
Migrations and Conquest: Easy Pictures for Complicated Backgrounds in Ancient and Medieval Structures

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Introduction: Did Rome Fall?

In case that only very few written sources survived this century, what will be known of our social, political, economic, cultural, or intellectual identities in a far future? Archaeologists excavating the ruins of present-day Europe in the distant future could discover structures confusing to them. The remains of our material culture could be interpreted by our future colleagues as those of a unified world in the northern and parts of the southern hemispheres. Or, as another possibility, would Europe be defined as an American colony or vice versa? Would the models generated be sophisticated enough to describe the complex structures of present-day societies? Could archaeologists or historians believe in migrations and decline, conquering westerners, and conquered, decadent easterners and southerners? Could great American invasions of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries become an explanation if the industrial areas and more modern city structures of Los Angeles, Chicago, and New York appear mightier than those in Europe? Or would our future colleagues believe in a massive Chinese takeover at the beginning of the twenty-first century due to the millions of plastic objects with “Made in China” on them? Or would they have learned from our discussions and intellectual evolutions in this field of study and try to avoid simple explanations? These considerations have been inspired by Chris Wickham. Wickham tried to criticize simple ethnic identifications of archaeological material and put it like this *cum grano salis*: “And indeed, a man or a woman with a Lombard-style brooch is no more necessarily a Lombard than a family in Bradford with a Toyota is Japanese; artefacts are no secure guide to ethnicity” (Wickham 981, 68). The famous German archaeologist Volker

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Bierbrauer did not like this too much and considered Wickham's idea as a joke (Bierbrauer 2004: 48 and note 23).

It was the Englishman Edward Gibbon (1737–1794) who started with his voluminous work, “The History of the Decline and the Fall of the Roman” (Gibbon 1776–1788), a debate in European intellectual circles. “Did Rome fall, or was it only transformed? Was the Empire destroyed by barbarians, or was its decay inevitable for internal reasons?” These historical structures were and are conceived very differently. “An age of romantic projections and national sentiments, roughly from Napoleon to Hitler, re-enacted the drama of a clash between northern barbarians and Roman civilisation” (Pohl 1997: 1). Many different explanations for the changes of the Roman world between 250 and 600 C.E. have been offered. The topic remains interesting not only for scholars but also for the general public (Demandt 1984). In German, the term *Völkerwanderung* (Great Migration) implies the idea of migrations changing the populations in vast areas of Europe. In French and Italian, the same time span is entitled *les invasions barbares* and *invasione barbarica*. Such terms demonstrate a long history of definitions and debates. French and Italian scholars in the early modern age saw themselves as the heirs of Rome, while their German colleagues embraced ideas of supreme northerners smashing to pieces the decadent Roman world. From the beginning, these ideas were overloaded with political issues of the time. History was used to prepare wars (von See 1970, 1994).

Wolfgang Lazius, a scholar at the court of Emperor Ferdinand I in Vienna, tried to create a common Gothic background of European countries as different as Spain, Burgundy, and Austria in the sixteenth century to legitimize the Habsburgian rule in these areas. Lazius did not create a Gothic myth with a deep impact in the history of scholarship like his colleagues using Tacitus's or Caesar's ideas. Only his book's title, *De gentium aliquot migrationibus*, became one of the roots of the term *Völkerwanderung* (Lazius 1572; Springer 2006).¹

Roman Ethnography Creates the “Barbarians”

We must, first of all, ask what a barbarian is or could have been in our sources. There were different kinds of barbarians, based upon the Roman and Greek ethnographic tradition and view of geography. Greek writers defined identities of human societies in the known world and bequeathed ethnonyms. Since the sixth and fifth centuries B.C.E., these categories were most often little more than learned constructions. Greek ethnographers like Hekataios, Herodotus, and Eratosthenes of Cyrene categorized the world north of the Alps as a western Keltike (Κελτική) and an eastern Scythike (Σκυθική) with the river Tanais (Don) as its frontier. Only Celts and Scyths were known as the two *ethne* (ἔθνη) living in the northern part of

