London in ruins, as imagined by Gustave Doré in 1873. A New Zealander, scion of a civilization of the future, is drawing the remains of the long-dead city.
O

I

DID ROME EVER FALL?

On an October evening in 1764, after some intoxicating days visiting the remains of ancient Rome, Edward Gibbon ‘sat mus-

ing amidst the ruins of the Capitol’, and resolved to write a history of the city’s decline and fall. The grandeur of ancient Rome, and

the melancholy of its ruins, had awoken his curiosity and imagination, and had planted the seed for his great historical endeavour. Gibbon’s

fascination with the dissolution of a world that seemed quite literally set in stone is not surprising—deep within the European psyche lies an

anxiety that, if ancient Rome could fall, so too can the proudest of modern civilizations (Fig. 1.1).

In Gibbon’s day, and until very recently, few people questioned age-old certainties about the passing of the ancient world—namely, that a high

point of human achievement, the civilization of Greece and Rome, was destroyed in the West by hostile invasions during the fifth century. Invaders, whom the Romans called quite simply ‘the barbarians’ and whom modern scholars have termed more sympathetically ‘the Germanic peoples’, crossed into the empire over the Rhine and Danube frontiers, beginning a process that was to lead to the dissolution not only of the Roman political structure, but also of the Roman way of life.

The first people to enter the empire in force were Goths, who in 376 crossed the Danube, fleeing from the nomadic Huns who had recently appeared on the Eurasian steppes. Initially the Goths threatened only the eastern half of the Roman empire (rule at the time being divided between two co-emperors, one resident in the western provinces, the other in the East (see front end paper)). Two years later, in 378, they inflicted a bloody defeat on the empire’s eastern army at the battle of Hadrianopolis, modern Edirne in Turkey, near the border with Bulgaria. In 401, however, it was
the turn of the West to suffer invasion, when a large army of Goths left the Balkans and entered northern Italy. This began a period of great difficulty for the western empire, seriously exacerbated at the very end of 406, when three tribes—the Vandals, Sueves, and Alans—crossed the Rhine into Gaul. Thereafter there were always Germanic armies within the borders of the western empire, gradually acquiring more and more power and territory—the Vandals, for instance, were able to cross the Straits of Gibraltar in 429, and by 439 had captured the capital of Roman Africa.

In 476, seventy-five years after the Goths had first entered Italy, the last Roman emperor resident in the West, the young and aptly named Romulus Augustulus (Romulus ‘the little emperor’), was deposed and sent into retirement. The West was now ruled by independent Germanic kings (see back end paper). By contrast, the eastern Roman empire (which we often call the ‘Byzantine empire’) did not fall, despite pressure from the Goths, and later from the Huns. Indeed, in the 530s the eastern emperor Justinian was strong enough to intervene in the Germanic West, capturing the Vandals’ African kingdom in 533 and starting a war of conquest of the Ostrogoths’ Italian kingdom two years later, in 535. Only in 1453 did the Byzantine empire finally disappear, when its capital and last bastion, Constantinople, fell to the Turkish army of Mehmed ‘the Conqueror’.

According to the conventional view of things, the military and political disintegration of Roman power in the West precipitated the end of a civilization. Ancient sophistication died, leaving the western world in the grip of a ‘Dark Age’ of material and intellectual poverty, out of which it was only slowly to emerge. Gibbon’s contemporary, the Scottish historian William Robertson, expressed this view in a particularly forceful manner in 1770, but his words evoke an image of the ‘Dark Ages’ that has had very wide currency:

In less than a century after the barbarian nations settled in their new conquests, almost all the effects of the knowledge and civility, which the Romans had spread through Europe, disappeared. Not only the arts of elegance, which minister to luxury, and are supported by it, but many of the useful arts, without which life can scarcely be contemplated as comfortable, were neglected or lost.²

In other words, with the fall of the empire, Art, Philosophy, and decent drains all vanished from the West.
I was born and brought up in Rome, the heart of the empire, surrounded by the same ruins of past greatness that had moved Gibbon, and my father was a classical archaeologist whose main interest was the remarkable technical and architectural achievements of the Romans. The essential outlines of Robertson’s view have therefore always come naturally to me. From early youth I have known that the ancient Romans built things on a scale and with a technical expertise that could only be dreamed of for centuries after the fall of the empire. Ancient Rome had eleven aqueducts, bringing water to the city through channels up to 59 miles long (which is roughly the distance from Oxford to London), sometimes on arches 100 feet high; and sixteen of the massive columns that form the portico of the Pantheon are monoliths, each 46 feet high, laboriously extracted from a quarry high up in the eastern desert of Egypt, manhandled down to the Nile, and brought hundreds of miles by water to the empire’s capital. It is very difficult not to be impressed by achievements like these, particularly when one finds them replicated, on a smaller and more human scale, throughout the provinces of the empire. Pompeii—with its paved streets, raised pavements, public baths, and regularly spaced water fountains—and the hundreds of others cities of the Roman world that were like it, in their own quiet way make an even deeper impression than the overblown grandeur that was Rome.

Despite my upbringing, I have never much liked the ancient Romans—to me they too often seem self-important and self-satisfied—and I have much more sympathy for the chaotic and difficult world of post-Roman times. On the other hand, it has always seemed self-evident that the Romans were able to do remarkable things, which, after the fall of the empire, could not be done again for many hundreds of years.

