

**THROWING BALLAST OVERBOARD:
THE ATTITUDE OF THE EASTERN ROMAN EMPIRE
TOWARDS THE WEST IN THE FIFTH CENTURY AD**

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Abstract. The year 395 marked a turning point in the fortunes of the Roman Empire. The division of the imperial territory into two portions proved to be final and, in the short-term historical perspective, led to the downfall of the western part. The article suggests that this event was caused by a deliberate position taken by the ruling elites of the Eastern Roman Empire toward their western counterparts. The main reason for the downfall of the West thus lies in the fact that the eastern government refused to subsidize the western infrastructural and military needs with its money and other resources, which up to that time had been the necessary condition for the maintenance of the Roman civilization in the westernmost part of the Roman Empire—*praefectura Galliarum*. The eastern ruling class used the unique situation of the virtual absence of the Roman army and its commanders, which had withdrawn for operations in Italy, to establish the rule of a civilian government. The refusal to support the West economically led to the rise of the eastern economy, as well as to the growth in importance of eastern regions such as Syria and Egypt, which were economically the strongest. These conditions, created within the Eastern Empire after the secession of the West, in many respects resembled those of the same territories during the Hellenistic period, with the exception that now they were kept together by the efficient unifying institutions of the Roman state of Late Antiquity.

Keywords: Eastern Roman Empire, Western Roman Empire, Emperor Constantine the Great, Emperor Theodosius I, Emperor Justinian, Rome, Constantinople, Roman elites, Egypt, Syria, Gaul, Illyricum, Hellenistic World, the Church of Constantinople, the Church of Alexandria, the Church of Antioch, the Church of Rome.

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**ИЗБАВЛЯЯСЬ ОТ БАЛЛАСТА:
ОТНОШЕНИЕ ВОСТОЧНОЙ РИМСКОЙ ИМПЕРИИ
К ЗАПАДУ В 5 В. Н.Э.**

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Аннотация. В 395 году произошло поворотное событие в судьбе Римской империи. Разделение имперской территории на две части оказалось окончательным, и в короткой исторической перспективе оно привело к падению западной части. В статье выдвигается гипотеза, согласно которой последнее событие было вызвано позицией, которую правящая элита Восточной империи осознанно заняла по отношению к своим западным партнерам. Таким образом, главная причина падения Запада заключалась в том, что восточное правительство отказалось покрывать западные инфраструктурные и военные потребности деньгами и иными ресурсами Востока, что вплоть до того времени было неременным условием поддержания римской цивилизации в наиболее западной части Римской империи — префектуре Галлий (praefectura Galliarum). Правящий класс Востока воспользовался уникальной ситуацией фактического отсутствия римской армии и её командующих, которые выступили для ведения военных действий в Италии, с целью установления власти гражданского правительства. Отказ от экономической поддержки Запада привел к росту восточной экономики, а также к росту значения восточных областей, таких как Сирия и Египет, которые в экономическом отношении были наиболее сильными. Условия, сложившиеся в Восточной империи после отпадения Запада, во многих отношениях были схожими с условиями, господствовавшими на этих территориях в эллинистический период, с тем только различием, что теперь благодаря эффективным единообразным институтам римского государства поздней античности они были политически объединены.

Ключевые слова: Восточная Римская империя, Западная Римская империя, император Константин Великий, император Феодосий I, император Юстиниан, Рим, Константинополь, римские элиты, Египет, Сирия, Галлия, Илирик, эллинистический мир, Константинопольская Церковь, Александрийская Церковь, Антиохийская Церковь, Римская Церковь.

The end of the fourth century was marked by a number of important events, the full significance of which modern historians have not yet made clear. A formal mark of the new period was set by the new division of the Roman Empire between two underage sons of the eastern emperor Theodosius I (379–95).¹ The division did not by itself signify any drastic change in the fortunes of the empire, since by that time a similar event had already taken place a number of times. The exact circumstances under which this division took place were peculiar. Emperor Theodosius died in the West after successfully putting down a mutiny that previously had led to the assassination of the western emperor Valentinian II (375–92).

Theodosius died soon after his victory in Milan, but before that he provided for the succession of his sons Honorius (395–423) in the West and Arcadius (395–408) in the East. In the two respective capitals—Milan in the West and Constantinople in the East—power thus became concentrated in the hands of local authorities. While in the West the government was placed in the hands of General Stilicho, in the East it was represented by a civilian power for the first time in history in the person of a praetorian prefect, Rufinus. Thus, in the East very important factors came together: the virtual absence of the army as an immediate political factor, the peaceful and “unmilitary” character of the young emperor and, as a consequence, concentration of power in the hands of civilian dignitaries. Eastern military potential had been considerably undermined by the defeat at Adrianople in 379 and by the withdrawal of Theodosius’ troops to the West, where they suffered heavy losses during the campaign against the usurpers, and what remained of them stayed with Honorius under the command of Stilicho in the West.

