Rome’s Final Conquest: The Barbarians
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Abstract
The standard account of Rome’s dealing with the barbarians in late antiquity describes dynamically expanding Germans and an Empire succumbing beneath their pressure. Offered here is an alternative scenario. Its starting point is that the barbarians and Rome, instead of being in constant conflict with each other, occupied a joined space, a single world in which both were entitled to share. What we call the barbarian invasions was primarily a drawing of foreigners into Roman service, a process sponsored, encouraged, and rewarded by Rome. Simultaneously, the Romans energetically upheld their supremacy. Many barbarian peoples were suppressed and vanished; the survivors were persuaded and learned to shoulder Roman tasks. Rome was never discredited or repudiated. The future endorsed and carried forward what the Empire stood for in religion, law, administration, literacy, and language.

The period known as the early Middle Ages followed the later Roman Empire; but did it do so as night follows day or as morning follows dawn? The German philosopher Johann Gottfried Herder said this about the fall of Rome: ‘Everything was exhausted, unnerved, shattered . . . going under in excess, vice, disorder, license, . . . an emaciated corpse lying in a pool of blood’.1 If like Herder you see Rome ending in depravity and a field of ruins, with savages camping in the ashes, then a tragedy has happened, a calamity that would take centuries to repair – a genuine Dark Age. People have looked at early Europe in this way since the sixteenth century; and many people still do.

But new stories have been told, especially in the last half-century. They have particularly affected the Roman landscape. In 1964, A. H. M. Jones published a decisive reevaluation of the late Roman world. Jones contradicted the Herder-like thesis of internal Roman decay. He argued forcefully that the later Empire was domestically sound; the internal problems of the Empire did not add up to decline.2 Other encouraging news soon came. As early as the 1940s, and even earlier for art history, scholars had arrived at positive assessments of the intellectual, artistic, and religious life of the late Roman world. This thread has been picked up by a small army of scholars headed by Peter Brown.3 Things are
looking up for what Jones called ‘the later Roman Empire’ and everyone now calls ‘late antiquity’. The period was vibrant and creative, anything but decadent. The early Middle Ages were not dark; they followed a late Rome whose religion, writings, and artistic creations offered ample nourishment to the medieval future.

There is more to late antiquity, however, than religion and art. Where do the barbarian invasions and great migrations fit into all this? Peter Brown and his disciples have focused on the eastern Mediterranean; barbarians are almost unnoticed in the recent multi-author *Guide to the Postclassical World*, which lacks entries for even the Visigoths and the Franks. The place of the barbarians in late antiquity has long been my particular obsession. What follows are some developed reflections on this subject, and my title, ‘Rome’s Final Conquest’, suggests the direction I am going to take.

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In the decades since World War II, there has been an informal and unacknowledged convergence of the established narrative of the barbarian invasions with the account championed by historians of the later Roman Empire. Each version reinforces and corroborates the other. These stories also dovetail with the popular, vernacular conception of a Migration Age in which ‘warrior tribes . . . swept out of the forests of Europe and brought the vainglorious Roman Empire to its knees’. The wide range of agreement among these constituencies might be taken to confirm the rightness of their narratives, but it may represent instead the premature ending of a long argument. It is not as though there were no other possibilities. For a long time now, the evidence has occasioned less catastrophic readings, and the angle of vision might still be moved by a few degrees from its long-fixed direction.

The long-standing narrative of the Migration Age tells us of the Germanic peoples rising from remote origins in the north, then engaging in a long migration, attacking the Roman Empire, and ultimately founding kingdoms on Roman soil. The course of events is viewed as though from the distant side of the Roman border. The Germans, it seems, engaged in a centuries-long expansion occasioned by population increase and a search for more and better land. What the Germanic peoples did beyond the Roman borders and why they did it are taken as known. They are usually portrayed as forming a collective Germandom with a common culture and effectively acting in unison. Their concerted expansion hammered at the Empire with growing pressure until the barriers collapsed and human wave upon wave broke through, causing the Western Empire to collapse before them. The assailants established Germanic kingdoms on the conquered lands and introduced a distinctive Germanic culture.
This traditional narrative from a barbarian angle is not confined to a limited constituency. On the contrary, it converges with the image of destructive aliens championed from a Roman point of view. Two serious books on the fall of Rome were published at Oxford in 2005; both of them broadcast firm convictions that the barbarians took down the Roman Empire. One of the authors singles out the Huns as the aggressors-in-chief, the other is emphatic about the ruins piled up by the invaders. These convictions about the fall of Rome have been voiced before; for more than a half century, historians of the later Empire have drawn new attention to the barbarian impact. In 1947, André Piganiol exclaimed, ‘Roman civilization did not die a natural death. It was murdered’. The noted Cambridge historian A. H. M. Jones laid out the classic form of this argument in his great work of 1964 that has just been mentioned. Late Rome should not be underrated, he said: ‘The internal weaknesses of the empire cannot have been a major factor in its decline’; more emphasis should therefore be given to ‘the simple... view that the barbarians played a considerable part in the decline and fall of the empire’; ‘barbarian onslaughts... in persistence and weight of numbers’ were ‘the major cause of [the] fall’ of the West. Because Jones supplied a profound and positive appraisal of internal conditions, his reasoning about ‘barbarian onslaughts’ had compelling force. Piganiol, Jones, and the two Oxford books of 2005 reaffirm what German and Italian humanists already maintained in the sixteenth century and what has never ceased to be asserted since then. The vigorously expanding barbarians featured by the Germanic narratives of the great invasions turn smoothly into the dangerous empire-destroyers evoked by historians of the later Empire.

The course of events narrated from both standpoints emphasizes conflict. Barriers exist, and they are assailed; foes clash, some winning battles and others driven off. From the barbarian angle, heroic leaders are applauded for their exploits; campaigns and march routes are traced down to the founding of Germanic kingdoms on conquered soil, foreshadowing the main countries of medieval and modern Europe. The image of attacking barbarians is particularly encouraged by the famous, track- and arrow-filled map of the barbarian invasions that, in one form or another, is seen everywhere. Spokesmen for Rome have a complementary outlook. Eager for Roman endurance, they prize strenuous countermeasures over diplomacy. Foreigners in lofty Roman positions are noted but deplored; their exclusion is preferred. Barbarian pressure too strong for the Empire to withstand is often invoked. Incidents of antagonism and discord occupy the foreground. The repugnance of Romans for greasy-haired aliens is set emphatically before us. It’s a war between owners and trespassers, to be lost or won.

The Roman narrative rounds out the German one. Both chart an intrusion into the refined, peaceful, and productive life of the Empire – a sharp, unexpected, and costly interruption of the (proper) course of
history. The expression ‘barbarian invasions’ means disruption; so does the ‘fall’ of Rome. The foreigners broke through and did their worst, and that worst (as now argued) was very bad indeed: ‘the end of civilization’.\textsuperscript{14} In some quarters the energy of the barbarians is applauded, in others regretted. Gloriously or deplorably, the aliens moved and, as a result, diverted events from their normal flow. Rome was denied its (justified) expectation of eternity; the (destined) course of material progress was reversed; and, for better or worse, the Germans found their place in the sun, but in an age that they had darkened.