¹ See Stefan Donecker (2012).

the inhabited world. *Ethne* was understood as greater groups of peoples. Other parts of the world were inhabited by Thracians or Persians, Ethiopians, Libyans, and *Maurousioi*. Each of these terms is complicated and needs scholarly interpretation (Geary 2002; Lund 1990). One example, Herodotus distinguished in his fourth book (4, 191, 1–3) “ploughing” Africans west of Lake “Triton” (most likely the Gulf of Gabès) and “meat-eating as milk-drinking nomads” east of the Triton. Furthermore, Herodotus distinguished in his Libyan logos “immigrated” Africans (Phoenicians and Greeks) and “indigenous” Africans, the Libyans and *Aithiopes* (Asheri et al. 2007). The term Libyans was applied to the Carthagians and their allies and later became a term for the inhabitants of Africa in general. So, for example, later, the Emperor Septimus Severus (146–211 C.E.) could be called a Libyan. Procopius, a writer of the sixth century C.E., used Libyans for the Latin-speaking African population. What I try to show here is that throughout centuries, a literary system had been evolved of how to classify the inhabitants of certain regions. They were defined as immigrants, indigenous, belonging to a certain group, eating this and that, and being this and that. Such stereotypes helped Roman intellectuals, military leaders, and businessmen to give order to the world. They do not or only partly describe the structures of the named societies. Whether this Roman point of view can be compared with patterns of modern racism or not remains a matter of discussion. Elements of racism are there (Lentano 2007; Isaac 2004; Snowden 1983).

Greek ethnographers tried to classify new groups interacting with the Mediterranean world and to understand them as part of one of the known *ethne*. Observations, deductions, and speculations combined with empirical knowledge formed the basis of this written knowledge. Aristotle (384–322 B.C.E.) defined ethnicity as one of the main differences between Greeks and barbarians. Greeks live in their *polis*; barbarians live in *ethne* (Politica 1324b). The Greeks and Romans writing these sources were primarily citizens of their *polis*, their *civitas*, or the *res publica*. The rest of the population in the Mediterranean most likely had identities similar to those of the so-called barbarians. Kulikowski (2007: 35) stated, “Indeed the fact of imperial government and its regular demands for taxation may have been the only real factor distinguishing a Pannonian peasant on one side of the Danube from a Quadic peasant on the other.”

Vast areas north of the Roman borders were defined by Roman ethnographers as the lands of origin for many barbarian peoples. The widely discussed “Scandinavian problem” derives from this. Since the sixth century, origin stories emerged, using the motive of a Scandinavian or northern descent for the military elites ruling at Ravenna, Carthage, or Toledo. Roman ethnographers had a clear picture: Out of the cold north, uncountable numbers of people descended. The numbers of the arriving *gentes* given by Roman authors were most often fictional and greatly exaggerated. Romans tended to use strong pictures when talking of barbarians. In the language of the sources, they overwhelmed everything like waves, floods, and volcanic lava. Ammianus Marcellinus reports that *innumerae gentium multitudines*, countless swarms of nations, poured through the provinces when the Goths arrived in Thrace in 376 in unexpected great numbers. Herodotus had given a record of the