For the first time in the history of the new eastern capital, Constantinople, the central elites, which by that time had reached their full development,² remained without external military control and under the rule of a young emperor who had grown up and been educated in Constantinople itself. Arcadius’s early death in 408 and the transition of power to the child emperor Theodosius II further strengthened the predominant position of the civilian government in the East. The split of the empire and the changed political circumstances, caused by the rise to power of the civilian government in the East, rapidly generated enmity between the western and the eastern territories.

Stilicho, who was still militarily powerful, experienced a great shortage of money to fund his growing military expenditures due to internal and external unrest in the Gallic provinces. In this regard, it can be argued that the eastern government simply refused to support him financially,

¹ See general surveys in Bury 1931, 106–211; Ostrogorsky 1957, 25–78; Stein 1959, 219–254; Jones 1964, 170–216; Kulakovskii 1996, 135–186.

² See Chekalova 2010, 15–80.

using the bad economic condition of the eastern part as a pretext. This refusal provoked a series of hostile actions from Stilicho aimed at seizure of Eastern Illyricum in order to put pressure on Constantinople.³ The eastern government reacted by enticing the Goth Alaric⁴ to invade the West. The actions of Alaric, clearly instigated by the East, ended up in the disastrous sack and plundering of Rome in 410,⁵ which was seen by contemporaries as an ominous sign.

This long confrontation between the East and the West was not like previous conflicts between co-ruling emperors, which had resolved without considerable changes in the existence of the respective parts of the empire. Periodical redistribution of imperial power and zones of responsibility of different emperors now gave ground to concentrated power in the hands of the local elites, who belonged to the richest and economically more solid eastern part of the Roman Empire and now for the first time found an opportunity to stop “feeding” the West.

From the very beginning of Roman rule, the eastern provinces were destined to subsidize the West. Almost simultaneous expansion of Rome eastward and westward in the first century BC brought under Roman dominion such disparate territories as Gaul and Britain in the West, and Syria and Egypt in the East. Thus the economically powerful East was “counterbalanced” by the economically depressed West. The riches of the East flew to Rome and further west in order to enhance the economy and introduce Roman civilization in wild Gallic and Germanic parts of the empire.⁶ This process was slow and difficult. Especially burdensome for the imperial budget proved to be the construction and maintenance of the formidable defense system of the western *limes* by the end of the second century AD when Roman expansion was exhausted. The Quartering of Roman soldiery along the roads and borders of vast Gallic, Germanic, Pannonian and Illyrian territories cost the imperial treasury enormous sums of money, most of which were levied in the East. As a result, roughly three quarters of the state’s revenue was levied in the East, while three quarters

³ The actions of Stilicho were combined with the endeavours of the Roman pontiffs to keep control over Eastern Illyricum; see Moreau 2017, 255–285.

⁴ See Demougeot 1951, 267; Grumel 1951, 39.

⁵ The “crisis export” thus became customary for the Eastern Empire in its relations with the West. The redirection of Attila’s invasion from the East to the West and the Theodoric’s expedition to Italy, which represented deliberate efforts of the eastern government, bear mention in this context.

⁶ See, e.g., to this topic different contributions in Blagg and Millet 1990.

of its expenditures were generated in the West,^{7a} a situation intolerable and unnatural from the very outset.⁸

The troubles of Germanic invasions in the West constituted no immediate threat for the East. The necessity of providing vast resources for the maintenance of useless territories was obviously burdensome for the eastern parts. Nevertheless, well-established imperial military elites with western roots made this situation seem perpetual. It did not change even at the very end of the third century when the system of *tetrarchy* came into being due to the reforms of Diocletian (284–305).⁹ Although this system was introduced in order to eliminate rivalry among the emperors and thus to avoid civil wars, the result was even more typological for the relations between the East and the West. As the Diocletianic system collapsed soon after the resignation of its author, the co-emperors resumed internal wars. In this respect, it is noteworthy that the instigator of war was almost always an emperor, whose domain was westernmost and who thus experienced the greatest shortage of money and other resources, which his eastern colleagues were not willing to cover.¹⁰