This antagonism cannot be the last word, however. The accounts of the barbarian invasions just outlined can be faulted and have long been contested. The dissenters have included eminent historians, such as the abbé J.-B. Dubos in the eighteenth century, N.-D. Fustel de Coulanges in the nineteenth, and Alfons Dopsch and Henri Pirenne in the twentieth.\textsuperscript{15} Five objections have proved particularly strong. First, the barbarians were not a united force, but a number of usually small-scale peoples not acting in concert. Next, these gentes lacked any group solidarity; even by modern standards they were not all Germans (e.g., Alans and Huns), and those whom we do call Germans did not know they were kin or behave as though they were.\textsuperscript{16} Most important, Rome’s neighbors had no strategic goal of ruining and replacing Rome; when given a chance, as they often were, they served the Empire, did so loyally, and enjoyed their rewards.\textsuperscript{17} The barbarian kingdoms of the fifth and sixth centuries were not Gothic, Burgundian, or Frankish initiatives resulting from armed conquest. They were created at the behest of Rome and on a Roman legal basis.\textsuperscript{18} And, lastly, the outcome of the encounter of Rome with its neighbors was positive. The early medieval period in western Europe was neither barbarous nor dark; it witnessed a fragmented but productive Roman-Christian civilization carrying on on Roman foundations of religion, law, administration, literacy, and language.\textsuperscript{19} Critical remarks like these may be telling, but are inadequate. However cogent and forceful the objections may be, they risk being no more than debating points. It is one thing to poke holes in established narratives, and another to devise a coherent alternative account of the course of events. No one has yet developed a comprehensive scenario to challenge the standard model of dynamic northerners and a succumbing Rome.

One aspect of the standard model seems particularly questionable, namely, the central premise of trespass and transgression. Violent and damaging clashes certainly took place; there is no denying the battle of Adrianople, Alaric’s and Geiseric’s sacks of Rome, Attila’s invasions of Gaul and Italy, the Saxon seizure of Britain, the toppling of Romulus Augustulus, and much else. These are the headlines featured in all our books. There is no denying either that the later Roman centuries experienced severe losses of economic sophistication and material comfort.\textsuperscript{20} The issue, however, is not whether such conflicts took place, or losses were experienced, but whether the barbarians of late antiquity should be regarded as outsiders
breaking in upon an inside, as a foreign world confronting and overturning a Roman world.

This opposition of outside and inside is deeply entrenched in historical tradition; it was massively reinforced in the Renaissance by both Italian and German commentators, and is still very much alive today. But it is an article of faith rather than a solid fact, and does not exclude a less confrontational perspective. The inhabitants of both sides of the Roman frontiers, instead of being opposed, may be regarded as denizens of a broad, joined space in which the multiple, disconnected barbarian peoples were no more alien, or less entitled to live and share, than the — again ostensibly alien — Christians, or the Romans themselves. In this perspective of a single space and a single world, the tragic conflicts intermittently pitting barbarians and Romans against each other would be judged in the same way as the tragic, and numerous, wars of Romans among themselves. The losses inflicted by barbarian action would not be set off in modern thinking as outrageous and monstrous by comparison with the merely mournful bloodshed and turmoil of civil strife.

Our handling of the theme of the barbarians and Rome does not have to be bisected by the Roman border. For us, the crucial fact should be that both barbarian and Roman antiquity are based on a common documentary basis; the neighbors of Rome come before us in just the same sources as the Empire itself. Greco-Roman authors may have disparaged the barbarians; yet the same disparagers, almost alone, permit us to know them. In the vision projected by these witnesses, we see that, regardless of which side of the border the foreigners occupied, they were there, like villains in a stage play, impossible to turn into unexpected or even unwelcome apparitions.

The barbarians, in their multiple splinters, are as legitimate tenants of late Roman history as those other latecomers, the Christians. They can be intelligible if viewed, not as aliens from afar blundering where they were not wanted, but as an integral component of the late Roman equation. Instead of being hostile intruders, the barbarians participated for better or worse in a single far-flung Rome that projected not only to its borders but beyond. It was the only world existing in that part of the globe, and Rome’s motley neighbors had no less rightful a claim to share in its present and future than did its motley citizens — e.g., the provincials of Numidia, Syria, or Britain. One fourth-century administrative document, the so-called Verona List, matter-of-factly integrates a catalogue of the provinces of the Empire with one of ‘the barbarian peoples who multiplied under the emperors’; inside and outside fitted into a single scheme. The Romans would not have dipped deeply into this labor pool if they had not thought that the barbarians were worthy partners in a common enterprise.

The standard model of the barbarian invasions hinges on conflict. An alternative to it is within reach. Some decades ago, M. I. Finley spoke as follows about the challenges facing late Rome:
Yet surely there were few Roman leaders, whether emperors or senators or field commanders, so stupid that they did not realize the enormity of Rome’s difficulties and the need for effort on a greater scale than had ever been required before.25

This diagnosis is valuable for helping us realize what did not happen. The barbarian problem as managed by late Rome did not involve driving away its neighbors and keeping them at as great a distance as possible, or for thickly manning the barriers and retaining every speck of territory.26 Instead of redoubling hostility toward foreigners, the later Empire was confident in its invincibility and, without being fixated on defense, continually explored how best to employ the valuable and sometimes dangerous human resource on its doorstep.

Its main course of action was straightforward and is well attested by our informants. Rome primarily dealt with the barbarians, outside the borders or within, as recruits to the imperial cause. They were to be generously encouraged on the one hand and severely disciplined on the other.27 The two lines of conduct – encouragement and coercion – were simultaneous, not contradictory; both were positive responses to the task of upholding the Roman hegemony, and they achieved their goal. The gigantic Empire eventually ceased to exist; even Constantinople almost fell; but the luster of ‘eternal Rome’ has never dimmed, and much that was embodied in its Empire – religion in the lead – was carried forward into the Middle Ages and beyond.

The argument I shall set out presupposes that the barbarian lands beyond the Roman frontier were not peopled by leagued enemies arrayed against an embattled imperial camp. Barbaricum, the zone of the barbarians, was a disordered and disadvantaged extension of the Empire. This is why Rome drew freely on foreign manpower, trusted its immigrant recruits, and promoted many of them to high commands. Both parties were understood to share in the goal of sustaining and cultivating the one and only world existing in that part of the globe. I also presuppose that the end of direct Roman control in a territory did not spell the end of its civilization or its ruin and replacement by alien savagery. The differences between Roman civilization and its early medieval successors were marked but limited, and one civilization fathered the others without interruption; ‘in the Middle Ages the empire was not more than half dead, and even now it is mighty yet’.28 The classical and Christian antiquity of the late Roman Empire had medieval tomorrows.