Medic hordes attacking Greece in the fifth century B.C.E. In Ammianus' view, this new evidence confirmed the trustworthiness of the old stories of great masses of barbarians living outside the known world (Ammianus Marcellinus 21, 4, 7, and 8). Synesius of Cyrene reported to emperor Arcadius that no new barbarians could be found north of the Black Sea. The barbarians just astutely invented new names to fool the Romans and scare them (Synesius *Oratio de regno ad Arcadium imperatorem*, 16). Such motives, pictures, and stereotypes had become part of literary traditions that intellectuals of the sixth century had introduced as explanations. Jordanes wrote in Constantinople after 550, but he made some much disputed use of a now lost Gothic history by Cassiodorus, who had written some three decades earlier at the court of the Ostrogothic king, Theodoric. Jordanes entitled Scandinavia as an *officina gentium aut certe velut vagina nationum*, a workshop or womb of nations (Jordanes *Getica* 25; cf. Goffart 1988). Paul the Deacon referred in the eighth century to a Longobardian origin in this "workshop of nations," trying to compare his Longobards to the famous and ancient Goths. Paul knew that many other people live there: *Est insula qui dicitur Scadanan (. . .) in partibus aquilonis, ubi multae gentes habitant* (Origo *Gentis Langobardorum* 1). For Goths and Longobards, a Scandinavian origin was constructed at the Ostrogothic court in Ravenna in the middle of the sixth century and through the Carolingian era. These writings had an afterlife. The Geographus Ravennatus around 700 defined Scandinavia as an *Antiqua Scythia* to explain the origin of the Scythic Goths, Gepids, and Danes. Three centuries later, Adam of Bremen entitled the Baltic Sea *mare Scythicum*. Adam classified all the peoples on the Baltic coasts as Scyths, including the Slavic peoples. Helmold of Bosau as Otto of Freising adapted Adam's categories (Ravennatis *anonymi cosmographia et Guidonis geographica* 1, 8; Adam of Bremen, *Gesta* 2, 18, 19).

Ethnic Identities in Roman Provinces?

For a long time, scholarship assumed ethnic affiliations being bound to the barbarian outsiders. One of the preconditions of the idea for a "Decline and fall of the Roman Empire" (Edward Gibbon) was the assumption that Roman provinces had been "romanized" for centuries. Theodor Mommsen, Francis Haverfield, and their contemporaries developed the concept of "Romanization." The spread of Roman civilization in Italy and the provinces of the Roman Empire was seen as an acceptance of something like a Roman ethnicity by local populations or as a phenomenon of migration. A variety of processes of change were labeled with the term, and from one study to another, the parameters vary considerably. "Romanization" was never a clear cultural, political, economic, or social development nor ever completed, and critical approaches have been published. The first phase affected only local elites or military personnel; large parts of the population may have lived in structures similar to pre-Roman conditions or those in the *Barbaricum*. Roman identity was taken as granted or even used politically. The frontiers and the Roman army have to be taken into consideration as melting pots

delivering identities. Recent studies try to analyze the backgrounds as the (Byzantine or local) afterlife of “Roman” identity and to understand the many different levels taking into consideration regional differences. Romanization and “de-Romanization” are still not fully understood (Revell 2008; Hingley 2005; Ando 2000; Woolf 1998; Whittaker 1994).

Gaul or Britain, Armenia or Moesia, and Spain or Syria became Roman provinces. What was called *Germania* and *Scythia* did not. People coming from these regions were barbarians, and people inside the imperial borders, friends and allies. “Sussex in 60 B.C. and Thuringia in A.D. 300 stood at the same relative physical and social distance from imperial power. What has differed is the way modern scholars have studied the two regions, the one being studied diachronically, as the prehistoric state of a future Roman province, and the other studied synchronically, as part of a continuous *Germanentum*. If the diachronic interpretation of barbarian life in pre-Roman Britain or Gaul were substituted for the conceptually synchronic reading typical in *Germania* or *Scythia*, similarities would almost certainly emerge.”² That means such similarities are a long-standing desideratum of modern scholarship. The categories of ancient writers were used unquestioned up to Late Antiquity and, in many cases, up to the high Middle Ages (Geary 1999: 107–109; Pohl 2002: 15). For most ancient writers, categorizing people north, east, and south of the Mediterranean basin simply meant distinguishing their ways of life from the urbanized civilization they knew, not mentioning, at the same time, the fact that farming communities did not really differ from barbarian communities in the Mediterranean outside their cities.