**Banishing Catastrophe**

It has therefore come as a surprise to me to find a much more comfortable vision of the end of empire spreading in recent years through the English-speaking world. The intellectual guru of this movement is a brilliant historian and stylist, Peter Brown, who published in 1971 *The World of Late Antiquity*. In it he defined a new period, ‘Late Antiquity’, beginning in around AD 200 and lasting right up to the eighth century, characterized,
not by the dissolution of half the Roman empire, but by vibrant religious
and cultural debate. As Brown himself subsequently wrote, he was able in
his book to narrate the history of these centuries ‘without invoking an
intervening catastrophe and without pausing, for a moment, to pay lip
service to the widespread notion of decay’. ‘Decay’ was banished, and
replaced by a ‘religious and cultural revolution’, beginning under the late
empire and continuing long after it. This view has had a remarkable
effect, particularly in the United States, where Brown now lives and works.
A recent Guide to Late Antiquity, published by Harvard University Press,
asks us ‘to treat the period between around 250 and 800 as a distinctive
and quite decisive period of history that stands on its own’, rather than as
‘the story of the unravelling of a once glorious and “higher” state of civil-
ization’. This is a bold challenge to the conventional view of darkening
skies and gathering gloom as the empire dissolved.

The impact of this new thinking has, admittedly, been mixed. In par-
ticular, amongst the wider reading public a bleak post-Roman ‘Dark Age’
seems to be very much alive and well. Bernard Cornwell’s historical novels
about this period are international best-sellers; the blurb on the back of
The Winter King sets the grim but heroic scene: ‘In the Dark Ages a
legendary warrior struggles to unite Britain . . .’. Arthur (for it is he) is a
battle-hardened warlord, living in a wooden hall, in a Britain that is manly,
sombre, and definitely decaying. At one point the remains of a half-
ruined Roman mosaic pavement are further shattered, when dark-age war-
riors bang their spear ends on the floor to approve the decisions of their
leaders.

However, amongst historians the impact of the new Late Antiquity has
been marked—particularly on the way that the end of the Roman world is
now packaged. There has been a sea change in the language used to
describe post-Roman times. Words like ‘decline’ and ‘crisis’, which suggest
problems at the end of the empire and which were quite usual into the
1970s, have largely disappeared from historians’ vocabularies, to be
replaced by neutral terms, like ‘transition’, ‘change’, and ‘transformation’. For
instance, a massive European-funded project of research into the
period 300–800 chose as its title ‘The Transformation of the Roman
World’. There is no hint here of ‘decline’, ‘fall’, or ‘crisis’, nor even of any
kind of ‘end’ to the Roman world. ‘Transformation’ suggests that Rome
lived on, though gradually metamorphosed into a different, but not neces-
sarily inferior, form. The image is of a lively organism evolving to meet
new circumstances. It is a long way from the traditional view, in which
catastrophe destroys the magnificent Roman dinosaur, but leaves a few tiny
dark-age mammals alive, to evolve very slowly over the coming centuries
into the sophisticated creatures of the Renaissance.

**Accommodating the Barbarians**

Along a parallel route, leading in essentially the same direction, some
historians in recent decades have also questioned the entire premiss that
the dissolution of the Roman empire in the West was caused by hostile
and violent invasion. Just as ‘transformation’ has become the buzzword for
cultural change in this period, so ‘accommodation’ is now the fashionable
word to explain how peoples from outside the empire came to live within
it and rule it.

Here too old certainties are being challenged. According to the trad-
tional account, the West was, quite simply, overrun by hostile ‘waves’ of
Germanic peoples (Fig. 1.2). The long-term effects of these invasions
have, admittedly, been presented in very different ways, depending largely
on the individual historian’s nationality and perspective. For some, particu-
larly in the Latin countries of Europe, the invasions were entirely distruc-
tive (Fig. 1.3). For others, however, they brought an infusion of new and
freedom-loving Germanic blood into a decadent empire—witness, for
instance, the words of the eighteenth-century German philosopher
Herder: ‘Expiring Rome lay for centuries on her deathbed . . . a deathbed
extending over the whole World . . . which could . . . render her no assist-
ance, but that of accelerating her death. Barbarians came to perform this
office; northern giants, to whom the enervated Romans appeared dwarfs;
they ravaged Rome, and infused new life into expiring Italy.’

But, while there has always been a lively debate about the long-term
consequences of the invasions, until recently very few have seriously ques-
tioned the violence and disruption of the Germanic takeover of power. Indeed, for some, a good bloodletting was a decidedly purgative experi-
ence. In a book written for children, the nineteenth-century English his-
torian Edward Freeman robustly defended the brutality with which his
own Anglo-Saxon ancestors had eliminated their rivals the Romano-
Britons, the ancestors of the Welsh: “it has turned out much better in the
end that our forefathers did thus kill or drive out nearly all the people
whom they found in the land . . . [since otherwise] I cannot think that we
The ‘Wandering of Peoples’ (Völkerwanderung), which overran the western empire, as shown in an historical atlas.
should ever have been so great and free a people as we have been for many ages. While the children of Victorian England may have enjoyed Freeman’s prose, one wonders what was made of these sentiments in Wales.

Unsurprisingly, an image of violent and destructive Germanic invasion was very much alive in continental Europe in the years that immediately followed the Second World War. But in the latter half of the twentieth century, as a new and peaceful western Europe became established, views of the invaders gradually softened and became more positive (Fig. 1.4). For instance, book titles like *The Germanic Invasions: The Making of Europe AD 400–600* (of 1975) did not question the reality of the invasions, but did present them as a positive force in the shaping of modern Europe.

More recently, however, some historians have gone very much further than this, notably the Canadian historian Walter Goffart, who in 1980 launched a challenge to the very idea of fifth-century ‘invasions’. He
1.4 The barbarian tamed. Two late-twentieth-century images of Germanic settlers. In one, a warrior-king has removed his helmet, to show that he is a worldly-wise, even kindly, middle-aged man, not a testosterone-driven thug. In the other, the shield has become a fashion accessory.
argued that the Germanic peoples were the beneficiaries of a change in Roman military policy. Instead of continuing the endless struggle to keep them out, the Romans decided to accommodate them into the empire by an ingenious and effective arrangement. The newcomers were granted a proportion of the tax revenues of the Roman state, and the right to settle within the imperial frontiers; in exchange, they ceased their attacks, and diverted their energies into upholding Roman power, of which they were now stakeholders. In effect, they became the Roman defence force: ‘The Empire . . . had better things to do than engage in a ceaseless, sterile effort to exclude foreigners for whom it could find useful employment.’