While the situation in 395 was no different, its consequences were. The change of borders in 395 brought to light an already extant split between elites in the respective parts of the empire. The Senatorial class of Rome and imperial dignitaries of the key cities of the West, such as Ravenna, Milan, and Arles, proved unable to stand their ground against economically and culturally more powerful elites in Constantinople, Asia Minor, Syria, and Egypt. The revenues, which previously flew from Egypt, Asia Minor, and Syria to Italy and Rome and from there to Gaul, as state expenditures, from the time of Constantine the Great (306–37) started to flow increasingly to Constantinople. In the period from 395 to 410 the last act of this drama played out: Constantinople finally became the exclusive destination point of all taxes levied in the East. What previously was either undisputed booty or tribute paid to Rome, now in full measure was booked by the exchequer of the Constantine's capital. From this time on, in order to receive subsidies any western authority had to negotiate with Constantinople, although it soon became quite clear that the latter was ready to maintain little more than the western court, while all the rest were left to their own resources.

What the West could obtain from the East was no longer a tribute, but rather an occasional grant paid by the eastern government, which

⁷ Cf. Duncan-Jones 1994, 253–255.

⁸ About the Roman fiscal control in the East see Burton 2004, 311–342; Katsari 2011, 34–71.

⁹ See Seston 1946, 193–257.

¹⁰ A similar situation was observed even in the third century AD, but then it was more complicated and less conclusive, since Rome as the capital of the Empire was attractive as a goal for the usurpers who originated in the East.

pursued its own purposes. The collapse of the West was rapid and spectacular. The year 410 was marked by the plunder of Rome. In the following several decades, almost every western territory outside Italy was overrun and came under the control of barbarians. The East showed practically no mercy toward the West: it let the territory fall without trying to give a helping hand. Occasional support of the western dynasty secured eastern control over Italy as far down as the year 476. In this year the eastern emperor Zeno formally accepted the West back under his sovereignty, notwithstanding the fact that he no longer cared for its defense and provision. The interests of the eastern emperors never stretched further west than Italy and Northern Africa, for the recovery of which they made occasional efforts, culminating in the Justinianic reconquest of those regions. Meanwhile, vast extensions of the former *praefectura Galliarum* were never present in any eastern plan for Reconquista.

The failure of the West to survive as an integral and indispensable part of the Empire, where military elites no longer played their former unifying role, thus appears to us inevitable. Celtic and Germanic territories of Gaul remained dependent on subsidies, which Roman emperors used to provide by exploiting eastern parts of the empire. They proved unable to develop trade and production that could have secured them a significant place in the interregional exchange of the empire. Withdrawal of eastern subsidies and the supply of various resources in kind brought about a collapse of the Gallic economy for the next one thousand years to follow.¹¹ The monetary supply in the western territories also dipped due to a negative trade balance with the East. This circumstance was immediately followed by collapse of internal trade and the progressive naturalization of the economy. The economy of the West thus lay in tatters.

The position of the newly created eastern elite was unique. It never disposed of considerable military strength comparable even with that of the fourth century. It attempted to meet military challenges with ingenious and efficient diplomacy, which eventually became a brand for Byzantium. It is quite evident that military expenses were considerably shortened in the fifth century, and the army itself curtailed, to say nothing of the fact that the systematic efforts to keep the *limes* somewhere in Germany and to support the infrastructure and the Graeco-Roman way of life in Gaul were no longer an obligation for Constantinople.

The effect of this massive disburdening was tremendously positive for the fortunes of the East. Within several decades of the fall of the West, one can observe a boom in the East. Prosperity grew rather conspicuously in a number of economical, social and intellectual aspects. Certain taxes

¹¹ The same situation took place in the third century AD, but it proved to be of short duration and was not aggravated by massive invasions of Germanic barbarians. From the fifth century onward, the Roman-Gallic elite lingered under Germanic dominion until being mingled in with the conquerors.

were abolished, such as the notorious *chrysargyron* introduced by Constantine the Great.¹² The monetary system, based on gold *solidus*, became the backbone of the economy that was to last for many centuries. Gold coins circulated in huge numbers in the East.

Elimination of the western elite from the imperial scene led to the predominance of eastern regional elites and their growth in importance and influence. With the decline of the Hellenistic states and their incorporation into the Roman empire, representatives of the eastern regional elites largely disappear from the written sources. Rome became the pivot of imperial politics for two centuries until the crisis of the third century AD. The eastern regions only draw attention in the context of the military and administrative activities of the Romans and their infiltration into the everyday life of the eastern provinces and their economies. The voice of the East is almost inaudible in this period. The crisis of the third century provides evidence of the separate existence of certain eastern regions at the periphery of the collapsing Roman Empire, such as Egypt and Syria, under the dominion of ephemeral rulers.