From the third to the seventh centuries two conspicuous themes structure and channel Roman doings vis-à-vis the fragmented peoples to the north and east of its borders. The first theme involves the Empire importing and organizing these foreigners as participants in the imperial enterprise, giving them tasks that benefited not only the Empire and its subjects but also themselves. The other theme allows us to see that Rome did not lose self-confidence in the face of its foreign recruits. The Roman leadership
adamantly and often destructively asserted its ascendancy over the barbarians, forcing them to toe its line or snuffing them out, and spiritedly upholding the preeminence of its culture and religion. The extraordinary cultural efflorescence of late antiquity, to which much attention has rightly been paid in recent decades, had a large part in bending the barbarians to the task of upholding Rome.

Recruiting on one hand and overawing on the other; the Roman Empire achieved its final conquest: the enlistment of the barbarians into carrying forward its fame. Under each of these rubrics, ample information can be set out. The best course for presenting it in a limited compass is to group individual incidents in two lists. The lists do not chart lines of consistent, deliberate policy by enlightened rulers, or constitute balanced capsule histories of Rome and the barbarians. They are sets of facts and incidents selected out of late Roman history to document my two themes of imperial recruitment and assertiveness. They illustrate what, to my mind, was going on regardless of the actors’ momentary intentions. Two sets of isolated headlines are shown, differing somewhat from those normally emphasized. Comments will be appended after each list to underscore and categorize their contents.

1. The Roman Empire recruits and organizes foreigners as participants in the imperial enterprise. A selection of representative incidents is catalogued in roughly chronological order. The list includes incidents of three kinds: (1) the importation and recruitment of barbarians; (2) the promotion of barbarians to major offices in the Roman state, up to and including marriage into the imperial family; and (3) the conveyance of Roman provinces to barbarian rulers. A few other facts, such as conversions to Christianity, are included. Date markers in round numbers are supplied in the left margin, for chronological orientation only.29

250 • Gordian III recruits Goths and Germans against Persia
• Valerian recruits Germans against Persia30
• Probus recruits defeated Vandals for service in Britain
• Probus settles Bastarnae within the Empire
• Western Herules form a crack regiment in the Roman army

300 • Goths assist Constantine against his rival Licinius
• Franks and Alamans are dominant in the West Roman army
• Sarmatians are resettled in Gaul and Italy
• Goths are admitted across the Danube on Roman terms
• Valens converts the Goths to Roman Christianity
• The Franks Nevitta, Merobaudes, Ricomer, and Bauto are named eponymous consuls31
• Alan troops are the favorites of the emperor Gratian
• The Frank Arbogast is generalissimo of the West
• Theodosius welcomes the Goth Athanaric and his followers
• Theodosius I marries his adopted daughter to a half-Vandal, Stilicho
• Gothic troops defeat Theodosius’s rivals, Maximus and Eugenius
• The Roman army lists (of the *Notitia dignitatum*) record the recruitment of Marcomanni, Quadi, Taifali, Tervingi, Gothi, Vandili, Alamanni, Iuthungi, Franci, Salii, Chamavi, Bructeri, Ampsivarii, Saxones, Sarmatae, Alani
• The emperor Arcadius marries the daughter of the Frankish general Bauto
• Stilicho becomes generalissimo of the West
• The Goth Alaric is appointed to successive Roman generalships
• Alans, Huns, Vandals, and Goths serve Stilicho against barbarian enemies
• Theodosius’s daughter, Galla Placidia, marries the Goth Athaulf
• Athaulf commits the Goths to sustaining the Roman Empire
• The Visigoths are settled on Roman terms in Aquitaine
• Huns are recruited to support the usurpation of John in Italy
• The Aspar dynasty of Alan generals dominates the East Roman court
• Saxons are recruited to carry out the defense of Britain
• The Burgundian remnants are settled on Roman terms in southeast Gaul
• Valentinian III’s daughter marries a Vandal prince
• Rugians, Herules, Sciri, and other ex-satellites of Attila are resettled by the East Roman government
• The Sueve-Goth Ricimer becomes generalissimo of the West
• The Alan, F. Ardaburius Aspar, declines the East Roman crown
• Leo I marries his daughter to the Isaurian general Tarasicodissa
• Sciri and Herules are recruited for the West Roman army
• Odoacer takes charge of the West Roman government
• Isaurians become dominant in the East Roman government
• The Goth Theoderic is named eponymous consul
• The Frank Childeric assumes the Roman role in northern Gaul
• The ex-consul Theoderic takes charge of the West Roman government
• Theoderic rebuilds the dominance of West Rome
• Childeric’s son, Clovis, adopts Roman (Catholic) Christianity
• Clovis receives consular insignias from the East Roman government
• The Catholic half-Roman Hilderic becomes king of the Vandals
• The Lombards are settled in Pannonia by the East Roman government
• Clovis’s sons annex the Thuringian and Burgundian kingdoms
• The Goths in Spain adopt Roman Christianity
• English kingdoms adopt Roman Christianity
• The Goths reunify Catholic Spain after two centuries of fragmentation

The fateful movement of the Migration Age was not impelled from outside in; it was an attraction – the Empire drawing foreigners into its forces and its tasks. The admission of the Goths into the Empire in 376
was only the boldest step in a process that had been going on at a steady pace for more than a century. Major external and internal wars were one reason for recruitment. A quieter and more ordinary course simply called for filling the ranks of existing Roman formations by drawing warriors and agricultural manpower from across the frontier. We do not know how many barbarians were recruited; there clearly was a perceptible movement of population. The decisive element was not the number of recruits but the steadiness, expansion, and irreversibility of the magnetic process – the replacement of expensive Roman conscripts by foreign volunteers.34

It is often said that the recruitment of foreigners entailed the substitution of ‘mercenaries’ for natives.35 In fact, the Roman army had for centuries been a paid, long-service, professional force whose support was item number one in the imperial budget. Foreigners were no more mercenary than native Roman troops, and they allowed the peasants of the provinces to be left undisturbed to till their fields.36

Rome’s involvement with barbarian troops went far beyond recruitment; they were promoted in a big way. Some of the recruits gained positions of eminence and responsibility: they populated the imperial bodyguards; they became imperial generals; they were appointed to the lofty honorific office of the consulate; they were made generalissimos at imperial courts;37 amazingly, they even won acceptance as imperial in-laws (the emperor Theodosius II was the grandson of a Frank; Valentinian III was the father-in-law of a Vandal king). Ultimately, barbarian leaders, together with their forces, were given rule over wide parts of the Empire, settled among the provincials, and expected to live at peace and in harmony with them, which in fact they did.38 This steady admission and promotion of foreigners in large numbers is the course of internal Roman history that has a better claim to being called the barbarian invasions than do the intermittent breaches of the imperial borders. Invasion by immigrants was sponsored, encouraged, and rewarded by Rome.