Goffart was very well aware that sometimes Romans and Germanic newcomers were straightforwardly at war, but he argued that ‘the fifth century was less momentous for invasions than for the incorporation of barbarian protectors into the fabric of the West’. In a memorable sound bite, he summed up his argument: ‘what we call the Fall of the Western Roman empire was an imaginative experiment that got a little out of hand.’ Rome did fall, but only because it had voluntarily delegated away its own power, not because it had been successfully invaded.

Like the new and positive ‘Late Antiquity’, the idea that the Germanic invasions were in fact a peaceful accommodation has had a mixed reception. The world at large has seemingly remained content with a dramatic ‘Fall of the Roman empire’, played out as a violent and brutal struggle between invaders and invaded (Fig. 1.5). But, amongst historians, the new thinking has definitely had an effect, particularly on the overall packaging of the Germanic settlements. For instance, a recent European volume about the first post-Roman states is entitled *Kingdoms of the Empire: The Integration of Barbarians in Late Antiquity*. There is no hint here of invasion or force, nor even that the Roman empire came to an end; instead there is a strong suggestion that the incomers fitted easily into a continuing and evolving Roman world.

To be fair, Goffart himself acknowledged that his account of peaceful accommodation was not the full story—some of the Germanic incomers had simply seized what they wanted by violence. After all, he stated clearly that the late Roman experiment in buying military support had ‘got a little out of hand’. But such nuances seem to have been forgotten in some recent works, which present the theory of peaceful accommodation as a universally applicable model to explain the end of the Roman empire. For instance, two distinguished American historians have recently stated that
the barbarian settlements occurred ‘in a natural, organic, and generally eirenical manner’, and take issue with those historians who still ‘demonize the barbarians and problematize the barbarian settlements’—in other words, those who still believe in violent and unpleasant invasion. As someone who is convinced that the coming of the Germanic peoples was very unpleasant for the Roman population, and that the long-term effects of the dissolution of the empire were dramatic, I feel obliged to challenge such views.
In 446 Leo, bishop of Rome, wrote to his colleagues in the North African province of Mauretania Caesariensis. In this letter Leo grappled with the problem of how the Church should treat nuns raped by the Vandals some fifteen years earlier, as they passed through Mauretania on their way to Carthage—‘handmaids of God who have lost the integrity of their honour through the oppression of the barbarians’, as he discreetly put it. His suggestion was intended to be humane, though it will seem cruel to a modern reader. He agreed that these women had not sinned in mind. Nonetheless, he decreed that the violation of their bodies placed them in a new intermediate status, above holy widows who had chosen celibacy only late in life, but below holy virgins who were bodily intact. Leo advised the raped women that ‘they will be more praiseworthy in their humility and sense of shame, if they do not dare to compare themselves to uncontaminated virgins’. These unfortunate nuns and Bishop Leo would be very surprised, and not a little shocked, to learn that it is now fashionable to play down the violence and unpleasantness of the invasions that brought down the empire in the West.

The Use and the Threat of Force

The Germanic invaders of the western empire seized or extorted through the threat of force the vast majority of the territories in which they settled, without any formal agreement on how to share resources with their new Roman subjects. The impression given by some recent historians that most Roman territory was formally ceded to them as part of treaty arrangements is quite simply wrong. Wherever the evidence is moderately
full, as it is from the Mediterranean provinces, conquest or surrender to the threat of force was definitely the norm, not peaceful settlement.

A treaty between the Roman government and the Visigoths, which settled the latter in Aquitaine in 419, features prominently in all recent discussions of ‘accommodation’. But those historians who present this settlement as advantageous to Romans and Visigoths alike do not go on to say that the territory granted in 419 was tiny in comparison to what the Visigoths subsequently wrested by actual force, or by the threat of force, from the Roman government and from the Roman provincials. The agreed settlement of 419 was centred on the Garonne valley between Toulouse and Bordeaux. By the end of the century the Visigoths had expanded their power in all directions, conquering or extorting a vastly larger area: all south-west Gaul as far as the Pyrenees; Provence, including the two great cities of Arles and Marseille; Clermont and the Auvergne; and almost the entire Iberian peninsula (Fig. 2.1). 2 From Clermont we have some contemporary evidence of the local response to their expansion. Armed resistance was organized by the city’s bishop and aristocracy, and was for a time vigorous and effective. Clermont surrendered to the Visigoths only on the orders of the Roman government in Italy, which hoped thereby to save Provence and the strategically much more important cities of Arles and Marseille. We are told, admittedly by a very partisan source, that at one point during a siege, rather than surrender, the starving inhabitants of Clermont were reduced to eating grass. 3 This is all a very far cry from a peaceful and straightforward ‘accommodation’ of the Visigoths into the provincial life of Roman Gaul.

The experience of conquest was, of course, very varied across the empire. Some regions were overrun brutally but swiftly. For example, the Vandals’ conquest of North Africa, starting in 429 and culminating in the capture of Carthage in 439, was a terrible shock to an area of the empire that had escaped unscathed earlier troubles, and we have already encountered the nuns of Mauretania who were caught up in this violence. But after 439 Africa was spared further Germanic invasion, although it increasingly had its own native problems, from the fierce Berber tribes of the interior.