It is only in the fourth century AD after the unification of the Roman Empire under the rule of the originally western Emperor Constantine (306–37) that the East starts to gain predominance in the Roman Empire, a situation that was considerably accelerated by the official transfer of the imperial center to the East due to the foundation of Constantinople-New Rome.

The final establishment of the imperial center of gravity in the East was thus Constantine's greatest achievement, though it had been anticipated by Diocletian's inconsequent attempt to do the same a generation earlier. This measure, which was itself sound, bore traces of the reestablishment of the conditions of the Hellenistic epoch, though this time with a stronger political foundation. The loose empire of Alexander the Great was now united under the Roman banner and guided by new Roman principles of unified and integrated administration. In all other respects the old Hellenistic social and economic structures remained almost identical: the same regions and their elites played their accustomed roles in very much the same way as they had done under the *diadochoi*. The East retained what was the most important in the Roman heritage: unifying political, military, and financial systems, but in every other respect it remained Hellenistic to its core.

Correspondingly, if we are to analyze the motives and actions of the eastern regional elites, we cannot help using the same approaches that one would use to analyze the politics of different Hellenistic states (Ptolemaic, Seleucid, Pontic, Pergamon and other kingdoms), as well as the role of such political formations as the Achaean League or Rhodes. Even in this late

¹² See Blanch Nougés 2014, 311–321.

antique period, which is the focus of this article, regional interests became much the same as they had been centuries prior to the establishment of the Empire and to Roman dominion at all.

Nevertheless, the new capital, Constantinople, was a new factor that made the situation as a whole different from the Hellenistic times. After the secession of the West, New Rome started to play the role of the Old One in the East.¹³ As the new imperial center, Constantinople amassed huge sums of money as taxes, which it subsequently distributed as state expenditure. Correspondingly, maintaining relations with the capital and gaining advantages from it became a very important, sometimes even crucial aspects of provincial politics. Old eastern centers developed their relations with Constantinople in different ways. Syria, as a borderland, especially its inland parts, was very much dependent on the military and financial support of the central administration to maintain its defense infrastructure. Its maritime parts were largely engaged in sea trade, exporting Syrian/Lebanese goods to Asia Minor, the islands, Africa, and Constantinople itself. A great influx of Syrians contributed to the final Hellenization of Constantinople and served as an important source of state servants of different ranks.

Egypt, which enjoyed almost absolute internal security in Roman times, started to behave in very much the same way as the land of pharaohs and Ptolemies, but this time by non-military means. As the Empire's most important center of production, it exported agricultural and artisan products in great quantities, while at the same time serving as a major supplier of various raw materials. The bulk of its maritime trade as well as its merchant fleet were extremely impressive. As the richest region of the empire, Egypt was also the main taxpayer. Inestimable amount of all sorts of dealings made Egypt and Alexandria a highly influential factor in the capital and in the Empire as a whole. Important and profitable trade on the Red Sea was also under Egyptian control. Sinai and Palestine, the northern terminal of this trade, were deep in the Egyptian sphere of influence, exactly as they had been under the pharaohs. The great islands of the *Mediterraneum* also preserved their significance as maritime trade centers and indispensable transit ports on the way from Syria and Egypt to the cities of Asia Minor and Constantinople.

Vast extensions of Illyricum, though economically unimportant, had great significance for the western defenses of the Eastern Empire. They possessed a sufficient demographic resource for military recruiting, supplying the eastern army with soldiers of high quality. During the fifth through the sixth centuries, the Illyrians were particularly numerous in the army, including in its highest ranks. Constantine's and Justinian's

¹³ On the relations between Old and New Rome, see Grig, L., and L. Kelly, eds. *Two Romes. Rome and Constantinople in Late Antiquity*. Oxford 2012, esp. Grig and Kelly 2012a, 3–30; Ward-Perkins 2012, 53–78.

dynasties, for example, belonged to Illyrian military families. The Latin-speaking population of Illyricum maintained particularly close connections with the Italic West and thus the Illyrians were the most prominent promoters of pro-western trends in the politics of the eastern establishment.¹⁴ This fact under Justinian led to the reincorporation of certain parts of western territories into the Empire, a circumstance of dubious utility for its fortunes.