My concern in speaking of this immigration is not whether the barbarians were Romanized or not, but that they were harnessed to imperial tasks. Eventual assimilation of barbarians may or may not have taken place; whether it did has little importance.39 Foreigners did not have to change their spots in order to appropriate Roman religion, politics, law, or language. Their activities are the issue. Barbarians in high office pursued Roman agendas; barbarian kingdoms did too. When Franks defended the (once Roman) Rhine frontier and even extended it eastward into Thuringia, they were engaged in the Roman effort to safeguard Gaul and its Gallo-Roman population from disturbance. That they called themselves Franks when assuming this responsibility is a side issue. The most notorious case of performing Roman tasks is that of Theoderic the Ostrogoth in Italy, who headed and guided the established
West Roman government with distinction. This extraordinary leadership of a Roman machine overshadows Theoderic’s wearing Gothic hairstyles. In Spain, the successful efforts of King Leovigild and his successors to reunite the peninsula implemented a Roman rather than a Visigothic priority. *Imitatio imperii* was an explicit aim of Leovigild’s reign. None of the barbarians, not even the truculent Vandal, Geiseric, had ethnic programs of rule to carry out in place of the inherited obligations of the Empire.

Roman inventors or innovators were not needed to generate the idea of associating barbarians with the imperial enterprise. It had been a part of Rome’s art of government since the late Republic and before. Republican Rome had combined troops from allied Italian cities with its army, and they had a large part in its conquests; imperial Rome made the auxilia recruited from non-citizen provincials a permanent and valued part of the standing army. The difference in late antiquity was one of degree and boldness. Many of the items on my list may have simply been ad hoc responses to current crises or circumstances. The actions speak for themselves, pointing in a definite direction that no one may have wished to take but took nevertheless, as the preferable choice among distasteful options. What mattered ultimately was that the collective enterprise with which foreigners were associated was no different from that engaged in by the natives; there was no alternative goal than the well-being of the Roman hegemony. Athaulf, king of the Visigoths, spoke for all barbarian recruits when 'he chose to seek for himself the glory of completely restoring and increasing the Roman name by the forces of the Goths'. He recognized that the only choice he had was to have his Goths be the spearhead in upholding the Roman world.

On the Roman side, a deliberate policy of being friendly toward barbarians sometimes reared its head, but made little difference. Theodosius I is tagged as a philobarbarian, welcoming foreigners out of principle, or so some thought. In keeping with the original admission of the Goths by Valens, he accommodated the Gothic victors of Adrianople on imperial soil instead of wiping them out with exemplary ferocity. At least one commentator (a non-Christian) blamed him for undermining the Empire. Arguments of this sort turned out to be irrelevant. As friends or foes, foreigners were a part of the equation; ignoring them was not an option. Apparent changes of course quickly returned to unavoidable tracks. The imperial court that executed Stilicho for his leniency toward Alaric ended up giving the Visigoths favorable terms. The East Roman government, sometimes thought to have been barbarophobe, in fact relied more on barbarian strong-men in the fifth century than did its western partner. An Aetius who while young became averse to Visigoths reached out to the Huns as a more congenial pool of foreign troops. ‘Anti-barbarianism’ would have been as futile as Julian’s rejection of Christianity. When Vegetius, the military writer, suggested that the manpower was there to permit
domestic recruitment of the armies, no one listened. Romans believed, perhaps rightly, that (otherwise useless) foreigners asked no more than to kill each other in the service of the Empire.

Quite a few of the incidents on my list have long been judged negatively in our books. Odoacer’s taking charge of the West Roman government overlaps with the celebrated termination of West Roman emperorship, an alleged calamity. J. B. Bury judged that the overthrow of the Aspurs was auspicious. The role of foreigners in the fourth-century army is sometimes deemed excessive; the contemporary historian Ammianus Marcellinus blamed the emperor Julian (whom he normally admired) for naming the Frank Nevitta to the consulship. The question is raised whether the ‘semi-barbarian’ Stilicho was a traitor, as he was accused of being after execution. The catalogue of condemnations could go on. Measures involving barbarians in imperial affairs have had a mixed reception from historians; the idea of Rome for the Romans is generally an unspoken premise. The approach taken here is one of unqualified applause. The Christian Roman Empire needed its foreigners from outside or inside the borders and rightly behaved as though it did. That Christianized Empire was heavily engaged in non-military activities and achievements. One of its glories was the enlistment of barbarians in sustaining a profound domestic rejuvenation of the Roman world.

Was there a line to be drawn in the sand – thus far for the foreigners and no further? ‘If a successful large scale settlement of land-hungry groups on the waste fields of Greece, Italy, and Africa had succeeded’, says Alexander Demandt, ‘the collision harmful for the Empire might have been [put off until a later date]’; a hypothetical ‘successful’ settlement is contrasted to the ‘failed incorporation of the Germans’ that allegedly took place. Another course is to contrast beneficial from unacceptable levels of barbarian intake: ‘it was not at all inevitable that the earlier policy of Germanic immigration and recruitment should later have been replaced by foederati, Germanic kingdoms and warlords’. Such conclusions can provoke discussion today, and may not have been wholly unknown in certain late Roman quarters. They should be weighed against the second theme in Rome’s conquest of its neighbors.

2. The Roman Empire asserts its ascendancy over foreigners. Again, a selection of representative incidents is aligned in roughly chronological order. Three kinds of incidents are grouped in this list: (1) Roman military action against barbarians, whether provoked or not; (2) suppressions and dispersals of barbarian peoples; and (3) ‘celebrations’ by Roman authors, emphatically affirming the cultural preeminence of the Empire and typifying its many creative accomplishments. Date markers in round numbers are supplied in the left margin, for chronological orientation only.

250 • Aurelian triumphs over Iuthungi, Vandals, Goths, and Carpi
• Probus crushes Longiones, Franks, Burgundians, and Vandals
300
- Constantine clears foreign invaders from Gaul
- Galerius routs the Persians and exacts an advantageous peace
- The Carpi are suppressed
- Julian clears foreign invaders out of the Gaul
- Valentinian I overawes the peoples of the Rhine and Danube
- Intermarriage of Romans and barbarians is forbidden
- Valens makes war on the Danubian Goths
- The reaffirmation of Nicene orthodoxy turns Gothic converts into members of a condemned Christian branch (Arians)

400
- Stilicho suppresses Radagaisus and his army
- The Sciri are suppressed for the first time
- The Marcomanni and Quadi vanish
- The Alans, Silings, Asdings, and Sueves fail in their one-sided Spanish settlement
- The Siling Vandals in Spain are suppressed
- Most of the Alans in Spain are suppressed
- Latin writers celebrate the eternity of Rome and its victories
- Vegetius celebrates the Roman art of war
- Aetius suppresses the Burgundians in northern Gaul
- Aetius checks the Visigoths of Aquitaine in their expansion
- The Sueves in Spain are checked in their expansion
- Attila’s Huns are repelled from Gaul and Italy and dispersed
- The Aspar dynasty in Constantinople is suppressed
- The Sciri are suppressed a second and third time
- The Goths of Theoderic Strabo are dispersed
- Sidonius Apollinaris celebrates the continuity of Roman civilian life
- The Rugians are defeated and dispersed
- Odoacer and his Sciri and Herules are suppressed
- Constantius of Lyons, Ennodius of Pavia, Eugippius, and other hagiographers celebrate the power of saints over barbarians
- Victor of Vita calls for action against the Vandal persecutors
- The Sarmatians vanish
- The Isaurians are suppressed and dispersed