Other regions, particularly those near the frontiers of the empire, suffered from much more prolonged violence. Northern, eastern, and central Gaul, for instance, were contested in the fifth century between a bewildering number of warring groups: Romans, Bacaudae, Britons, Saxons, Franks, Burgundians, Thuringians, Alamans, Alans, and Goths all
fought for control of Gaul, sometimes in alliance with each other, but sometimes fragmented into even smaller groupings. This unrest lasted for almost a century after the Germanic crossing of the Rhine during the winter of 406–7. In this part of the Roman world, a degree of internal peace and stability returned only at the end of the fifth century, with the establishment of larger Frankish and Burgundian kingdoms. Similarly, though for a somewhat shorter period—from 409 until the Visigothic conquests of the 470s—control of the Iberian peninsula was fought over by Romans, Bacaudae, Alans, Sueves, Goths, and two distinct groups of Vandals. The *Chronicle* written by Hydatius, a bishop based in the north-west of the peninsula, gives a highly abbreviated but none the less
depressing account of the repeated raiding and invasion that were the inevitable consequence of this contest for power. Hydatius associated the arrival of the barbarians in Spain with the four scourges prophesied in the Book of Revelations, and claimed that mothers were even driven to kill, cook, and eat their own children. More prosaically, and more reliably, in 460 he himself was seized inside his cathedral church by a band of Sueves who held him prisoner for three months.⁴

Even those few regions that eventually passed relatively peacefully into Germanic control had all previously experienced invasion and devastation. For instance, the territory in Aquitaine that was ceded to the Visigoths in the settlement of 419 had already suffered raids and devastation between 407 and 409, and in 413 large parts of it had again been ravaged, this time by the Visigoths themselves, the future ‘peaceful’ settlers of the region.⁵ A similar story can be told of Italy and of the city of Rome. During the middle years of the fifth century Italy slipped slowly and quietly into Germanic hands, culminating in a coup and brief civil war in 476, which deposed the last resident western emperor, sent him into retirement, and established an independent kingdom. If this were the whole story of Italy’s late antique contact with the Germanic peoples, it would indeed have been a remarkably peaceful transition. However, between 401 and 412 the Goths had marched, at one time or another, the length and breadth of the peninsula, while in 405–6 another invading army had troubled the north and centre. The widespread damage caused by these incursions is shown by the extensive tax relief that the imperial government was forced to grant in 413, the year after the Goths had left the peninsula. This was a time when the emperor desperately needed more, rather than less, money, not only to fight the invaders, but also to resist a string of pretenders to the throne. Yet it was decreed in 413 that, for a five-year period, all the provinces of central and southern Italy were to be excused four-fifths of their tax burden in order to restore them to well-being. Furthermore, the damage that the Goths had inflicted appears to have been long-lasting. In 418, six years after the Goths had left Italy for good, several provinces were still struggling to pay even this substantially reduced rate of taxation, and had to be granted an extended and increased remission.⁶

The city of Rome was a powerful bargaining counter in negotiations with the western emperor, and it was repeatedly besieged by the Goths, before being captured and sacked over a three-day period in August 410.
We are told that during one siege the inhabitants were forced progressively ‘to reduce their rations and to eat only half the previous daily allowance, and later, when the scarcity continued, only a third’. ‘When there was no means of relief, and their food was exhausted, plague not unexpectedly succeeded famine. Corpses lay everywhere . . . ’ The eventual fall of the city, according to another account, occurred because a rich lady ‘felt pity for the Romans who were being killed off by starvation and who were already turning to cannibalism’, and so opened the gates to the enemy.\(^7\)

Nor was the departure of the Goths for Gaul in 412 the end of the woes of Rome and Italy. In 439 the Vandals seized the port and fleet at Carthage, on the North African coast opposite Sicily, and began a period of sea-raiding and conquest in the Mediterranean. Sicily, up to this date immune from trouble, was particularly badly affected, but Vandal raids also reached much further afield. In 455 a Vandal fleet captured Rome itself, and, over a fourteen-day period, subjected it to a second, much more systematic, sack, eventually sailing back to Carthage with its ships laden with booty and captives. Amongst the prisoners were the widow and two daughters of the late emperor of the West, Valentinian III. These imperial women, being very valuable, were certainly treated with care; but other captives had a far harder time—we are told that the then bishop of Carthage sold his church’s plate in order to buy prisoners and prevent families from being broken up, when husbands, wives, and children were sold separately into slavery.\(^8\)

**Living through Invasion**

A remarkable text, the *Life* of a late-fifth-century saint, provides a vivid account of what it was like to live in a province under repeated attack. Severinus was born in the East, but chose for his ministry a western frontier province, Noricum Ripense, on the south bank of the Danube, now within modern Austria and Bavaria (Fig. 2.2). He arrived in Noricum shortly after 453, and remained there for almost thirty years, until his own death. Like the accounts of other saints’ lives, that of Severinus does not provide a coherent and full record of political and military events during his lifetime; rather it is a collection of vignettes, centred around his miracles. However, because Severinus served a provincial population under attack, the *Life* provides plenty of circumstantial detail on relations
between Roman provincials and the Germanic invaders. It is also fortunate that the author of the Life, Eugippius, who shared many of Severinus’ experiences in Noricum, was a good raconteur.9

By the time Severinus arrived, Noricum had already experienced nearly fifty years of insecurity and warfare, including a short-lived revolt against imperial rule by the Noricans themselves.10 It would seem that during these decades Roman administration, and any control over the province from the imperial court in Italy, had already disappeared. There is no mention in the Life of a Roman governor of Noricum, nor of an imperial military commander, and the neighbouring provinces, of Raetia and Pannonia, seem already to have fallen almost completely into Germanic hands. Eugippius indeed describes the Roman defences of the Danube as a thing of the past: ‘Throughout the time that the Roman empire existed,
the soldiery of many towns was maintained at public expense for the
defence of the frontier. When this practice fell into abeyance, both these
troops and the frontier disappeared.’ He goes on to tell a wonderfully
evocative story of how the last vestige of imperial military power in the
region finally came to an end. Apparently, despite the general collapse of
the Roman defensive system, one imperial garrison, that of the city of
Batavis, was still in existence in Severinus’ time. But the only way the
soldiers could receive their pay was by sending some of their number south
and over the Alps into Italy to collect it. On the very last occasion that this
was done, the emissaries ‘were killed during the journey by barbarians’;
their bodies were later found washed up on the banks of the river. No more
imperial pay ever reached Batavis.11