It is striking that in sources dating from the Principate, the term *ethnos* (ἔθνος) was used as an equation for Latin *provincia* in the Greek east. “The term *ethnos* can denote or pertain to a province which need not be defined by territory; as such it is related to the original interpretation of the term *provincia* (province) which referred, as Mommsen has pointed out, to prescribed magisterial duties and functions, not to a territorial preserve” (Mandell 1984: 229; Liddell and Scott 1996: 480). This means strong evidence supporting the idea of similar conditions inside and outside the imperial borders. The borderline between so-called Romans and so-called barbarians was not a territorial one. Territories that became provinces maintained local identities. There are plenty of examples of this, such as the very name of *Augusta Vindelicorum*, the town *Augusta* of the *Vindelici*, or other ethnonyms present in Roman provinces with more or less importance. The “Three Gauls,” *Gallia Belgica*, *Lugdunensis*, and *Aquitania*, were divided into about sixty *civitates*. The provincial capitals often bore a name alluding to the Celtic population in the specific area. Lugdunum was called *Lugdunum Convenarum*, the capital of

²Michael Kulikowski, Thinking About Barbarian Identity – Recent Approaches and Some Ways Forward. Paper given at the conference “Römische Legionslager in den Rhein- und Donauprovinzen – Nuclei spätantik-frühmittelalterlichen Lebens?” at München: Michaela Konrad, Bayerische Akademie der Wissenschaften; Christian Witschel, Universität Heidelberg, 28.03.2006–30.03.2006.

the *Convenae*. Ancient Soisson was entitled the town *Augusta* of the *Suessiones* (*Augusta Suessionum*). But there are also examples of “inner barbarians” with many similarities concerning their interaction with the Roman authorities like the barbarians from the north. The population residing between Mount Haimos and the Lower Danube in the northern Balkan Peninsula was named Thracians or *Moesicae gentes*. Cassius Dio mentions that the *Getae* were called Moesians too after being integrated into the imperial structures (Roman History 51, 22, 6; the same in Pliny, *Naturalis Historia* 3, 149; 4, 3). One Thracian group was the *Bessoi* whose language was spoken by rural inhabitants up to Late Antiquity. The ethnic names *Bessoi* and Thracian were used in Byzantine texts through the early seventh century, and Theophanes explicitly called the Emperors Leo I, Justin II Tiberios I Thracians by birth. *Bessoi* became a synonym for Thracians in general and so Leo I was called a *Bessos* by birth (Neli 1980: 255–264). The Augustan history has the later Emperor Maximinus Thrax (235–238 C.E.) born “in a village in Thrace bordering on the barbarians, indeed of a barbarian father and mother (. . .).” The military career of “this youth, half barbarian and scarcely yet master of the Latin tongue, speaking almost pure Thracian” began under Emperor Severus in a cavalry unit (*Scriptores Historiae Augustae Max. Duo* 1, 5; 2, 5). In the south of Asia Minor between Pisidia, Lycaonia, and Cilicia Tracheia, the *Isauri* (Ἰσαυροί) lived. Cassius Dio mentions for 6 C.E. the beginning of revolts by the *Isauri*. Since Emperor Probus’s rule (276–282 C.E.), the Isaurians were constantly at war with the Roman army and carried out regular raids (Roman History 55, 28, 3; Ammianus Marcellinus 14, 2; 19, 13; 27, 9 on the years 354, 359, and 368). “From the time of Theodosius II, *Isauri* were enlisted for army service and in 474 the Isaurian Tarasicodissas came to the imperial throne under the name of Zeno. After Zeno’s death in 491 the *Isauri* were removed from the army, finally subjugated by 498 in grievous battles and resettled in large numbers in Thrace” (Tomaschitz 2008).