500
- The Danubian Herules are defeated by the Lombards and dispersed
- Clovis terminates the Gothic kingdom of Toulouse
- The Vandals of Africa are suppressed
- Gildas celebrates the struggle of the Romano-Britons against the Saxons
- Boethius celebrates philosophy in a Gothic prison
- Cassiodorus celebrates the persistence of Roman government in Italy
- The Italian Goths are suppressed twice
- An East Roman bridgehead threatens the Goths in Spain
- Jordanes celebrates the suppression of the Huns, Vandals, and Goths
- The Herules vanish
Some historians believe that Roman civilization ended abruptly, at the moment when control of a territory passed into barbarian hands. Instead, I would emphasize the impact of the Empire on the future and the memory that it left. One may, if so moved, say that Rome fell, but it cannot be said that it was discredited. After multiple retreats, the extent of its direct rule was vastly curtailed in both East and West; nevertheless, its reputation remained positive and has continued to do so. Its welfare was prayed for by Christians as the pillar of peace and order. After a three-century lapse, its empire in the West was called back into being in AD 800, as a resplendent title that was prized by northern kings and kept alive until 1806. In the East, a population of Greek speakers despising Latin gloried in calling themselves Romans. The Middle Ages, no longer mocked as ‘dark’, bear witness to a prodigious survival. In time, Petrarch exclaimed, ‘For what is all history if not the praise of Rome?’

To this day, the theme of the fall of Rome, cherished in historical discourse (and by editorialists), mainly affirms the perceived momentousness of what happened to this world empire.

The renown of Rome through later ages was gained by the Romans themselves, whose energy did not flag with the passing of time. If they succeeded in shining, they did so by obstinately occupying the front of the stage in late antiquity and exacting a heavy toll from real or imagined dissenters. The most conspicuous feature of my second list is the refrain of suppressions – peoples wiped from the scene. Add to them those that vanished or were dispersed. In most cases, what became of the suppressed and vanished peoples is simply unknown; their fate eludes us. The Marcomanni and Quadi were noticed by the Romans in the first century BC; neighbors of the Empire for a very long time, they fought a sometimes victorious ten-year war with Rome in the days of Marcus Aurelius (c. AD 175); in the 370s the Quadi much disturbed Valentinian I; both peoples existed as late as the fifth century. Then they were gone, outcome untold. East Roman observers considered the ‘Gothic peoples’ to consist of the Visigoths, Ostrogoths, Vandals, and Gepids; few other foreign peoples equaled their prominence in late antiquity. But by the end of the sixth century, three of the four were suppressed, wiped out of the story; and their blotting out was gratuitous: when it took place, none of them posed a threat to their executioner. The élite troops of the surrendered Vandal and Ostrogothic armies were shipped eastward, poured into the Roman forces fighting Persia, and swallowed up; the remaining Vandals and Ostrogoths were engulfed with less notice. The focus of our books
has been on the survivors who were placed in charge of kingdoms, notably the Franks. But many others became extinct. The hecatomb of barbarian peoples includes Sciri, Herules, Carpi, Sarmatians, Taifals, Rugians, Sueves, Huns; the list goes on. Their ruin, which rarely receives the attention or grief it deserves, merits equal time to the putative fall of Rome. The Empire retained coercive power and ferocity and did not shrink from violence.

Romans suffered too. The government made no fetish of defending all its lands by armed force. A major territory, such as Britain, could be evacuated by its garrison without any effort at recovery being made when conditions improved. A saint was praised for setting in motion the emptying of a province that the West Roman government would complete. The security of provincials was not guaranteed. If there were distractions to be contended with, such as pretenders to the imperial throne, the residents were left to suffer the plunder and arson inflicted by barbarian invaders. Defense was uncertain even in other circumstances since troops were spread thin. An official spokesman once declared that a part of the Empire should not endure high taxes simply to safeguard the inhabitants of another part.

While the humble provincials were left to bind their wounds, the official centers of imperial power took on their enemy of the moment—sometimes usurpers, sometimes barbarians. Military victory over foreign ‘rebels’ was elusive, and their defeat was often unnecessary. The essential was that barbarians should not be allowed to harden in their real or supposed defiance and enjoy a secure existence. The Vandals were stiffer-necked than most. Western and Eastern Rome repeatedly engaged them militarily and diplomatically. The dispensers of Roman discipline were often repulsed by the Vandals in a century of friction, but the pressure did not let up, and ultimately the Romans prevailed. On another terrain, no compromise was entertained between Nicene Christianity and the Arianism of the Goths and Vandals; barbarian attempts to force conversion were answered by readiness for martyrdom. In northern Gaul, a Burgundian kingdom was accepted until it made as though to widen its borders; then, Huns were sought out and unleashed in full fury upon the transgressors. That branch of the Burgundians was terminated. The turn of the Huns came later. The Visigoths of Toulouse, aping Roman behavior, sought to widen their territory; Aetius strenuously checked them; and they were expelled by the Catholic Franks. Some of the foreigners sharing in Roman affairs enjoyed good fortune, but many others paid a heavy price. Barbarians were forcibly shown that there was no alternative to the Roman agenda.

The most appealing and compelling sign of Rome’s power is its cultural efflorescence. An amazing feature of late antiquity is that the internal life of the Empire went on unchecked by the activities of barbarians. Contrary to popular belief, the later Roman Empire was not
a besieged fortress with a population and government engaged in a continual, draining struggle for mere existence and survival. The Empire was oblivious to its alleged peril. It poured resources into its domestic enthusiasms and experienced one of the most culturally active and creative periods of its history. St. Augustine died in an African city under attack by Vandals, but he had had a long and massively productive career. His life and episcopate are symbolic of late antiquity, the circumstances of his death a chance detail. From the third century to the seventh, hundreds of intellectuals had the tranquility and the means to be major and minor fathers of the Church. Their contest with the classical past was only one aspect of the prodigious (and expensive) acceptance and development of the Christian religion. There was more. Neoplatonism, the last major philosophical school of antiquity, took form during the imperial crisis of the third century and flourished thereafter. Profane letters were otherwise cultivated too: there was no lack of artists in poetry and prose, educators, writers on practical affairs, and many more. Architects and mosaicists found employment. Roman law was twice codified. Canon law gained solid foundations. A stock of original works was built up that nourished and animated the religion, literature, and artistic creations of the future. Armed force may well have disrupted trade, investment, and production, but it intruded little on the life and skills of the mind.