During Severinus’ time, the defence of the region seems to have
depended, not on imperial organization, nor even on a united provincial
defence, but on the initiative of individual cities. Furthermore, local con-
trol does not seem to have extended far beyond the walled settlements; a
number of different Germanic peoples were active, raiding or fighting,
deep within the province—above all Rugi and Alamans, but also Thuring-
ians, Ostrogoths, and Herules—and the Life records several incidents in
which people were either killed or captured in the Norican countryside.
Two men, for instance, were seized in broad daylight within two miles of
the city of Favianis, having left the safety of the walls to gather in the fruit
harvest.12

In the years that he spent in Noricum, Severinus was able to help the
 provincials in their dealings with the invaders in a number of different
ways. On one occasion, it was his miraculous foretelling of events that
saved the city of Lauriacum from a surprise attack; but for the most part
his aid seems to have been more mundane. In particular, he was able to win
the respect of successive kings of the Rugi and Alamans, despite the fact
that the latter were still pagan, and to intervene with them on his flock’s
behalf. When an Alaman king came to visit Severinus in Batavis, the latter
was able to negotiate the release of around seventy captives.13 However,
the Life makes it clear that, over the course of Severinus’ stay, what power
and independence still remained to the Noricans gradually ebbed away.
The city of Tiburnia escaped capture only by buying off its besiegers;
while Asturis, Ioviaco, and Batavis all fell to assault. Ioviaco, we are told,
was captured by Herules, who ‘made a surprise attack, sacked the town, led
many into captivity’, and hanged a priest who had been foolish enough to
ignore Severinus’ warnings to abandon the settlement; and at Batavis, when the city fell to Thuringians, those still in the town (having ignored similar saintly warnings) were either killed or led into captivity.\footnote{14}

The inhabitants of Quintanis, in the face of danger, abandoned their city for Batavis, and then withdrawn further (along with many of the inhabitants of Batavis) to Lauriacum. The inhabitants of Lauriacum, the last independent city-dwellers of Noricum, were at last helped by Severinus to negotiate their own surrender to the Rugian king, and were resettled in towns that were already his tributaries.\footnote{15} Even before the death of the saint in about 482, all Noricum Ripense was in Germanic hands.

Despite these sorry events, there was some scope for negotiation and for peaceful coexistence. We have already met Severinus negotiating, with varying degrees of success, with leaders of the Rugi and Alamans. According to Eugippius, who of course would want to put as good a gloss on this outcome as possible, the inhabitants of Lauriacum, on surrendering with Severinus’ help, left their city, and, ‘after being placed peacefully in other settlements, lived with the Rugi on friendly terms’.\footnote{16} Even without the help of a saint, townspeople were able to come to agreements with the invaders: before Severinus’ arrival, the city of Comagenis had already entered into a treaty arrangement with a group of barbarians, who provided the town with a garrison. This looks at first glance like a mutually advantageous accommodation: the Germanic soldiers simply replaced the absent Roman army, and protected Comagenis. However, since the townsmen then required a miracle from Severinus in order to drive this garrison out, it is clear what kind of ‘protection’ was being provided.\footnote{17} This was an accommodation made in a context of violence, and between parties in a very unequal and tense power relationship.

\footnote{1000}

The Life of Severinus makes it clear that the process of invasion was highly unpleasant for the people who had to live through it, although it is difficult to specify quite how unpleasant—partly because intervening periods of peace are not recorded, and partly because it is always impossible to quantify horror, however vividly described. In other regions of the West, this problem is gravely exacerbated by the lack of good narrative sources covering the fifth century. We are often dependent, at best, on bald chronicle entries almost entirely shorn of detail. The following extract, from the Chronicle of Hydatius, describing events in the Iberian peninsula during...
the year 459, gives an idea of the kind of evidence we have. This, it should be noted, in comparison to most chronicles, is unusually full and detailed:

Theoderic [king of the Visigoths] sends a section of his army to Baetica under his commander Sunieric; Cyrila is recalled to Gaul. Nevertheless, the Sueves under Maldras pillage parts of Lusitania; others under Rechimund, parts of Gallaecia.

On their way to Baetica, the Herules attack with great cruelty several places along the coast of the district of Lucus.

Maldras [the Sueve] killed his brother, and the same enemy attacks the fort of Portus Cale.

With the killing of several who were nobly-born, an evil hostility arises between the Sueves and the Gallaecians.18

This was written by a man in the thick of many of these events; but, besides accepting that a great deal of unpleasant military activity is going on, it is very hard to know what to deduce from such a laconic account. What exactly happened when an ‘evil hostility’ arose between the Sueves and the Gallaecians?

For more detail, we are often dependent on moralizing tracts, written with a clear purpose in mind, in which accounts of atrocities have been tailored to fit the overall argument. Very occasionally, we have good reason to suspect that their authors have deliberately underplayed the unpleasantness of events. The Christian apologist Orosius, for instance, wrote a History against the Pagans in 417–18, in which he set himself the unenviable task of proving that, despite the disasters of the early fifth century, the pagan past had actually been worse than the troubled Christian present. In describing the Gothic sack of Rome in 410, Orosius did not wholly deny its unpleasantness (which he attributed to the wrath of God on Rome’s sinful inhabitants). But he also dwelt at length on the respect shown by the Goths for the Christian shrines and saints of the city; and he claimed that the events of 410 were not as bad as two disasters that had occurred during pagan times—the sack of Rome by the Gauls in 390 BC, and the burning and despoiling of the city under the Nero.19

