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2007-2008

John Wesley Powell Research Conference

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4-2008

## Refugees from the 1st through 4th Centuries: Racial, Economic, Cultural, and Practical Issues along the Borders

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### Recommended Citation

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HST490

12-11-07

**Refugees from the 1<sup>st</sup> through 4<sup>th</sup> Centuries: Racial, Economic, Cultural,  
and Practical Issues along the Borders**

Much like our modern world, ancient refugees sought out Rome as a land of wealth and security. The classical literary sources (e.g. Tacitus, Cassius Dio, Ammianus Marcellinus, etc.) have provided posterity with a wealth of descriptions of refugee incidents. Through these accounts of refugees to and from Rome, we can piece together an understanding of Rome's level of control over her borders, and more generally, over large population movements. This process will also shed light on other issues such as motives, biases, and economic factors. Based upon the incidents described by the classical historians throughout the 1<sup>st</sup> through 5<sup>th</sup> centuries, we see what appears to be an evident fluctuation in the level control exercised by the Romans. Furthermore, the contemporary awareness of the benefits and disadvantages of allowing refugees to in Rome will also be highlighted in this process. Most importantly among all of these issues, simple economic gains and losses tend to be the most significant motive behind the actions of both the refugees and the Romans.

Before moving on to specific examples, it is important to differentiate between what could be considered normal conquest or raiding and what constitutes a real refugee. The instances that will be examined here are examples of groups of people who were forced from their homes and sought refuge among the Romans *en masse*. These groups were fleeing from death (via starvation, war, etc.) and sought permanent residence and

protection within Rome. The factors affecting these refugee groups' decision to migrate will be examined more thoroughly on a case by case basis to show relationships with respect to Rome's ability to control these dispossessed peoples. Like modern refugees (and immigration in general) push and pull factors influenced these decisions. These can range from economic decline and cultural alienation to man-made catastrophe or the appeal of a more "civilized" society.<sup>1</sup>

One of the earliest examples of refugees we find is left to us by Tacitus in the *Annals* when he provides a brief account of an event involving the Frisians and the Ampsivarii. Tacitus tells us of the Frisians who attempted to settle in "clearings reserved [*agrosque vacuos*] for the use of the troops."<sup>2</sup> Upon this move, the Roman commander there threatened the Frisian leaders Verritus and Malorix, forcing them to seek Nero's permission to settle, only to have their request later denied.<sup>3</sup> This land was then immediately reoccupied by the "starving" Ampsivarii who, upon facing heavy pressure from Rome, did not give up the land so easily; instead, they opted to form an alliance in an attempt to fight the Romans.<sup>4</sup> The motivations of these particular groups becomes rather apparent when viewed through Tacitus' explanations. Tacitus tells us that the Ampsivarii had been "expelled by the Chauci, and were now a homeless people."<sup>5</sup> Tales of groups of people who are forced to leave their land because another rival people has invaded that land is a major theme that appears throughout many of the incidents that will be examined later. It is somewhat bizarre, however, given that the Ampsivarii attempted to fight the Romans for the land, but did not fight the Chauci who

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<sup>1</sup> David, Noy, *Foreigners at Rome: Citizens and Strangers* (London: Duckworth, 2000), 87.

<sup>2</sup> Tacitus, *Annals*, translated by M. Hutton, Clifford H. Moore, and John Jackson, The Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1980), 13.54

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 13.55 *ff.*

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 13.55.

had originally evicted them. This decision must have been made for some unknown reasons possibly due to desperation or some other reason. The Frisian's desire to seek out Roman land, although not explicitly stated, can be easily deduced from the fact that they chose to settle where the land did not requiring clearing before engaging in agriculture. This coupled with Rome's reputation no doubt explains the Frisian refugee's motives. These people's motivations were simply land hunger and the area that just happened to be cleared was appealing to them. To the Romans, this act must have carried with it a great deal of symbolism, as the *agri vacui* were projections of Roman power into the barbarian territories.<sup>6</sup> By moving into these spaces the Ampsivarii and Frisians threatened Roman interests, thus provoking a harsh reprisal.

It is a little more difficult to understand why the Romans chose not allow them the right to settle on the empty land (*agri vacui*) outside of just sheer pride. The *agri decumates* themselves served as a cleared area that was used by the Roman legions (both during active service and for land grants upon retirement) as look-out space near borders. In addition to the obvious loss of this land that would be produced by allowing a barbarian group to settle on this land, the potentially dangerous effects of permitting a hostile barbarian group to settle along a border must be considered. The Ampsivarii certainly attempted to persuade the Romans to the advantages of allowing the right to settle by claiming that Rome would be better served by having an ally on its border than by having pastureland.<sup>7</sup> The right to settle on or within Roman territory (*receptio*) was a major tool employed during the Empire to control the barbarian populations. *Receptio*

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<sup>6</sup> David Potter, "Empty Areas and Roman Frontier Policy," *The American Journal of Philology* 113, no. 2 (Summer, 1992): 274.

<sup>7</sup> Tac. *Ann.* 13.55.

is described as the “practice of allowing an outside group to settle within the empire.”<sup>8</sup>

Although this is not the exact word that Tacitus uses to describe the supplications of the Frisians and Ampsivarii, their actions do indeed fit the definition. The potential gains of allowing supplicant refugees to settle on Roman territory were great. The Empire could expect to gain increased taxes, increases in cultivated land (thus greater food production capacity), and perhaps most importantly (particularly in Late Antiquity) a larger recruiting base for the army among others. Thus, when *receptio* is viewed as a tool of control, Nero’s decision to deny it to the Ampsivarii and the Frisians demonstrated to the barbarian peoples that Rome did not need the barbarians.