The part of intellectuals in upholding the ascendancy of Rome and keeping the foreigners cowed is arresting. Gaul, a crucial area, experienced its first period of literary animation and creativity in its fifth century in the Empire, when barbarians were no longer distant specks on the horizon. The first British authors also belong to this time. Church fathers did their part, as witness the hagiographers marshaling the saints to reduce barbarians to reverence. The religion they spoke for was loyally Roman. The literary history of the sack of Rome in 410 has often been noticed; the reaction of most writers was not that the jig was up, that the Empire was humbled and laid low, or comparable gloom. On the contrary, Rutilius Namatianus responded with one of the most elevated tributes to the eternity of Rome that was ever penned; and the priest Orosius wrote a history that showed the Roman Empire experiencing continual improvement (hardly any other history was more popular in the Middle Ages). Augustine’s response to the event of 410 raised the subject to a metaphysical plane, yet still in the service of Roman culture. Meanwhile, Rome as the imperial capital yielded to Rome as seat of the sole and revered patriarchate of the Latin Christian church. The burden of empire that the barbarians shouldered included, not only the gospel, but also the safeguarding and cultivation of Latin letters, sacred and profane, inseparable from a religion rooted in literacy. The part of (Catholic) Saxon England, not to speak of Ireland, in this Christian ‘empire’ of letters is one of the wonders of the early Middle Ages.
Costly barbarian invasions undeniably took place, and so did costly wars by Romans among themselves. External or internal, both types were disruptive and did enduring damage. The Goths revolted after admission to the Empire; Alans, Vandals, and Sueves crossed destructively into Gaul and then into Spain; the city of Rome experienced many sieges and captures; Vandals seized Africa; Attila’s Huns and their subjects invaded Gaul in 451 and Italy in 452. These and other acts harmful to the Empire by foreigners were paralleled and exacerbated by no less costly fighting of Romans among themselves. Murderous competition for the imperial office was the plague of the third century; the fourth century was also well furnished with imperial usurpations, one of which – Magnentius’s – climaxed in a battle whose exceptional casualties were noted at the time; Theodosius I put down two western usurpers with heavy loss of life. The large but brief invasion of Italy by the Goth Radagaisus did little damage by comparison with the incurable instability of the Western Empire for decades after Valentinian III’s assassination. An Empire that could afford murderous competition at its apex can hardly surprise us by breakdowns at its periphery; it had no special claim to restraint by its neighbors or to other delicate consideration. The inner and outer disruptions of the later Empire have long been the stuff of its history; both were harmful, neither kind more than the other. However lamentable, they do not eclipse the constructive dealings of Rome and the barbarians with each other.

Romans drew foreigners into the Empire to share its burdens and, by ceaselessly upholding the preeminence of its power, culture, state, and religion, shaped them, in the West, into espousing and forwarding the imperial cause. What took place in a span of more than three centuries was, in effect, an ordered passage of duties from one set of hands to another, trained by coercion to learn its responsibilities and to take them seriously. The barbarians were conquered for Rome. Under new leadership, the former tasks were undertaken and carried on.

Change is not cost-free or smoothly benign. As the priest-historian Orosius noted in 417, the conquests that created the Roman Empire were accompanied by tragic bloodshed among the empire-builders as well as the victims. A millennium later, in our early modern period, the great, applauded European discoveries and settlements inflicted almost unbelievable mortality upon the discovered. It does not surprise us that the undoubted benefits of the Industrial Revolution were accompanied by the ruin of myriad lives and livelihoods. We know from recent experience that hubs of industrial prosperity can turn within decades into a Rust Belt. Non-lethal damage also hurts. There is no reason why, in late antiquity, the progress of the Christian religion and the passage of responsibilities to barbarian leaders and troops should not have coincided with
centuries of economic contraction and material simplification. What this contraction consisted of, how it was experienced, what ruins it piled up – these are serious questions that deserve even more attention from historians than they have yet received. The abrupt, catastrophic collapse of East Rome in the seventh century is much more visible than the longer-term, much more qualified economic regression of a West where large numbers of churches were built in the sixth century. One certainty about the Roman Empire or any other epoch is that it should not be expected to soar in uninterrupted, untroubled, and beneficent material enrichment.

The two processes of Roman recruitment and overawing of barbarians could not last indefinitely; Justinian’s strenuous reign (527–65) gave both enterprises a final impulse. A time came when there was nothing left to give the recruits that they did not already have, a moment, too, when the ascendency of the Empire was, if not used up, at least difficult to assert in earthly forms. (Imperial troops could seize Italy from the Goths but not keep it intact.) A change of focus set in. In Britain, Anglo-Saxons learned to be Roman Catholics and to master the Latin language. In the Frankish kingdom, many Gallo-Romans turned themselves into Franks. One symptom of this conversion was the legend of Frankish origins from Troy, with its fraternal implication that Franks and Romans had shared the same cradle. South of the Pyrenees, a prominent bishop showed a beautiful and bountiful Spain once betrothed to Rome now embracing its joyful Gothic bridegroom. The passage from one guise to the next invited imaginative reflections; foreign matter was poured into Latin-Christian molds. What clearly existed was the awareness of transition. In Britain, Gaul, or Spain, these were new occurrences, early medieval stories, not foreign to conditions in late antiquity but working out from them. When Gibbon evoked a hypothetical barbarian threat in his own time, he said, ‘Europe is secure from any future irruption of barbarians; since, before they can conquer, they must cease to be barbarous’. In the perspective of a medievalist, this shedding of ‘barbarity’ and shouldering of imperial tasks is what happened, with great pain to all concerned, in the last centuries of the Roman Empire.

The encounter of Rome with the barbarians is a historical problem that many generations have grappled with. The orthodox and lately reasserted model for dealing with it offers complementary stories of the ascent of the Germans and of the fall of Rome to destructive aliens. The account that has just been outlined proposes that the barbarian dimension of late antiquity was a Roman story, in which the Empire held the initiative as much as in its past. Rome conquered its neighbors by a prolonged process of attraction and assertiveness. The histories offered by these scenarios, drawn from the same material, differ markedly in the selection, weighing, and interpretation of events. There may be other possibilities. The discussion should go on.
Let me, in conclusion, compress this alternative story into six points:

1. The lands of the barbarians were not a separate world but a disunited and disorganized extension of the Roman Empire. That is why Romans felt free to dip into this big pool of manpower and to harness it to imperial purposes.

2. What we call the barbarian invasions was primarily a drawing or pulling of foreigners into Roman service, a process sponsored, encouraged, and rewarded by Rome.

3. Destructive intrusions from the outside and barbarian stirrings within certainly occurred, but they do not differ in kind from Roman usurpations and civil wars. The external and internal disruptions of the later Empire were of one piece. They damaged and hurt but decided nothing.

4. The later Empire exchanged the costs of external security for the expenses of a vibrant and inventive domestic life, highlighted by conversion to Christianity.

5. The ascendancy of Rome in late antiquity was strenuously upheld by the late Romans. Many barbarians were swallowed up and vanished; those who survived kept their ethnic names but were pushed and persuaded to shoulder Roman tasks.

6. Whether the Empire stood or fell is the wrong question. What matters is that Rome was never repudiated. The future sustained and carried forward what it stood for in religion, law, administration, literacy, and language.