Many years later, in the mid-sixth century, the historian and apologist of the Goths, Jordanes, also tackled the topic of the Gothic sack of Rome—an event that created very obvious problems for the implausible central thesis of his work, that Goths and Romans were by nature allies and friends. Jordanes’ solution, although hardly satisfactory, was to pass
very swiftly over the sack, making the best of it that he could with the help of Orosius: ‘On entering Rome at last, on the orders of Alaric they [the Goths] only looted it, and did not, as barbarian peoples normally do, set it on fire; and they allowed almost no damage to be inflicted on the shrines of the saints. They [then] left Rome . . .’. This very brief account (only two lines of printed Latin) can be contrasted with the 171 lines that Jordanes dedicated to an alliance of Goths and Romans, which defeated Attila and the Huns in 451.\(^20\)

However, such toned-down descriptions of atrocities are rare; it is much more common to find violent events presented with very obvious added highlights. Here, for instance, is the sixth-century British historian Gildas, describing the consequences of the revolt and invasions of the Anglo-Saxons: ‘All the major towns were laid low by the repeated battering of enemy rams; laid low, too, all the inhabitants—church leaders, priests and people alike, as the sword glinted all around and the flames crackled . . . There was no burial to be had except in the ruins of houses or the bellies of beasts and birds . . .’. While here, in graphic detail, Victor of Vita, the chronicler of Vandal religious intolerance, tells of the horrors that occurred after the Vandals crossed into Africa over the Straits of Gibraltar in 429: ‘in their barbaric frenzy they even snatched children from their mothers’ breasts and dashed the guiltless infants to the ground. They held others by the feet, upside down, and cut them in two . . .’.\(^21\)

Both Gildas and Victor of Vita were writing at some distance in time from the events they described. But apocalyptic descriptions of the violence of invasion can also be found in the writings of contemporaries. The account of the passage of the Vandals provided by Possidius, who lived through these events, is not, for instance, very different in tone from that given by Victor of Vita: ‘Everywhere throughout the regions of Mauretania . . . they [the Vandals] gave vent to their rage by every kind of atrocity and cruelty, devastating everything they possibly could by pillage, murder, various tortures, fires, and other indescribable evil deeds. No sex or age was spared, not even God’s priests and ministers . . .’.

It is indeed in a poem contemporary to the events, that we find the most highly coloured description of the invasion of Gaul in the years 407–9:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{Some lay as food for dogs; for many, a burning roof} \\
\text{Both took their soul, and cremated their corpse.} \\
\text{Through villages and villas, through countryside and market-place,}
\end{align*}
\]
Through all regions, on all roads, in this place and that,
There was Death, Misery, Destruction, Burning, and Mourning.
The whole of Gaul smoked on a single funeral pyre.22

Of course these descriptions are exaggerated for rhetorical effect: not everyone in Britain was buried in the ruins of a burnt house or in the belly of a beast; the whole of Gaul did not smoke in a single funeral pyre, however striking the image; and Victor of Vita’s account of heartless baby-killers is surely an attempt to cast the Vandals in the role of ‘new Herods’. But such accounts did not emerge from nowhere. The experience of all wars is that armies, unless under very tight discipline, commit atrocities—and no one would suggest that the Germanic armies were under strict control. The truth, perhaps, is that the experience of invasion was terrible; though not as terrible as the experience of civilian populations in some medieval and modern conflicts, in which ideological difference encouraged cold-blooded and systematic brutality, over and above the ‘normal’ horrors of war. Fortunately for the Romans, invading Germanic peoples did not despise them, and had entered the empire in the hope of enjoying the fruits of Roman material comfort—but, equally, the invaders were not angels who have simply been badly maligned (or ‘problematised’, to use modern jargon) by prejudiced Roman observers.

All too rarely can we give substance and support to literary accounts, through the survival of a more prosaic document focused on the painful consequences of a particular episode. We have already encountered Leo’s letter to the bishops of Mauretania dealing with the impact of Vandal rape, which shows that the highly coloured accounts of Vandal brutality offered by Victor of Vita and Possidius were not entirely invented. In 458 Leo had to write a similar letter to the bishop of the north Italian city of Aquileia, which six years earlier had been captured and sacked by Attila’s Huns—an event that was blamed by later writers as the cause of the town’s ruin.23 In the absence of good archaeological evidence, it is currently impossible to say exactly how destructive this sack really was, but Leo’s letter provides a remarkable insight into some of the human misery that it caused. As with the Mauretanian nuns, Leo was asked his advice over a moral conundrum. In 452 the Huns had taken many men off into slavery; some of these had managed to regain their freedom, and were now returning home. Unfortunately, in several cases they had come back to find that their wives, despairing of ever seeing them again, had remarried. Leo, of
course, ordered that these wives put aside their second husbands. But, appreciating the circumstances, he commanded that neither the bigamous wives nor their second husbands should be blamed for what had happened, as long as all returned willingly to the previous state of affairs. He does not tell us what should happen to any children of these second unions.  

**Barbarian Bitterness?**

It may be a mistake to assume that the invaders were innocent of all hatred, and at worst only boisterously bad. The Romans were traditionally highly dismissive of ‘barbarians’, and despite increasing and ever-closer contacts during the later fourth and fifth centuries (including marriage alliances between the imperial family and the Germanic royal houses), some very offensive Roman attitudes survived for a very long time. It is easy to find in the Latin literature of the age the sentiment that barbarians were uncouth and beneath consideration, or indeed that the best barbarian was a dead barbarian. In 393 the Roman aristocrat Symmachus brought a group of Saxon prisoners to Rome, intending that they publicly slaughter each other in gladiatorial games held to honour his son. However, before they were exhibited, twenty-nine of them committed suicide by the only means available to them—by strangling each other with their bare hands. For us, their terrible death represents a courageous act of defiance. But Symmachus viewed their suicide as the action of a ‘group of men viler than Spartacus’, which had been sent to test him. With the self-satisfaction of which only Roman aristocrats were capable, he compared his own philosophical response to the event to the calm of Socrates when faced with adversity.