Furthermore, it shows that Rome clearly had the power to wipe out those that defied her will. This notion is supported by Tacitus, who recorded a statement that was made by the commander in the area, Dubius Avitus. Dubius Avitus is recorded to have remarked to the Ampsivarii spokesman, Boiocalus, that, “people must submit to the rule of their betters; that the gods to whom they [Ampsivarii] appealed had willed that the decision as to what should be given or taken..., was to rest with the Romans.”<sup>9</sup> This in itself is a powerful statement that reveals contemporary Roman attitudes of superiority towards refugees, and barbarians in general. It also reinforces the idea of the use of *receptio* as a tool of control because the gods granted Rome the power to decide the fate of others. Thus, this notion of control is elevated to even a religious level by these comments.

Due to the relative lack of information that Tacitus provides, it is rather difficult to determine clearly if Nero (and the Romans in general) were fully aware of the benefits of allowing these refugees to settle at this time. However, this is certainly not

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<sup>8</sup> Derek William, *The Reach of Rome: A History of the Roman Imperial Frontier 1<sup>st</sup>-5<sup>th</sup> Centuries AD* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1996), 172-3.

<sup>9</sup> Tac. *Ann.* 13.56.

the case in circumstances surrounding some of the other minor instances that Tacitus provides in the *Germania*. For instance, he notes the Agrippinenses who were allowed to settle along the Rhine to “[serve as] a guard against invaders.”<sup>10</sup> Returning back to the “empty land” cleared by Roman legions along the borders, Tacitus lists several tribes that through “daring” and “indigence, seized upon this district of uncertain property [*agri decumates*].”<sup>11</sup> There tends to be a general unwillingness to exploit these refugee groups for agricultural benefit during the early Empire.<sup>12</sup> More importantly, the sole point of allowing these peoples to settle, as maintained by Tacitus, is “for military use alone, they are reserved, like a magazine of arms, for the purposes of war.”<sup>13</sup> This statement definitively proves that the Romans were aware of at least the military value of taking in refugees. By granting them *receptio*, the Romans were able to catch these groups of refugees in a weak position and force them into submission. While at the same time they were building not only buffer zones from greater enemies—thus saving Roman resources by hiring Rome’s fighting out to barbarians—but also expanding the size of the recruitable population in a process that helped to stabilize and at the same time Romanize the frontiers.

Similar processes to those mentioned in the case of the Ampsivarii again appear surrounding the issues that precipitated the Marcomannic war. The Romans had long been accepting Marcomanni refugees such as their exiled king Maroboduus, who was given refuge by Tiberius, and the Quadan king Vannius who “was granted the refuge within the empire; he and his followers were allowed to settle in N[orthern]. Pannonia

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<sup>10</sup> Tac. *Germ.* 28.158.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 29.159-165.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 14.26; This, as C. R. Whittaker points out, is despite the fact that the legions were “never able to provide all the necessary food for the soldiers stationed there.”

<sup>13</sup> Tac. *Germ.* 29.159.

where they could provide Rome with a useful diplomatic weapon in any future negotiations with the Quadi.”<sup>14</sup> However, this was nothing when compared to the events prior to the war when the Marcomanni and their allied tribes (Quadi, Iazyges, Sarmatians, etc.) sought *receptio* among the Romans. They were denied that request and as a result, waged war on Rome for fourteen years. It is generally presumed that the Marcomanni federation had been pushed off of its land by Goths and other peoples new to Europe.<sup>15</sup> This is a process that was also seen in the Ampsivarii who were pushed from their lands by the Chauci, and is one that would appear many more times over the proceeding centuries.

The final peace treaty between the Romans and the Quadi would grant the Quadi the right to settle in Roman territory in “the hope that they might be detached from the Marcomanni.” but did not grant this right to the Marcomanni.<sup>16</sup> Rome did, however, restore one-half of the “neutral zone” that was along the Danubian frontier.<sup>17</sup> This neutral zone was presumably of similar function as the *agri vacui* of Tacitus, in that they served as projections of the power of the empire as well as a clearing for scouting/defensive purposes along the borders, which Tacitus tells us attracted many Gauls to “cultivate” the land.<sup>18</sup> Although, the Romans exacted a large one-time tribute from the Quadi and Marcomanni, demanding them to partially disarm while simultaneously placing other limitations on them.<sup>19</sup> The fact that the *agri vacui* were only partially restored shows that Rome was willing to make some concessions, but was

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<sup>14</sup> Lynn F. Pitts, “Relations between Rome and the German ‘Kings’ on the Middle Danube in the First to Fourth Centuries A.D.,” *The Journal of Roman Studies* 79 (1989): 47-8.

<sup>15</sup> William, 171-2, 175; C. R. Whittaker, *Frontiers of the Roman Empire: A Social and Economic Study*, (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1994), 171.

<sup>16</sup> Dio Cassius, vol. 7, translated by Earnest Cary, The Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1955), 72.11.

<sup>17</sup> Dio Cass. 72.15.

<sup>18</sup> Whittaker, 46, 74, 90, 167-73 *passim*.; Tac. *Germ.* 29.

<sup>19</sup> Dio Cass. 72.18-19.

certainly not going to allow undesirable elements to settle in land that it considered a projection of its territory.

The Iazyges, another federate tribe, did not fare as well because they were forced to settle twice as far as had the Quadi and Marcomanni.<sup>20</sup> Cassius Dio informs us that “the emperor had wished to exterminate them [Iazyges] utterly....[because] they were still strong at this time and had done the Romans great harm.”<sup>21</sup> This notable degree of Roman reluctance to grant the Iazyges *receptio* illustrates quite clearly that the emperors certainly had a grasp on the dangers of allowing a dispossessed, but still militarily strong, group to settle near or in Rome. Furthermore, the fact that they were required, and able to promptly furnish “eight thousand cavalry,”<sup>22</sup> caused further concern among the Romans despite the fact that they were essentially benefiting from this new influx of recruits. Ultimately, however, they are granted the right to settle near the Danube, though, in such a way that they were surrounded on three sides by Roman territory.<sup>23</sup> Another latecomer to the fighting, the Astingi, are also introduced to us by Dio in his account of the Marcomanni wars. He recounts how they came with “their entire households, hoping to secure both money and land in return for their alliance.”<sup>24</sup> Thus it was not only the nearby refugees that sought Roman land, but also tribes from further out that wished to settle on Roman lands. The treaties are interesting because they demonstrate how the neighboring barbarians had to make treaties with Rome even though they wished to settle beyond the borders of Rome or on just the fringes of territory not technically even a part of Rome. The level of control exerted over these

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 72.16.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Williams, 64.