Short Biography

Walter Goffart’s research has ranged from late Roman taxation (Caput and Colonate, 1974) through ninth-century forgeries (The Le Mans Forgeries, 1966) to modern historical atlases (Historical Atlases, 1570–1870, 2003); it still covers that range. His other books are Barbarians and Romans: The Techniques of Accommodation (1981); The Narrators of Barbarian History (1988); and, most lately, Barbarian Tides: The Migration Age and the Later Roman Empire (2006). He is the translator of Carl Erdman, The Origins of the Idea of Crusade (1978). Many of his early articles are collected in Rome’s Fall and After (1989). He is a fellow of the Royal Society of Canada, a corresponding fellow of the Royal Historical Society, and a fellow of the Medieval Academy of America, which awarded him its Haskins Medal, 1991. Belgian-born, he moved to North America in 1941 and was U.S. educated; all his academic degrees are from Harvard (Ph.D., 1961). Appointed a lecturer in history at the University of Toronto in 1960, he was promoted to professor in 1971 and retired in 1999. On retirement, he was given After Rome's Fall. Narrators and Sources of Early Medieval History. Essays Presented to Walter Goffart (1998), which contains his bibliography to
that year. Since 2000, he has been a Senior Research Scholar and Lecturer in History at Yale University.

Notes

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1 Original emphasis. J. C. Herder, Another Philosophy of History and Selected Political Writings (1774), trans. I. D. Ivrigenis and D. Pellerini (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 2004), 33.


3 A major step in the rehabilitation of late antiquity was the publication by Henri-Irénée Marrou of his Retractatio (Paris: E. de Boccard, 1948) to Marrou, Saint Augustin et la fin de la culture antique (Paris: E. de Boccard, 1938). (There is a combined 4th ed., 1958.) For earlier rejections of decadence, associated with the Viennese art historian Alois Riegl, see the sketch in Santo Mazzarino, The End of the Ancient World, trans. George Holmes (New York, NY: Knopf, 1966), 182–3. The recent wave is often dated from Peter Brown, The World of Late Antiquity from Marcus Aurelius to Muhammad (London: Thames and Hudson, 1971); not easy reading for novices. It seems fair to say that the belief in a decadent and inferior late Roman culture (a view classically exemplified by Bernard Berenson, The Arch of Constantine or, The Decline of Form [New York, NY: Macmillan, 1954]) has not yet been wholly abandoned.


6 The same assumed unity is claimed from a Roman perspective; e.g., Stephen Williams and Gerard Friell, Theodosius. The Empire at Bay (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1995), 76, ‘a continuous arc of hostile and powerful Germanic tribes all along the 2000-mile Rhine and Danube frontiers’. Cf. the trench line of World War I.


8 Peter Heather, The Fall of the Roman Empire. A New History of Rome and the Barbarians (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005); Bryan Ward-Perkins, The Fall of Rome and the End of Civilization (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005). For a fuller tracing of the ground chosen by Ward-Perkins, see Ramsay MacMullen, Corruption and the Decline of Rome (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1988). Heather succinctly set out his main thesis in ‘The Huns and the End of the Roman Empire in Western Europe’, English Historical Review, 110 (1995): 4–41. One should combat the simplistic but widespread idea that Gibbon (n. 7) launched the theme of the decline and fall of Rome. The subject was already very old when he wrote about it; see e.g., n. 11 below. The quoted passage of Herder (n. 1) appeared two years before Gibbon’s first volume.

Jones, Later Roman Empire, 1027, 1068 (including internal conditions).

A pair of sixteenth-century books suggest by their titles how moth-eaten the barbarians as destroyers of Rome are: Niccolò Zeno, Dell’origine di Venetia et antqvissime memorie de i Barbari, che distressero per tuto'l mondo l'imperio di Roma (Venice: Francesco Marcolini, 1537); Jerome Turler, De migrationibus populorum septentriionalium post devictos a Mario Cimbros et de ruina Imperii Romani liber (Frankfurt-am-Main: Haeredes Chr. Egen, 1564). Another example is in the Journal des savans (January, 1772), 32–3, ‘Une foule innombrable de Barbares se répand dans l’Empire Romain, le ruine de fond en comble & établit sur ses ruines les principaux états qui partagent aujourd’hui l’Europe. Les moeurs féroces et les coutumes des Allemands s’introduisirent partout & laisserent après elles ces impressions & ces traces de barbarie que nous remarquons encore dans une posterité très reculée’. Also, Jonathan Barlow, ‘Race Theory, Historical Geography and the Transition from Ancient to Medieval’, in T. W. Hillard et al. (eds.), Ancient History in a Modern University, Vol. 2, Early Christianity, Late Antiquity and Beyond (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1998), 406–7.


For a comprehensive collection of disparagements of barbarians, including greasy hair, see Herwig Wolfram, Geschichte der Goten, 2nd ed. (Munich: C. H. Beck, 1980), 449; trans. in his ‘Gothic History and Historical Ethnography’, Journal of Medieval History, 7 (1981): 314–15, and History of the Goths, trans. T. J. Dunlap (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1988), 6–7. His fusion of opinions from all sides and times makes matters look worse than they were, and the parallel tradition of barbarian virtues is overlooked. Direct observation was rarely involved. Besides, the ethnographies did not perceptibly influence the Romans who dealt with the barbarians and treated them as a reliable labor pool.

See the title of Ward-Perkins’s book cited n. 8 above.


Language is the only criterion for treating many late antique peoples as though they formed a community of Germans. See Reinhard Wenskus, Stammesbildung und Verfassung (Cologne: Böhlau, 1961), 470; cf. Musset, Germanic Invasions, 12. The uninhibited modern usage of ‘German’ and ‘Germanic’ allows historians (and others) to speak of the barbarians as though they formed an ethnic collectivity with a common civilization (e.g., n. 6 above).

The lack of a strategic goal is glaring: after the complete victory of the Goths at Adrianople, their leader Fritigern had no idea what to do next. See Williams and Friell, Theodosius, 30.

E. A. Thompson, ‘The Settlement of the Barbarians in Southern Gaul’, reprinted in Thompson, Romans and Barbarians. The Decline of the Western Empire (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1982), 25, ‘It is of the first importance to understand that the settlement of the barbarians was an act of purely Roman policy’.

‘Civilization’ is meant broadly. It is apparent that the ex-Roman West lost cohesion and experienced a diversity of conditions. As Ward-Perkins rightly observes (Fall of Rome, 172), Christopher Dawson, The Making of Europe. An Introduction to the History of European Unity (London: Sheed and Ward, 1932), was a precocious advocate of a positive assessment of the early Middle Ages (from a Roman Catholic viewpoint). Since the 1960s, notably in Britain, this period has given rise to a flourishing, nonsectarian branch of scholarship not averse to positive assessments.