Nevertheless this reincorporation was symptomatic: it proved the fact that the eastern establishment was guided by the idea of economic sufficiency of the territories in question. Among the western lands, which had been lost to the Empire in the fifth century, only those with the largest economic value became targets of imperial reexpansion: Italy,¹⁵ Sicily, and Africa.¹⁶

Of great importance for the expression and, consequently, for the characterization of regional interests within the east-oriented empire was a relatively new institution, the Imperial Church. The emergence of regional spiritual leaders, namely city bishops who possessed monarchic spiritual authority, was a total novelty for the antique world and, not surprisingly, they started to play a considerable role in regional politics. Bishops of greater cities (*urbes maiores*) were by definition significant actors in the promotion of local interests at the imperial level, including the capital. Covert and unavoidable interregional conflicts began to be conducted through church politics; the promotion of regional interests was often camouflaged by theological issues.

Thus, it is quite evident that the diverging theologies of Antioch and Alexandria had a political dimension. At an early stage of the Christian Roman Empire in the fourth century AD, theology became instrumental in the political activities of respective parts of the Roman Empire, furnishing either rivalries among the legitimate emperors or an occasional mutiny with

¹⁴ They were the last people to give the Eastern Empire its Latin flair. The weakening of the Illyrian element within the eastern Roman establishment as late as the sixth century made the hellenization of the empire irreversible. Syrian chronicles characterize this phenomenon as the return of power from the Roman to the Greek “kings” (*malkē*, βασιλεῖς).

¹⁵ No doubt the idea of bringing the symbolically important Old Rome back under imperial control also played a considerable role in deliberations concerning the recapture of Italy.

¹⁶ The operations in the western extremity of Northern Africa and Southern Spain were likely meant to secure control over Gibraltar since relations with Southern Britain still had some significance. The import of British tin and corresponding commercial relations with Britain can be traced as late as the seventh century. In fact, the old Phoenician commercial routes did not lose their significance even in the sixth century AD, since the Eastern Empire strove to secure for itself possessions in the Western *Mediterraneum* that were amazingly similar to the ancient Phoenician and Greek commercial networks. It virtually led to the reintegration of the Carthaginian system in eastern Roman garb, thus reconstructing one more phenomenon from the Hellenistic period.

respectful slogans of fighting for the right faith. After the secession of the West and since the end of the fourth century, theology increasingly became a means to project regional influence within the Eastern Empire.¹⁷ The “monophysite” dogma was a product of Alexandria, while the “dyophysite” dogma was predominantly associated with Syria. Both were widely used in order to project regional influence beyond the respective regional borders and especially in the capital of the empire. The economically dominant Egyptian elite used the authority of Alexandrine theology and Alexandrine archbishops in order to achieve immediate influence upon the imperial court, while Syrian elites did the same, exploiting the traditional ecclesiastic ties of Constantinople to the Church of Antioch.¹⁸ In the mid-fifth century, the Church of Rome suddenly changed its pro-Alexandrine orientation and sided with Syria, adopting its dyophysite principles. Thus the pro-western part of the eastern elite, mostly Latin-speaking due to its primarily Illyrian or even Gothic origins, created a league that favoured the political reintegration of the West (at least in part), and chose as its creed *Tomos* of Pope Leo,¹⁹ while the anti-western one clung at the reconciling *Henoticon* of Emperor Zeno.²⁰ The end to the exhausting struggle was brought by the compromising politics of Justinian (527–65).²¹

As a conclusion, I would point out the following observations. First, the change of the imperial borders and the refusal to subsidize the Western Roman Empire were likely deliberate decisions by eastern elites, who by that time had fully recognized their own particular interests. Second, the secession of the West raised the importance of the regional elites in the East, who from that time on built up their relations with the state’s capital and the central elites in their own way. Third, the Eastern Roman regions acted according to ways and practices that were characteristic for the Eastern Mediterranean area since as far back as the Hellenistic period and even earlier.

¹⁷ This adds further aspects to the newly introduced concept of the late antique “geo-ecclesiology”: Blaudeau 2017, 39–56.

¹⁸ This recalls the rivalry of the Ptolemies and Seleucids. The gradual shifting of Jerusalem toward Alexandria in ecclesiastical issues and its final secession from the Antiochian patriarchate in 451 are to be regarded as a victory for Egypt in the area, one that had been a contested for Syria and Egypt ever since the most ancient times. Its siding with Constantinople and Rome in 516–18 and its transition to pro-Chalcedonian attitudes was a significant turning point. See Perrone 1980, 89–222.

¹⁹ See Gratsianskiy 2007, 125–145. The far western Churches of Gaul and Spain remained conspicuously well out of the context of West-East ecclesiastic relations, building a backyard of Italy.

²⁰ See Frend 1972.

²¹ See Gratsianskiy 2016.

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