<sup>24</sup> Dio Cass. 72.12



tribes is interesting especially when it is juxtaposed with the fact that Roman forces had suffered heavy defeats early on in the war.

Aside from just simple *receptio* and land rights found in the treaties, the economic constraints that were applied to the defeated barbarians are also of marked significance. These economic constraints principally took the form of barring the Quadi and other defeated tribes from attending Roman markets.<sup>25</sup> According to Dio, in order to prevent the Marcomanni or Iazyges from masquerading as a Quadi, all parties were barred from attending Roman markets.<sup>26</sup> Scholar Lynn Pitts maintains that these restrictions show that Romans and barbarians must have been trading prior to their implementation.<sup>27</sup> In addition, she notes that they were most likely only temporary, as archaeological evidence proves that there was still robust trade activity well into the third century.<sup>28</sup> Thus: “economic aspects were almost certainly as important as the military.”<sup>29</sup> Following this reasoning, the Romans must have certainly understood the economic repercussions of *receptio*. The ability to enforce such a ban must also be taken into consideration as well, but there was probably some effective degree of control in this area for at least a short while. Although limiting trade was a common Roman policy along the northern frontiers, it does not seem to have been maintained for long in this case.<sup>30</sup> The issue of trade rights as found in the treaties regarding the settling of refugees continues to appear throughout the sources as a major point of contention between the Romans and refugees themselves. Lastly, referring back to the other levies that the Quadi and Marcomanni were subjected to upon their peace deal, the

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 72.11.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Pitts, 51.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid. 54.

<sup>30</sup> Potter, 271.

Romans were certainly aware that they could have collected not only military levies from these refugees, but also could have extracted tribute and taxes.

Not only did Rome seek to control these refugees economically, but they also had a heavy hand in their politics as well. For instance, the accession of any new Marcomannic or Quadan leader required prior Roman approval; general bans on assemblies are also found in the classical texts.<sup>31</sup> This in itself is not an unheard of practice during the Empire, but it just further reinforces how much these refugee populations gave up in order to settle on Roman lands. We also see the Marcomanni returned to the refugee position again in the fourth century when their queen Fritigil sought Roman protection for her people through Ambrose.<sup>32</sup> They were of course required to convert to Christianity before receiving any help from the Romans, but again, control of over barbarians through the usage of *receptio* now extended into the realm of Christianity. By this time there was certainly a defined policy of controlling incoming refugees by whatever means possible in an attempt to keep them subdued. Controlling them through political meddling and conversion was just one of the many tactics that the emperor and local governors employed.

The level of control that the Romans were thus far able to achieve over refugee populations appears to have deteriorated rather rapidly in a matter of a century or so.<sup>33</sup> Perhaps the most famous and most well documented instance of refugees described in the classical sources is Ammianus Marcellinus' account of the Goths that fled across the Danube in the fourth century. The arrival of large numbers of starving Gothic refugees

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid. 51.

<sup>32</sup> Whittaker, 181-2.

<sup>33</sup> Roman power was always directly correlated with military power. The Gothic invasions do not necessarily signal a military collapse of Rome, but have been described by some authors as merely a historical fluke.

and the wretched treatment they received at the hands of the local Roman authorities sparked not only widespread Gothic pillaging, but also the Gothic Wars. The reason for the Gothic crossing seems to have been twofold. The first reason—in almost the exact same manner as found among the Ampsivarii and Frisians and the Marcomanni and Quadi—was the pressure that was placed on the Gothic population by the arrival of the Huns in Gothic territory. Furthermore, the way the authors tend to present the pressures the Huns exerted on the Goths makes it seem like a very rapid process; however, as Peter Heather maintains, “[the] Huns did not arrive *en masse*” but “[r]ather, a slow build-up of pressure precipitated a crisis among certain Goths, whose retreat westwards provoked a similar response among many of their neighbours,” in essence, a “domino effect.”<sup>34</sup> As a result, Shaw dubs this line of reasoning the “domino theory of causation,” particularly in reference to Late Antiquity.<sup>35</sup> This theory contrasts markedly with Wolfram who remarks how the Goths could not live in a land in which an enemy “could destroy at will and without advance warning.”<sup>36</sup> Thus, based upon this statement and others, the Huns struck with rapidity not consistent with the domino theory of causation. This certainly does help to explain the tone of crisis found in the classical sources. In addition, the former theory ignores too much or takes too liberal an interpretation of the language found in the classical texts. The pressure on the Goths due to the arrival of the Huns precipitated a food shortage—in one author’s words, the

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<sup>34</sup> Peter Heather, “The Huns and the End of the Roman Empire in Western Europe,” *English Historical Review* 110, no. 435 (Feb. 1995): 10.

<sup>35</sup> Brent D. Shaw, “War and Violence,” in *Late Antiquity: A Guide to the Postclassical World*, ed. G. W. Bowersock, Peter Brown, and Oleg Grabar (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1990), 152.

<sup>36</sup> Herwig Wolfram, *The Roman Empire and Its Germanic Peoples*, trans. Thomas Dunlap (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 81.

“Gothic food supply collapsed”—among the Goths, thus creating a wave of refugees.<sup>37</sup>

The Gothic envoys did, however, seek imperial permission to cross the Danube before doing so.<sup>38</sup> This action could be construed to mean that they had respect for Rome, but it is more likely that they sought to avoid the appearance of an invading force as it certainly would have appeared to Roman officials had they just crossed the Danube without gaining prior imperial permission. Jordanes, in fact, tells us that the Goths “preferred to ask for lands from the Roman Empire, rather than invade the lands of others with danger to themselves.”<sup>39</sup> Most likely, the Goths chose to go to Rome for the same reasons that those before them had done—they saw Rome as a land of wealth and prosperity.