In the same year, 393, thousands of Goths died fighting in northern Italy for the emperor Theodosius, at the battle of the River Frigidus, thereby gaining him victory over the usurper Eugenius. Early in the fifth century, the Christian apologist Orosius had no qualms in celebrating this as a double triumph for Theodosius—not only over Eugenius, but also over his own Gothic soldiers: ‘To have lost these was surely a gain, and their defeat a victory.’ A little later, in around 440, the moralist Salvian praised the barbarians for being better in their behaviour than the Romans. At first sight this seems to represent a marked change in Roman attitudes. But Salvian’s praise was intended to shock his fellow Romans
into contrition: ‘I know that to most people it will seem intolerable that I say we are worse than the barbarians.’ Salvian’s true feelings towards barbarians are revealed in a passage where he writes of Romans driven by oppression to join them—despite sharing neither their religious beliefs, nor their language, ‘nor indeed . . . the stench that barbarian bodies and clothes give off’.27

These dismissive and hostile sentiments were not kept quietly under wraps, for discussion only amongst Romans. The monuments of the empire were covered in representations of barbarians being brutally killed (Fig. 2.3); and one of the commonest designs of copper coin of the fourth century shows Rome’s view of the correct ordering of things—a barbarian being speared to death by a victorious Roman soldier (Fig. 2.4). The invaders must have been fully aware of these Roman sentiments towards them, and it is unlikely that they were wholly unaffected by them. Indeed we are told that Attila, on seeing a painting in Milan of enthroned Roman emperors with slaughtered Huns under their feet, had a new and more accurate scene depicted, with himself ‘upon a throne and the Roman emperors heaving sacks upon their shoulders and pouring out gold before his feet’.28

On the rare occasions the Romans of the late empire defeated an invading force in battle, they treated it, as they had always done, in a high-handed and comprehensive way, ensuring that it would never operate again as an independent unit. In 406 an invading Germanic force was trapped and defeated at Fiesole, near Florence. Some of the troops that surrendered were drafted into the Roman army; but its leader was at once executed, and many of his followers sold into slavery. One source, which was admittedly keen to emphasize the scale of the Roman victory, reports that ‘the number of Gothic captives was so great, that whole herds of men were sold together, each for a single gold coin, as if they were the cheapest of cattle’.29

Sometimes there was very immediate cause for bitterness on the part of the Germanic armies. In 408 Stilicho, a general in Roman service, born of a Roman mother and Vandal father, fell from power and was killed. Stilicho was an able warrior who had gained the trust of the emperor Theodosius (379–95), marrying his niece, Serena, and acquiring a position at the very heart of the Roman establishment. He became effective ruler of the West on behalf of Theodosius’ son, the young emperor Honorius (who married Stilicho’s daughter); he held the consulship (the
The right way to treat hostile barbarians, as shown on the column of Marcus Aurelius in Rome (built at the end of the second century AD). Above, captured males are being beheaded, apparently by fellow prisoners acting under duress; below, a woman and child are being led into slavery—while behind them another woman prisoner is stabbed in the chest by a Roman soldier.
most prestigious office in the empire) on two occasions; and he was given the exceptional honour by the Roman Senate of a silver-gilt statue in the Forum. Stilicho’s life and career show that the Roman state was well able to use and honour men of ‘barbarian’ descent; but events at his death reveal that his origins had not been forgotten, and that relations between the Romans and their Germanic soldiery were not entirely pragmatic and straightforward.

When news of Stilicho’s death spread, a murderous pogrom was launched in the cities of northern Italy against the defenceless wives and children of Germanic soldiers serving in the Roman army. Unsurprisingly, on hearing of this atrocity, the husbands immediately deserted the Roman army and joined the invading Goths. Later in the same year, as the Goths were camped outside Rome, they were joined by more recruits with no cause to love the Romans, a host of slaves who had escaped from the city. Many of these slaves and most of the soldiers who had lost their families in 408 were probably still in the Gothic army when it finally entered Rome in August 410. The subsequent sack of the city was probably not an entirely gentle affair.
The Roman Reaction to Invasion

Unsurprisingly, the defeats and disasters of the first half of the fifth century shocked the Roman world. This reaction can be charted most fully in the perplexed response of Christian writers to some obvious and awkward questions. Why had God, so soon after the suppression of the public pagan cults (in 391), unleashed the scourge of the barbarians on a Christian empire; and why did the horrors of invasion afflict the just as harshly as they did the unjust? The scale of the literary response to these difficult questions, the tragic realities that lay behind it, and the ingenious nature of some of the answers that were produced, are all worth examining in detail. They show very clearly that the fifth century was a time of real crisis, rather than one of accommodation and peaceful adjustment.31

It was an early drama in the West, the capture of the city of Rome itself in 410, that created the greatest shock waves within the Roman world. In military terms, and in terms of lost resources, this event was of very little consequence, and it certainly did not spell the immediate end of west Roman power. But Rome, although it had seldom been visited by emperors during the fourth century, remained in the hearts and minds of Romans the City: all freeborn men of the empire were its citizens. Not for eight centuries, since the Gauls had sacked Rome in 390 BC, had Rome been captured by barbarians; and on that occasion the pagan gods, and the honking of some sacred geese, had saved the city’s last bastion, the Capitol, from falling to a surprise attack.

The initial response to the news of Rome’s fall was one of stunned surprise. It is typified by Jerome, who was living in Palestine at the time, and who recorded his reaction in the prefaces to his commentaries on Ezekiel. Jerome, understandably, saw the City as the head of the Roman body politic, and his first response was to expect the empire to die with it:

The brightest light of the whole world is extinguished; indeed the head has been cut from the Roman empire. To put it more truthfully, the whole world has died with one City.

