reich*.

<sup>159</sup> Cardini, *I re magi*, pp. 83-86.

<sup>160</sup> Weinfurter, *Das Reich*, p. 121.

<sup>161</sup> Bloch, *L'Empire*, p. 552; also: Monnet, *Le Saint-Empire*.

scholars<sup>162</sup>. In the opening lines of his fundamental book on the subject, Michael Doyle wrote: «Empires are relationships of political control imposed by some political societies over the effective sovereignty of other political societies. They include more than just formally annexed territories, but they encompass less than the sum of all forms of international inequality»<sup>163</sup>.

Michael Maier recalled the peripheries' importance to understand the metropole's role and identity: «[p]recisely because it constitutes the edge of empire [...] the frontier is critical for the center»<sup>164</sup>. Indeed, imperial frontier regions play a crucial role: although permeable, they separate the empire and the other, on the backdrop of whom the empire was defined. Within a Mediterranean discourse, it was the barbarian other; during the medieval centuries, it gained a religious dimension. The Carolingians were able to create an ideology, indebted to the Christian Roman Emperors' theocracy which, progressively enriched and reframed, was the backbone of imperial conceptions until the nineteenth century<sup>165</sup>. The empire was the home of the Christians; pagans dwelt beyond it. Helmut Reimitz has shown how the proper baptismal rite ensured membership of the imperial community; Mayke de Jong has demonstrated how the empire as a whole was conceived as a moral project for the realization of God's plan<sup>166</sup>. Carolingian narratives seem to stress this identity multiple times: in verses such as the *De Pippini regis victoria Avarica* the imperial subjects are called *Christiani*, while their antagonists are dismissed as *pagani*<sup>167</sup>. The Royal Annalist went as far as to depict the heathen Abodrites as Christians because of their alliance with the empire<sup>168</sup>. Among the strongest later usage of this rhetoric, we can place Widukind of Corvey's account of the Battle of Lenzen<sup>169</sup>.

Yet, the Ottonian emperors, together with their successors, became increasingly surrounded by kingdoms sharing similar Christian identities, political languages, and cultural traits. Christianity was never an imperial prerogative, but through the Middle Ages all the European rulers legitimated their authority through the Christian religion; the Church headed by the pope was bound to clash with imperial convictions concerning their power and role. This undermined the imperial mission and the emperors' prestige. Around the year 1000, we see control of Italy and Rome as an essential element of the emperor's role. In fact, the investiture controversy demonstrated how even the emperor's moral primacy inside Christianity was bitterly contested. It is too big a debate to be addressed here, but ecclesiastical authority

<sup>162</sup> Münkler, *Imperien*, pp. 35-77.

<sup>163</sup> Doyle, *Empires*, p. 19.

<sup>164</sup> Maier, *Among the Empires*, p. 79.

<sup>165</sup> Weinfurter, *Das Reich*; Moreland, *The Carolingian Empire*; Folz, *Idée d'Empire*. Bühner-Thierry, *Centres et périphéries*.

<sup>166</sup> Reimitz, *Grenzen und Grenzüberschreitungen*.

<sup>167</sup> *De Pippini regis victoria Avarica*; Pohl, *Pippin*.

<sup>168</sup> Rembold, *Conquest and Christianization*, pp. 45-46.

<sup>169</sup> MGH, RGS, I, 36, pp. 51-54.

could have been a tool of imperial authority as well as a strong oppositional force to same<sup>170</sup>. Still around 1000, the Ottonian Empire was, in Chris Wickham's reading, the strongest military power in Europe<sup>171</sup>. This supremacy may have remained intact until the twelfth century: Frederick Barbarossa tried to enforce his authority through different means, the holiness of the Roman law and the cult of Saint Charlemagne among them; all became part of an imperial theology for the high Middle Ages<sup>172</sup>. Yet, the Empire increasingly acquired similar character to that of its neighbouring states, as its power declined.

Lucien Febvre showed how social relations are spatially projected, with frontiers reflecting ideology<sup>173</sup>. Carolingian border regions reflected the nature of an empire built on Roman and Christian models, its universal authority and majesty. Decades later, it became clear that the empires of the Ottonians and the Salians, like the twelfth-century Holy Roman Empire, were limited both north and south by *marcae*: the shores of the North Sea and the Baltic were sealed by Denmark, the boundary of the Danes, while dozens of marching days south, the limits with the Greek, Islamic, Lombard and Norman South were signed by the *marca par excellence*, gaining this name between the tenth and the eleventh century, which survives in the one modern regione Marche<sup>174</sup>. *Imperium*, nevertheless, maintained more than a purely territorial connotation: the orb, sometimes known as the *Reichsapfel* – imperial apple – held firmly in the left hand of every emperor, accurately represents the endless expanse of their dominions<sup>175</sup>.

<sup>170</sup> It has even been suggested that the whole Empire of the medieval West was a construct of Rome's bishops: Ullmann, *Reflections on the Medieval Empire*.

<sup>171</sup> Wickham, *Medieval Europe*, p. 101.

<sup>172</sup> Görich, *Frederich Barbarossa*, pp. 633-635.

<sup>173</sup> Febvre, *Limites et frontières*.

<sup>174</sup> Borgolte, *Das Reich*.

<sup>175</sup> Schramm, *Sphaira*.



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