A food crisis, as mentioned above, was one of the leading causes behind the Gothic refugee crisis. As demonstrated in earlier examples, a general lack of food (“subsistence crises falling short of famine”) was nothing new to Rome’s border lands—and the entire ancient world for that matter.<sup>40</sup> In the case of the Gothic refugee crisis, the motivations are not entirely different with the exception of a few things. Ammianus clearly tells us why the Gothic refugees turned to Rome in time of need: “Thrace offered them a convenient refuge, for two reasons: both because it has a very fertile soil, and because it is separated...from the fields that were already exposed to the thunderbolts of...war.”<sup>41</sup> This statement is further supported by Garnsey who notes that

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Ammianus Marcellinus, vol. 1-3, translated by John C. Rolfe, The Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982), 31.1, 4-5.

<sup>39</sup> Jordanes, *The Origin and Deeds of the Goths*, transcribed from *Gothic History of Jordanes in English Version*, translated by Charles Christopher Mierow (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1915) (available online, <http://www.ucalgary.ca/~vandersp/Courses/texts/texts.html>), 50.264.

<sup>40</sup> Garnsey, Peter. *Famine and Food Supply in the Graeco-Roman World: Responses to Risk and Crisis*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988.

<sup>41</sup> Amm. Marc. 31.3.8.

“war by itself may produce food crisis.”<sup>42</sup> The Goths’ need for “fertile soil” is mentioned frequently by Ammianus.<sup>43</sup> C. R. Whittaker also claims that in addition to the destruction due to the conflict that caused famine, a general population boom along the Danubian frontier exasperated the situation by overtaxing already scarce resources.<sup>44</sup> Natural and geological disasters are also suspected to have played a role in this process. One theory maintains that the tribes along the Northern Rhine were pushed inland due to the “Dunkirk 2 transgression.”<sup>45</sup> This theory maintains that changing sea levels near modern Belgium and the Netherlands caused rapid loss of land to the sea which forced the native tribes southward creating a refugee situation further south. Events such as these, particularly famines, provided opportunities for Rome to “capitalize on hunger and disease by using economic warfare to control rebellious ‘barbarians.’”<sup>46</sup> Rome certainly did capitalize on these events, but in the instance of the Goths, it backfired on her.

The arrival of numerous Gothic refugees along the banks of the Danube in 376 would mark the start of the Gothic War (376-382). The Roman loss of control over the Goths later led to pillaging and death for all parties involved and culminated in the defeat of Roman forces at Adrianople. Unlike some of the above instances, Ammianus clearly recounts the Roman reasons for allowing the Goths to cross the Danube. He tells us that the Gothic envoys had promised to furnish Rome with auxiliaries for the army, so much so that “the affair caused more joy than fear” as the emperor was to be brought “so many young recruits from the ends of the earth...; also that instead of the

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<sup>42</sup> Garnsey, 20.

<sup>43</sup> John Matthews, *The Roman Empire of Ammianus*, (Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins Press, 1989), 321.

<sup>44</sup> Whittaker, 220-21.

<sup>45</sup> Williams, 221-22.

<sup>46</sup> Whittaker, 222.

levy of soldiers contributed annually by each province, there would accrue to the treasuries a vast amount of gold.”<sup>47</sup> Particularly in this case, the Romans were not simply just granting *receptio*, they were expecting complete submission.<sup>48</sup> This meant that the Goths were expected to disarm completely, which they did not.<sup>49</sup> It has already been established previously here that the Romans were well aware of how refugees could serve as rich sources of recruits in addition to the fact that by the end of the fourth century, large components of the army were foreign recruits.<sup>50</sup> This was also not the first time the Goths were drawn into the Roman army. According to Jordanes, Constantine was furnished with forty-thousand Goths for which the Goths were granted the right to settle in Pannonia.<sup>51</sup> This certainly indicates also that the Romans were confident that they could control such a population and that also the Goths were willing to comply with Roman demands. However, something went terribly wrong and the Romans were bested by the Goths. This was presumably caused by a breakdown of Roman “bureaucracy” due to the sheer numbers that crossed the Danube.<sup>52</sup> The situation was exacerbated by the fact that the main body of the Roman army was in the East fighting Persia. The Emperor Julian ignored warnings from his advisors to attack the Goths; instead, he sought the supposed greater glory that came from taking on Rome’s old enemy.<sup>53</sup> Not all Romans were comfortable with granting *receptio* to such large numbers of barbarian refugees either. The sources indicate several instances of

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<sup>47</sup> Amm. Marc. 31.4

<sup>48</sup> Wolfram, 81.

<sup>49</sup> Paulus Orosius, *The Seven Books of History Against the Pagans*, translated by Roy J. Deferrari, *The Fathers of the Church* (Washington: The Catholic University of America Press, 1964), 7.33, p. 339.

<sup>50</sup> Shaw, 135.

<sup>51</sup> Jordanes 22.115.

<sup>52</sup> Amm. Marc. 31.6; Eunap. 65, p. 63.

<sup>53</sup> Fergus Millar, “Emperors, Frontiers and Foreign Relations, 31 B.C. to A.D. 378,” *Britannia* 13 (1982): 19.

cities that hoarded food and closed their gates to the starving Goths.<sup>54</sup> Due to the large numbers of Goths, the Romans lost control of the situation in a humiliating blow to Roman pride. This event sparked the Gothic Wars that would see Rome humiliated further at the battle of Adrianople.