The peoples, or *gentes*, inside and outside the Roman Empire remained a problem for Greek and Roman intellectuals because ethnic identities underlay a constant change and very often emerged only out of contention with Roman structures. A Greek or Roman city had a regional and civic identity known and secured, based on written traditions, legends, and religious belief in local deities. Whether there was a regional identity in cities in Gaul, Spain, or Anatolia too has to be cleared for every case. Ammianus Marcellinus mentions Assyrian names used besides the Greek names for cities in Cilicia and the names alluding to Celtic groups mentioned above must have meant something (14, 8). The ideas of Greek and Roman writers were so strong in the following centuries that modern scholarship seems to be still influenced by them. The perspective of Mediterranean cities dominated and still dominates our analyses of the past. Ancient writers had a strong self-definition with a commercial or military background in most cases, reducing the world outside their sphere of power to primitive barbarians who were to be beaten, used, or conquered. Roman policy needed victories to legitimize itself, and barbarian groups provided stereotypes used and reused again at many occasions. At the same time, a barbarian world was being constructed (Krierer 2004: 67–72, 89–99, 164–168; Barbero 2006). A certain pressure on the Roman borders existed,

partly caused by the wish for a better life, partly by Roman needs. On the one hand, Roman economic and political supremacy attracted barbarians; on the other hand, Roman policy created barbarian societies directly or indirectly (Kulikowski 2007: 34–42; Pohl 2002: 25–27). As mentioned before, many human beings inside the Roman borders lived under conditions similar to those of the so-called barbarians, especially in the Roman provinces of Gaul, Spain, Britain, the Balkans, or the Eastern provinces. The army offered the chance to make a career for men being born in such an environment. In recent research, the careers of “outer” barbarians like Stilicho, Rikimer, or Aspar have been stressed. But many emperors with a non-Roman background were born inside the imperial borders. Maximinus Thrax, Zeno, Leo I, and Justin II are examples of “inner” barbarians who had a great career. The so-called Illyrian emperors, Claudius Gothicus, Aurelian, Probus, Diocletian, and Constantinus I, were said to have little education but accepted as being experienced in military service and well suited to state administration. During Late Antiquity, ethnic names known from the victories of conquering consuls or emperors reappeared. This shows, among other things, that there were fewer differences between the so-called Roman and the so-called barbarian worlds than our sources lead us to believe. It is mainly the history of emerging European nations at war no earlier than the sixteenth century that deliberately used Greek and Roman categories for their own purposes, making our analysis so difficult.

Germans or Celts and Scythians?

During the nineteenth century, the postulate, in the end nothing more but a vision of ancient literature, of a “Germanic identity” was given new strength by linguistic theories. The entry “Germanen” in the *Deutsches Wörterbuch* of Jakob and Wilhelm Grimm gave a simple explanation: *Germani* is the term for the *Deutschen* and the people related to them (“germanen ist eine bezeichnung der deutschen und der ihnen stammverwandten völker bei Kelten und Römern, die sich bei letzteren mit sicherheit nicht über den sklavenkrieg [73-71 v. Chr.] hinauf verfolgen lässt”) (Grimm and Grimm 1897/1999: 3716). Most scholars had no reservations about the existence of a coherent Germanic world before the Middle Ages. Archaeological, historical, and linguistic research in the German-speaking world defined the *Germani* until recently as the immediate predecessors of the modern Germans (Goffart 2006: 20–22). Generalizing economic, social, religious, ethnic, or political structures of so-called “Germanic” peoples is impossible. The category *Germani* is a Roman and literary one; there has never been a “Germanic” identity or a “Germanic world”: “The non-existence of ancient Germans is perhaps the most important thing one can say about the barbarians of late antiquity” (Goffart 2006: 20). Despite the ambiguity of the antique term *Germani*, an enduring identity spanning from the constructed *Germani* in prehistory to the modern German nation became part of Germany’s public interest today. The (Roman) sources classified the societies with which Roman troopers, politicians, and bargainers were dealing. As these sources have a very different background than our research interests,