Who would have believed that Rome, which was built up from victories over the whole world, would fall; so that it would be both the mother and the tomb to all peoples.32

Rome’s fall, however, did not bring down the empire (indeed its impact on eastern provinces like Palestine was minimal). The longer-term Chris-
tian response to the disaster therefore had to be more subtle and sustained than Jerome’s initial shock, particularly because the pagans now, not unreasonably, attributed Roman failure to the abandonment by the State of the empire’s traditional gods, who for centuries had provided so much security and success. The most sophisticated, radical, and influential answer to this problem was that offered by Augustine, who in 413 (initially in direct response to the sack of Rome) began his monumental *City of God*.33 Here he successfully sidestepped the entire problem of the failure of the Christian empire by arguing that all human affairs are flawed, and that a true Christian is really a citizen of Heaven. Abandoning centuries of Roman pride in their divinely ordained state (including Christian pride during the fourth century), Augustine argued that, in the grand perspective of Eternity, a minor event like the sack of Rome paled into insignificance.

No other author remotely matched the depth and sophistication of Augustine’s solution, but many others grappled with the problem. The Spanish priest Orosius in his *History against the Pagans*, like Augustine, specifically refuted pagan claims that Christianity had brought about Rome’s decline. His solution, however, was very different, since he wrote in a brief period of renewed optimism, at the end of the second decade of the fifth century. Orosius looked forward to better times, hoping that some of the invaders themselves would be the restorers of Rome’s position and renown. In a rather dreary game of literary tit-for-tat, he matched every disaster of Christian times with an even worse catastrophe from the pagan past (see above, p. 21).34

Orosius’ optimism soon proved misguided, and Christian apologists generally had to bat on a very sticky wicket, starting from the premise that secular affairs were indeed desperate. Most resorted to what rapidly became Christian platitudes in the face of disaster. The author of the *Poem on the Providence of God*, composed in Gaul in about 416, exhorted Christians to consider whether these troubles had been brought about by their own sins, and encouraged them to realize that earthly happiness and earthly treasures are but dust and ashes, and nothing to the rewards that await us in Heaven (lines 903–9):

This man groans for his lost silver and gold,
Another is racked by the thought of his stolen goods
And of his jewellery now divided amongst Gothic brides.
This man mourns for his stolen flock, burnt houses, and drunk wine, 
And for his wretched children and ill-omened servants. 
But the wise man, the servant of Christ, loses none of these things, 
Which he despises; he has already placed his treasure in Heaven.35

The poem is such a powerful evocation of looting and destruction that one wonders how much consolation people would have found in it.

In a similar vein and also in early fifth-century Gaul, Orientius of Auch confronted the difficult reality that good Christian men and women were suffering unmerited and violent deaths. Not unreasonably, he blamed mankind for turning God’s gifts, such as fire and iron, to warlike and destructive ends. He also cheerfully reminded his readers that we are all dying anyway, and that it matters little whether our end comes to us immediately and violently, or creeps up on us unseen:

Every hour draws us a little closer to our death: 
At the very time we are speaking, we are slowly dying.36

A little later, in the 440s, Salvian, a priest from the region of Marseille, addressed the central and difficult questions, ‘Why has God allowed us to become weaker and more miserable than all the tribal peoples? Why has he allowed us to be defeated by the barbarians, and subjected to the rule of our enemies?’ Salvian’s solution was to attribute the disasters of his age to the wickedness of his contemporaries, which had brought divine judgement down upon their own heads. In this he was on ground firmly established by the Old Testament, to explain the fluctuating fortunes of the Children of Israel. Salvian, however, gave this very traditional interpretation an interesting, but not entirely convincing, twist. Rather than depict the barbarians as mindless instruments of God, faceless scourges like the Assyrians or Philistines of old, he argued that their success was also due to their own virtue: ‘We enjoy immodest behaviour; the Goths detest it. We avoid purity; they love it. Fornication is considered by them a crime and a danger; we honour it.’37 This was an ingenious attempt to argue for the fall of the West as doubly just: the wicked (Romans) are punished; and the virtuous (Germanic invaders) are rewarded.

By the mid-fifth century, authors in the West had no doubt that Roman affairs were in a parlous state. Salvian had this to say, albeit within the highly rhetorical context of a call to repentance:
Where now is the ancient wealth and dignity of the Romans? The Romans of old were most powerful; now we are without strength. They were feared; now it is we who are fearful. The barbarian peoples paid them tribute; now we are the tributaries of the barbarians. Our enemies make us pay for the very light of day, and our right to life has to be bought. Oh what miseries are ours! To what a state we have descended! We even have to thank the barbarians for the right to buy ourselves off them! What could be more humiliating and miserable!

A few years later, the so-called Chronicler of 452 summed up the situation in Gaul in very similar terms, bemoaning the spread of both the barbarians and the heretical brand of Christianity to which they adhered: ‘The Roman state has been reduced to a miserable condition by these troubles, since not one province exists without barbarian settlers; and throughout the world the unspeakable heresy of the Arians, that has become so embedded amongst the barbarian peoples, displaces the name of the Catholic church.’

It has rightly been observed that the deposition in 476 of the last emperor resident in Italy, Romulus Augustulus, caused remarkably little stir: the great historian of Antiquity, Momigliano, called it the ‘noiseless fall of an empire’. But the principal reason why this event passed almost unnoticed was because contemporaries knew that the western empire, and with it autonomous Roman power, had already disappeared in all but name. Jerome, in writing the empire’s epitaph in 410, was decidedly premature; but it is hard to dispute the gloomy picture from the 440s and 450s of Salvian and of the Chronicler. These men were well aware of the disasters that had engulfed the West; and they would have been astonished by the modern mirage of an accommodating and peaceful fifth century.