The language the classical authors employ to describe the plight of the Goths is important to examine especially because it helps to set this event apart from ordinary invasions for plunder. Sympathetic language abounds in the accounts, such as the “cries and lamentations, begging for pity asking to be allowed to cross” or how the envoys “with humble entreaty begged to be received [*suscepi se humili prece poscebant*]” and were sold dog meat by greedy Roman generals.<sup>55</sup> We find additional descriptions stating that “everything that could serve as food...had been used up, [and] that the barbarians [were] driven alike by ferocity and hunger” and “some who, because of the great crowd, struggled against the force of the waves and tried to swim were drowned.”<sup>56</sup> Some authors have construed the dog meat incident, in particular, to mean that the Romans had specific plans to starve the Goths into submission.<sup>57</sup> This argument does fit well with the Roman aim to control incoming refugee populations, but admittedly not outside the range of Roman cruelty.<sup>58</sup> Succinctly put, this disaster was caused by “[o]fficial incompetence, greed and a lack of planning” which led to the “brutal mistreatment of the starving refugees.”<sup>59</sup> Overall, most of the authors tend to

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<sup>54</sup> Amm. Marc. 31.5.5, 6.5

<sup>55</sup> Eunapius, in *The Fragmentary Classicising Historians of the Later Roman Empire: Eunapius, Olympiodorus, Priscus, and Malchus*, vol. 2 translated by R. C. Blockley (Liverpool: Francis Cairns, 1983), 42, p. 61; Amm. Marc. 31.4.1, 11.

<sup>56</sup> Amm. Marc. 31.8.3, 4.5.

<sup>57</sup> Matthews, 328.

<sup>58</sup> It is difficult to say precisely whether or not Roman military hierarchy had a thought process as sophisticated as this kind of action must require.

<sup>59</sup> Whittaker, 188.

take a sympathetic tone towards the Goths, at least until they began to pillage Roman territory and the tone quite often becomes rather scathing.

Food—or a lack thereof—was not the only reason for the Goths to seek refuge within Rome. Orosius tells us that just prior to the crossing of the Danube, many Goths had chosen to flee to Rome due to the persecutions that were carried out under king Athanaric among the various Gothic tribes.<sup>60</sup> These persecutions had, in fact, begun years before Athanaric's rise to power.<sup>61</sup> In religion, too, the Romans played a significant role in Gothic affairs, and religion served as one more tool to control the barbarian populations. The settlement of the religious Gothic refugees was part of "Constantine's determined effort to hold political control beyond the provincial boundaries."<sup>62</sup> In this instance, Rome used the refugees as the means to foment internal unrest among the Goths. In addition to religious zeal, the emperors more than likely sought to employ religious infighting to weaken the refugees by dividing them. This example illustrates at least to some degree the power that religion could have on control refugees as well as the contemporary understanding of the dangers of allowing these refugees to remain united and strong.

The Goths were not the only ones who were forced to resettle due to outside population pressures and displacement. As early as the mid-third century, the loss of Dacia forced a massive resettling of Roman civilians across the Danube.<sup>63</sup> This action would set the new provincial border at the Danube and thus helped contribute to the uncontrolled refugee wave. During the arrival of the Goths, Eunapius tells us that the "areas which they [Goths] overran were depopulated" and that the "countryside was for

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<sup>60</sup> Oros. 7.31, p. 337.

<sup>61</sup> Wolfram, 78-79.

<sup>62</sup> Whittaker, 186.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid. 205; Williams, 214.



the most part devastated and remains uninhabited and untravelled.”<sup>64</sup> Although displaced populations are the natural consequence of war (particularly so in the Roman East), the loss of this land to the Goths—and by consequence, the loss of control of presumed inferior—must have had a grave effect on the Roman psyche.<sup>65</sup> This becomes even more significant when contrasted with Roman ideology of essentially a mandate that called for constant expansion of Roman borders.<sup>66</sup> But this is not to say that this event destroyed Rome; instead, it was a surprise defeat that had greater psychological effects than actual consequences, especially on Ammianus who had clear motivations for trying to (over)emphasize this gravity of the event. There was certainly no perception among the Goths, or any other barbarian groups that Rome was somehow on the verge of collapse.<sup>67</sup> The reasons for the refugees to seek asylum in Rome was for pure economics and survival.

The loss of control over refugees witnessed here would take its final shape in the form of the first federate (*foederati*), and thus independent group, in the Empire.<sup>68</sup> This arrangement was worked out in the treaty of 382 between the Romans and the Goths. The Goths were given autonomy through federate status but were still kept within Roman control. In addition to this provision, exemptions from issues that were raised repeatedly in earlier treaties appear here as well. For instance, the Goths were granted land—which they had to cultivate themselves—which was tax exempted.<sup>69</sup> This must have been a big blow to swallow for Rome as she had given up one of the most

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<sup>64</sup> Eunap. 46, p. 63.

<sup>65</sup> Wolfram, p. 62, writes that even though territory was abandoned to non-states (i.e. barbarians) and they were able to occupy it (*possessio*) they were never able to legally exercise full dominion (*dominium*) over it according to Roman laws.

<sup>66</sup> Whittaker, 194.

<sup>67</sup> Heather, 16.

<sup>68</sup> Whittaker, 134. Wolfram, p. 88-101 *passim.*, discusses what he describes as roving bands within Roman borders after 380.

<sup>69</sup> Wolfram, 88-89.

important means of controlling and simultaneously profiting from refugees. However, Rome did manage to benefit from another provision. The Goths were required to support the Romans militarily by furnishing large numbers of troops.<sup>70</sup> Thus, although the Romans were not able to profit economically from the settling of the Goths, they were certainly able to use them militarily. This also had the added effect of weakening the military might of the Goths by siphoning off Gothic military reserves and by feeding the ever present need to fight a war. Thus, although Rome was forced to make concessions to the Goths, it still managed to profit in some way from the deal while concurrently dampening the possibility of future rebellion.