problems naturally appear. Modern scholarship has to discuss every individual and every ethnic name (*gens*) on its own terms, considering the specific historical circumstances. Prehistoric sociological structures interacted with the urban, Mediterranean culture, and it was out of these processes of integration and confrontation lasting for centuries, the transformation of the Roman World, that medieval Europe emerged. The idea of a “Germanic” identity, apart from a Roman definition of a *Germania*, did not appear earlier than the sixteenth century. It is much more part of the history of scholarship than of the Roman, barbarian, or postimperial history of Europe (Kulikowski 2007: 43–70; Goffart 2006: 40–55; Pohl 2000: 61, 2004; Geary 2002: 25–28).

Latin texts used the term *Germani* to describe the population of a *barbaricum* beyond the Roman borders east of the Rhine and north of the Danube only for a rather short period. Gaius Julius Caesar and other authors after him in the first two centuries C.E., especially Publius Cornelius Tacitus, established the term. Introduced by these Roman authors, *Germani* and *Germania* survived in a variety of very different meanings. After the Principate, *Germani* simply described, in most cases, Franks or Alamanni on both banks of the Rhine. The geographical term *Germania* was used to name the two Roman provinces along the Rhine, the *Germania superior* and *inferior*, established in the first century C.E. during the reign of Emperor Domitian. Besides this use in the Augustan period, east of these provinces, an area of Roman interest known as *Germania* appears in the sources. *Germania* was used consistently besides *Gallia* or *Italia*. One can understand it as a Roman category taken over by early medieval intellectuals without ever having become a clear political or territorial concept.

Only Caesar with his specific interests and after him modern scholarship since the fifteenth century categorized what Roman scholars before him had seen as Celtic barbarians as Germans. Caesar's intention was heavily dependent on his political aims: If he could convince the Roman public that there was a third group of barbarians he called Germans especially wild and dangerous and related to the ancient Cimbrians causing great problems in the second century B.C.E. and still feared, it would be accepted that he stopped at the Rhine and defined a new borderline there. His concept was only used by **some** Latin writers after him and no longer than the third century, never by Greek writers like Dio Cassius or later Zosimus.

Many Greek scholars simply classified Celts and Scyths in the northwest and northeast of the Mediterranean. This remained the usual concept of Greek literature until Late Antiquity. Few Greek texts use *Germanoi* (Γερμανοί). Those texts either depended on Caesar or defined the *Germanoi* as a Celtic people. A term like *Germani* still evokes, no matter how much one tries to avoid it, ideas of contingent identities in vast areas east of the Rhine and north of the Danube, including parts of Scandinavia, and with undefined borders to the east. This is very near to what Roman writers from the first century B.C.E. to the second century C.E., especially Caesar and Tacitus, wanted their fellow Romans to believe. At the same time, centuries after the first use of the term *Germani* (and in the same way as with the term Celts), such categories offered some security for generations of scholars and

their readers in a field of complicated and very often confusing sources, both in material and in written culture. Such pseudoethnic terms became widespread, by offering some order to confusing material, and they have a long history in scholarship that continues today. Both terms, *Germani* and Celts, were taken from Greek and Roman ethnographical literature. About 500 years ago, when medieval Europe entered an age of incredibly fast economic, political, and social change, scholars adapted these terms. A society that claimed classical texts as its intellectual basis began all historical explanations with these written remains of “classical” antiquity. Learned men of that age prepared a “modern” view of ethnic identity by looking for clear borders between the sixteenth-century Germans and French, Italians, and Spaniards – a task not that easy in a Europe unified by a common ecclesiastical and intellectual culture. Roman and Greek writers had very different aims from those of sixteenth- to nineteenth-century scholars. The division of people into west-Germanic, east-Germanic, and north-Germanic was an eighteenth- and nineteenth-century hypothesis of linguists (Goffart 2006; Pohl 2000: 1–12, 45–64; Pohl 2004; Krierer 2004: 45–50, 89–98; Dobesch 1995).

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