The Goths would continue to move across Europe for years to come, creating waves of Roman refugees who headed towards the Capital. The accounts of the Illyrian Roman refugees who flooded into Italy because of the Goths are well attested.<sup>71</sup> In this we can observe a further illustration that the arrival of the Huns in Europe created a wave of population pushes such that the Goths were first affected and forced to flee westward. They in turn pushed on the Romans who were then forced to flee further into the empire. These consequent waves of dispossessed peoples may have only been a temporary event as some scholars have noted that there was a continuity of Roman occupation in the Lower Danube in addition to the fact that not a single Thracian city fell during this time.<sup>72</sup> This is most likely due to the fact that the Goths lacked any sophisticated form of siege weaponry, let alone the tactics necessary to carry out a successful assault as indicated by Ammianus.<sup>73</sup> It is also very likely that the number of Roman dispossessed would have been greater had there not been fortified cities that the

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<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

<sup>71</sup> Wolfram, 126.

<sup>72</sup> Whittaker, 173.

<sup>73</sup> Amm. Marc. 31.5.4-8.

rural peasantry could flee in times of invasion. Thus, although we see consequent population pushes, by the time they reached Rome, the established Roman infrastructure helped to soften the blow at least somewhat.

The advancement of the Huns from the steppe undoubtedly had a significant impact upon Europe since they brought with them waves of refugees. The Hunnic refugees that are found in the classical sources were slightly different from some of the earlier examples in that these Huns were fleeing their own people. Priscus' account of the peace negotiations between the Romans and the Huns tells us that one of the major demands of the Huns was the return of Hunnic and allied refugees. In general, as Wolfram notes, "[n]egotiations between Romans and Huns dealt mostly with demands of the Hunnic leaders that barbarian deserters be handed over."<sup>74</sup> The Thracian Goth Priscus tells us that Hunnic ambassadors were "threatening to break the present peace if they [Romans] did not hand over all who had fled to them."<sup>75</sup> The process of handing over the refugees deprived Rome, particularly the Western Empire, of large numbers of mercenaries.<sup>76</sup> This subsequently weakened the military might of the army which was notorious for its inability to recruit enough men to keep its ranks full. The refugees in the instance of the Huns were composed mostly of deserters and rival claimants of Hunnic leadership as well as deposed rulers of tribes allied with the Huns. For example, we see two men of royal blood who were returned to the Huns only to be impaled upon extradition.<sup>77</sup> Death was the fate that awaited all of those who had sought refuge with the Romans. This fact became so well known that those refugees refused to go back,

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<sup>74</sup> Ibid., 142.

<sup>75</sup> Priscus, in *The Fragmentary Classicising Historians of the Later Roman Empire: Eunapius, Olympiodorus, Priscus, and Malchus*, vol. 2 translated by R. C. Blockley (Liverpool: Francis Cairns, 1983), 2, p. 225.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid., 136.

<sup>77</sup> Priscus, 2, p. 227.

instead preferring death by Roman hands until the Romans just stopped taking Hunnic refugees to avoid having to return them to the Huns.<sup>78</sup>

The humiliating conditions of the peace treaties the Romans signed starkly illustrate just how much control over the barbarian populations the Romans had lost. We are told that “overwhelming fear...gripped their [Roman] commanders” during the negotiations with the Huns and that “they were compelled to accept gladly every injunction...in their eagerness for peace.”<sup>79</sup> In addition to the return of the refugees, Rome was further damaged by being forced to pay ransom for the return of captured Roman soldiers. Although Rome was weakened militarily, it still seems to have been able to retain traditional economic means of control. In addition to the above conditions of peace (of which there were only three), the Huns made trade a significant point of issue. The Huns demanded from the Romans the right to attend “safe markets with equal rights for Romans and Huns.”<sup>80</sup> This demand, coupled with the demand for ransom in gold, shows just how dependent the Huns were on Roman trade. The Huns needed to secure trade with Rome in order to spend their newfound wealth, but the Romans most certainly did not share in the necessity to trade with the Huns. In a separate treaty several years later, we find a similar example of the Emperor Leo who refused to grant the Hunnic embassy the right to Roman trade.<sup>81</sup> The level of control and the effectiveness of that control that Rome had over trade in the former instance is somewhat uncertain but it still demonstrates that Rome used the power of her markets to control barbarians. Whether or not the emperors were conscious of this fact is a little less certain but we do see in the latter instance that the Emperor Leo’s decision was

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<sup>78</sup> Priscus, 3.3, p. 239; Wolfram, 129.

<sup>79</sup> Priscus, 3.3, p. 237.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid.

<sup>81</sup> Priscus, 46, p. 353.

based upon the damage that the Huns had inflicted upon his territory. Also illustrated in these two examples is the general fact that when Rome was stronger, it was better able to exert its will on others. But even when it was weak militarily, it could still exert a significant amount of influence by restricting trade with barbarians.

Although the issue of Hunnic refugees had slightly different circumstances than does some of the earlier instances, it still does much to demonstrate the basic policies which Rome employed in its policy of control over barbarian groups. The draw that the Empire had for the Huns was most certainly similar if not exactly the same for all other refugees that came to Rome. The Empire was a symbol of wealth and military might and as such it served as protection for those who were fleeing powerful enemies. The Huns, like those before them as well, would eventually be turned into refugees when the remnants of Atilla's Huns were forced to seek asylum with the Eastern Emperor after their defeat in the Hunnic civil wars.<sup>82</sup> The threat that refugee groups brought by this time to Roman interests has lead one scholar to quip that the *limes* (Roman borders) had to be adapted to face "a new kind of danger: from migrating families, the land-hungry, home-seekers and refugees."<sup>83</sup> Thus, while circumstances did change, motivations tended to remain the same.

Moving towards the Eastern end of the Empire we can see different circumstances but with many similarities. Although, from previous examples, it appears that refugee activity was limited to the northern border, but as Whittaker notes: "[o]n this frontier [the Northern frontier] we have more recorded cases than on any other of...*receptio* into Roman territory."<sup>84</sup> The border with Persia too had a long

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<sup>82</sup> Heather, 29.

<sup>83</sup> Williams, 258.

<sup>84</sup> Whittaker, 220.

history of refugee activity. So long in fact that it will only be covered briefly here due to space constraints; instead, only certain major issues that run throughout the previous examples will be touched upon here. The main difference between the two frontiers besides just the difference in historical length was the fact that most of these refugees were moved forcefully after the fall of a city. Assuming that loyalties to either empire in this volatile region were not excessively mercurial, it is simply good policy to remove a hostile population from an area that has just been annexed by a rival empire. As S.N.C. Lieu argues, the Persians had a very sophisticated policy of forcefully deporting Romans to Persian territory to build or rebuild Persian cities in the image of a culture that they admired.<sup>85</sup> Persian motives were thus primarily economic, with some room to make use of these peoples as propaganda devices demonstrating how Persia's power had defeated Rome. This stands in rather stark contrast to the Romans who, for the most part, lacked any sophisticated plan for what to do with Persian refugees and captives other than have them serve as propaganda and cheap labor.<sup>86</sup> Thus it was not only the Romans who were aware of the economic benefit that could be attained by accepting refugees (or forcefully taking them) into their territory. What is of major significance here is that we see a marked contrast to Roman policy along the northern border in Europe. In that region we have observed that there was some awareness—whether conscious or otherwise—of the economic benefit that could be attained by accepting refugees. The policy in that area also predated the instances that are found along the Romano-Persian border. It seems to be quite a mystery as to why economic

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<sup>85</sup> Samuel N. C. Lieu, "Captives, Refugees, and Exiles: A Study of Cross-Frontier Civilian Movements and Contacts between Rome and Persia from Valerian to Jovian," in *The Defence of the Roman and Byzantine East: Proceedings of a colloquium held at the University of Sheffield in April 1986*, ed. Philip Freeman and David Kennedy (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), 478, 500.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, 487.

exploitation of refugees was not continued in the East. The fact that the Persians lacked a reputation as fierce fighters in comparison to their northern neighbors explains why the Persians were not enlisted in the legions, as well as the fact that by this time the Romans had already had large numbers of European fighters in the region.<sup>87</sup> But it still does not help to explain why the Romans did not exploit these peoples economically unless one assumes that they were uninterested in those gains as in the instances of the Ampsivarii, Marcomanni, Quadi, etc. However, these earlier instances are just instances, and not carried out systematically and consistently, thus do not necessarily constitute a coherent policy. It must be kept in mind as well that the ultimate power to decide policy resided “at the centre” with the emperor, and, as such, his decisions were limited by what information he was provided—the quality of which could vary drastically.<sup>88</sup>

Religion always plays a major role in the flight of refugees. The Romano-Persian border was no exception. Persia served as a haven for Christians persecuted prior to the conversion of the Emperor Constantine.<sup>89</sup> The Persians as well were no doubt more than willing to accept them as it coincided well with their policy of taking in Romans in order to advance their own culture and economy. We also see instances of religious refugees reappear during the persecutions of Yezdegird II. This time it was the Persian Christians who sought refuge among the Romans who were subsequently

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<sup>87</sup> See Ammianus Marcellinus, 19.6 *passim*.

<sup>88</sup> Millar, 21; It should be noted, however, that the European border paled in terms of sophistication and development that was characteristic of the Hellenized East, and that the use of the Persian refugees for farm labor may have only been the natural course given that the European refugees were used for essentially the same thing. There are indeed myriad reasons why the Romans were not consistent in applying the same policy to the East as they were to the North, but it can perhaps be best summed up by saying that Roman policies rarely stand up to modern ways of thinking.

<sup>89</sup> Lieu, 485.

unwilling to return them to their land of origin in the wake of Persian demands.<sup>90</sup> What the Romans actually did with these refugees, however, has not been left to posterity, and thus any further analyses are difficult to make. Due to the large porous nature of the border between Persia and Rome, flight across the border “provided one of the few escape routes for those needing asylum from the forces of law or political oppression or religious persecution.”<sup>91</sup> Wartime also was another great opportunity to cross the border, such as the case of the Roman Antoninus who went to the Persian side, according to Ammianus.<sup>92</sup> These examples are no different in terms of motivation as seen in earlier instances. In the former example we see Persians who wished to preserve their lives by fleeing to Rome whereas in the later we see an individual whose motives were more complex but who was most likely trying to improve his material status.

Based upon the numbers furnished by the classical sources, the Romans appeared to have suffered a net loss of people to the Persians.<sup>93</sup> The Persians by far had the upper hand in terms of control over the flow of refugees along this traditional border. Whether or not either side had a clear grasp of the benefits of accepting refugees—as opposed to forcibly taking peoples—into their territory is much more difficult to ascertain. The Romans were certainly aware of the benefits of granting refuge to barbarians along its northern border, but they appear to have forgotten that in the East. On the other hand, the Persians had a clear policy of taking Romans in order to enrich their own economy. This is in addition to what Lieu argues was an idolization of Roman culture and Romanness, the net effect of which was the gradual Romanization

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<sup>90</sup> Socrates Scholasticus, *The Ecclesiastical History*, translated by A. C. Zenos, in *The Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (Grand Rapids, MI: WM. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1957), 7.18.

<sup>91</sup> Lieu, 494.

<sup>92</sup> Amm. Marc. 18.5.

<sup>93</sup> Lieu, 500.



(Hellenization) of Persian elite culture.<sup>94</sup> It is also important to note briefly that, as according to Lieu, these captured people and refugees tended to live very comfortable lives after being settled in Persia.<sup>95</sup> Unlike the suffering that Ammianus describes in the instance of the Goths, these peoples may have not suffered nearly as much as their northern counterparts. Lieu is careful to point out throughout his article that the journey to the final destination and the actual capture, etc., was quite often a highly traumatic experience.

It is perhaps too simple to just speak of these refugee movements as singular events with a simple end. However, what happens to these groups after they acquire safety in Rome (or are pushed back into the frontiers) is also important in illustrating how strong Roman influence could be. In the first two instances cited at the beginning of this paper, both groups of refugees were prohibited from trading with Rome and the former group was even prohibited from settling along Roman borders. These facts themselves illustrate the control that could be exercised among the refugees. What is important in these instances is that “of course, not all such barbarians [refugees] were settled precisely on the frontier,...many were exploited...in the interior as *laeti*.”<sup>96</sup> This makes a fair bit of sense as well when one considers the potentially dangerous environment that would be created by allowing a hostile group of barbarians to settle wholly intact along sparsely defended borders. Thus by forcing or promoting settlement inland, so to speak, Rome was able to diffuse this potentially catastrophic condition as well as serve labor requirements deeper within the Empire. This can be contrasted with the *foederati* status that was given to the Goths which essentially allowed them

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<sup>94</sup> Ibid., 478-500 *passim*.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid., 481.

<sup>96</sup> Whittaker, 232; *laeti* is a term that denotes group(s) of barbarians permitted to settle inside the empire upon the condition that they provide recruits for the Roman military.

autonomy within the borders of the Empire. Not only were they not divided up, but they were also allowed to essentially roam freely which helps to explain the disastrous events (such as the sack of Rome) further on in Late Antiquity.

Perhaps most powerful among all of the Roman control mechanisms is cultural—i.e. Romanization. By trading with these barbarians, Rome was able to begin the process of accustomizing these groups by introducing them to Roman goods, culture, and ways of life. The wholesale intake of refugees only served to catalyze this process. Whittaker summarizes this entire process elegantly when he notes: “The truly remarkable fact about these huge, peaceful shifts of population is how difficult it is to see any real sign of them in the archaeological remains. They disappear ‘like ghosts’ into the countryside....[,] they become rural provincials.”<sup>97</sup> Perhaps this was the ultimate goal of the barbarians of the Western Empire. As stated throughout, there was a clear sense among the barbarian groups of an admiration for Rome and thus it is no stretch to claim that there existed a cognitive desire to become Romanized, if not Roman. In addition, in order for Romanization to be effective at all, these barbarian populations had to be willing to at least some degree to be Romanized. As Whittaker noted, Romanization could cause less culturally advanced groups such as the Quadi, Ampsivarii, etc. to essentially stop existing. This was perhaps Rome’s most power tool of control and one which they had the least direct control over as it could neither truly be consciously wielded nor could it be immediately effective when the crises demanded.

The power of Romanization is further emphasized when compared to the situation with Roman refugees in Persia. A poignant example of this was the wholesale transplant and recreation of Antioch in Persia by the Persian King Chosroes. The entire

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<sup>97</sup> Ibid.

city was composed of thirty-thousand Roman “captives” guarded by a few Persian who sent a message to the Emperor Tiberius II to have him liberate them.<sup>98</sup> This rather comical anecdote perhaps exaggerates the dangers of allowing hostile dispossessed populations to exist undivided—in this case, not even on the border, but deep within an empire. As noted above, this entire process helped to Romanize, to a degree, Persia. Whether or not the Persians wanted to be Romanized is a different issue. The Roman captives certainly wanted to retain their Romanness despite captivity as evidenced above. However, the East had already had a well established culture that the Western barbarians lacked. Thus any attempts at Romanization would have to overcome a long-established culture—a feat that is by no means easy, even when the population is willing.

Critics have repeatedly pointed out the flaws and advantages of *receptio*. Williams provides a lengthy, rather negative assessment of it *receptio* describing it as “fatal.”<sup>99</sup> He goes on to state that “[i]nvaders, refugees, economic opportunists, migrant workers...: the empire played host to them all...[in] a process [in which] barbarians and Romans were merging.”<sup>100</sup> This negative assessment perhaps places too much emphasis on the Gothic invasions and later events without adequate address of earlier events. Furthermore, the borders had always served as a point of contact for the absorption of barbarians.<sup>101</sup> Therefore, barbarians and refugees would still continue to seek out Rome whether *receptio* was granted or not. Williams also makes the claim that *receptio* was one of Rome’s last bargaining chips, but this ignores the fact that it as well as variations on the theme of allowing refugees to settle had been in practice for several

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<sup>98</sup> Lieu, 499.

<sup>99</sup> Williams, 280.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid., 280-281.

<sup>101</sup> Millar, 8.

centuries.<sup>102</sup> Other scholars have taken more neutral stances on the issue describing the arrival of the Gothic refugees as a “mismanaged *receptio*,” and not as a tool with which Rome would scourge herself with.<sup>103</sup> It is perhaps most fair to argue that *receptio* was a tool of control that was only exercised sparingly the results of which could vary drastically. In retrospect, the Roman command structure was certainly aware of some of the benefits that could be accrued by granting *receptio* to fleeing refugees. However, it by no means ever adopted a unified, consistent policy that could stand up to modern day scrutiny. It is perhaps best to simply note that decisions were made on a case by case basis, one that did not necessarily factor in experience that was gained by earlier generations.

In all of these examples we can see a clear appreciation of the economic motives of all parties involved. The treaties in particular have provided us with ample support that demonstrates clearly that Roman contemporaries understood the power of economics and trade. The refugees sought out Rome’s perceived agricultural wealth and stability while the Romans used the refugees as a new source of recruits for the legions and a boost to the tax basis. There was absolutely no humanitarian compassion in any of these cases as economic decisions served as the basis for all of these decisions. Furthermore, the results that followed each case could vary wildly, and were thus highly dependent upon the circumstances in each instance. This study has primarily focused on economic conditions and motives, but certainly issues of racial superiority and fears no doubt had some role to play as well. In addition, the wider role of Christianity in refugee affairs may in fact play a greater role than examined here. Due to the sheer

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<sup>102</sup> Williams, 237.

<sup>103</sup> J. F. Drinkwater, “The Usurpers Constantine III (407-411) and Jovinus (411-413),” *Britannia* 29 (1998): 273.

scope of this study, these important issues cannot be given full justice within the above constraints.

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