An excellent gauge of this process is given by Michael Hendy, ‘From Public to Private: The Western Barbarian Coinages as a Mirror of the Disintegration of Roman State Structures’, Viator, 19 (1988): 29–78. Losses are heavily stressed by Ward-Perkins, not without reason, but much regression seems to have taken place in times far removed from a barbarian problem, let alone military action. For example, the potteries of La Graufesenque, which Ward-Perkins makes much of (Fall of Rome, 97–100), peaked in the 100s AD and were insignificant by 200; they can hardly be relevant to the Migration Age.
same reciprocity is conceivable in classical antiquity. In a drama, in which the elevation of the interior is validated by the inferiority of the exterior. The context, the civilized and the barbarous are regarded as complementary, actors in the same narrow material criterion like this one may not have universal appeal.

'Civilization' with standard of living; below a certain level, it seems, civilization ends. A narrowly material criterion like this one may not have universal appeal.

we observe cultural particularities among the Romans, e.g., Britain, Africa, Syria. See also n. 39 below.

'parce subiectis, debellare superbos' (Rome's mission was to spare those who have submitted and to subdue the arrogant), a saying that applies only approximately to the two themes outlined.


One is reminded of the Vergilian tag, parce subiectis, debellare superbos (Rome's mission was to spare those who have submitted and to subdue the arrogant), a saying that applies only approximately to the two themes outlined.

The quotation is from Max Cary, History of Rome, 2nd ed. (London: Macmillan, 1954), 780–1, long a standard work and deservedly so. Cary shows that one does not have to be a medievalist to believe in a major prolongation of Rome. Ward-Perkins, Fall of Rome, 87, identifies 'civilization' with standard of living; below a certain level, it seems, civilization ends. A narrowly material criterion like this one may not have universal appeal.

With rare exceptions, the incidents cited (in this list and its pair) are well documented and traceable in standard reference works; e.g., Ernst Stein, Histoire du Bas-Empire, trans. J.-R. Palanque, 2 vols. (Paris: Desclée de Brouwer, 1949, 1959); Jones, Later Roman Empire; Émilienne Demougeot, La formation de l'Europe et les invasions barbares, 3 vols. (Paris: Aubier, 1969–1979); Alexander Demandt, Die Spatantike: Romanische Geschichte von Diocletian bis Justinian, 284–565 (Munich: C. H. Beck, 1988); Prosopography of the Later Roman Empire, ed. J. R. Martindale et al., 3 vols. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980–1992) (later cited as PLRE). Also Bury, n. 49 below. The accent in the two lists, as elsewhere in the article, is on the what of events, not on the why's or the motives of the actors or similar considerations. This approach is intentional, but not everyone may be comfortable with it.


MacMullen, Corruption, 199–204, supplies an excellent documented record of barbarian officers (including consuls) and troops. The consulate, whose two holders gave their names to the year, was the loftiest honorific position that emperors could bestow.

Notitia dignitatum, ed. Seeck. The rough date at which this information is entered in my list refers to the source, not to the moment of recruitment (the date of the Notitia and much else
about it are disputed, but without affecting my roster). Units are listed by the page in Seeck's edition and the numbers on that page. Marcomanni, 123 nos. 198–9, 131 no. 65, 134 no. 98, 141 no. 183; Salii, 125 no. 129, 135 no. 67, 138 no. 129; Taifali, 13 no. 31, 142 no. 205; Tervingi, 18 no. 61; Vandili, 59 no. 68; Sarmatae, 59 no. 26, 218–19 (many); Iuthungi, 60 no. 43, 70 no. 31; Franci, 65 no. 51, 66 no. 67, 68 no. 45, 78 no. 33; Ampsivarii, 125 no. 70; Alamanni, 65 no. 63, 68 no. 36; Quadi, 65 no. 56; Chamavi, 65 no. 61; Saxones, 68 no. 37; Gotthi, 70 no. 32; Heruli, 122 no. 162; Alamanni, 130 no. 50; Bructeri, 135 no. 69. See also MacMullen, as previous note.

33 Stein, Bas-Empire, 1:353–4.
34 One ostensible reform proposed by a later fourth-century Roman author was the discharge of senior soldiers so as to save on their (elevated) pay; he earnestly subordinated military effectiveness to frugality: Anonymous, De rebus bellicis, 5, ed. E. A. Thompson, A Roman Reformer and Inventor (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1952), 96–97.

35 The term is already in Gibbon, Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire, ed. Bury, 4:166.
36 They may also have been desirable by being more politically neutral than Roman troops. Typically, the settlement of the Visigoths in Aquitaine (418) had something to do with checking the political activities of the southern Gallo-Romans: John Matthews, Western Aristocracies and Imperial Court A.D. 364–425 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975), 315; Wolfram, History of the Goths, 72–3.


38 See the comment of Thompson, n. 18, above. I am not at all sure that the installation of the Visigoths was as basic a departure from the past as is argued by Michael Kulikowski, Rome's Gothic Wars (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 183–4. There is no evidence of social or economic disruption as a result of the settlement. Neither the footings of the kingdoms nor the kings’ efforts to enlarge the ceded territory were ‘barbarian’ in nature. Too much may be made of the barbarian’s autonomy; their attachment to Roman example was much more intense than to the (nebulous) ethnic traditions of heartlands from which, with rare exceptions, they were wholly cut off. Similarly, the Frankish appropriation of Gaul was accompanied by a wholesale transposition of the Frankish center of gravity to the (thickly Gallo-Roman) new acquisitions, as witness the location of the Merovingian capitals.

39 There was no homogeneous ‘Roman identity’ to be assimilated into. Sarmatians, Herules, and whoever else were only additional diversities to be poured into a pot that had never needed to melt. Besides, in the later Empire, being a Christian could be a greater bond than Roman citizenship, a comparatively devalued category since the third century. Even though most barbarians became Christians of a ‘wrong’ kind (Arians), the common Christian substrate might outweigh divergent creeds, and the obligatory (West) Roman agenda never ceased to include specifically Nicene Christianity.

41 The allied cities eventually fought against Rome for equality (‘the Social War’, 89–91 BC). The auxilia of the Empire were as numerous as the legions of citizens. See Williams and Friell, Theodosius, 91–2. For my purposes, the role of non-citizens in the army and its tasks is more important than whether these soldiers ultimately did or did not receive Roman citizenship or were molded into Romans by military service. Justinian’s armies clearly illustrate Roman armed forces composed of ethnic regimes; so does the coalition gathered by Aetius against Attila. The ethnicities claimed were secondary to the tasks performed.


43 Zosimus, New History, 4.33.2–4, 39.5, 40.6–8, 56.1, trans. Ronald Ridley, Byzantina Australiensia 2 (Canberra: Australian Association for Byzantine Studies, 1982), 85, 89, 96.

44 On Stilicho, see n. 50 below. On West Rome and the Visigoths, Kulikowski, Rome’s Gothic Wars, 181–4.

45 I mainly have in mind the (Alan) Aspar dynasty, powerfully placed for more than forty years; see Stein, Bas-Empire, 1:283–4, 311, 321, 352–6, 358–63, 391; PLRE 2:135–8, 164–8, 842–3 (and n. 49 below). Note also the remarkable four-generation family of Areobindus, highlighted by John Moorhead, The Roman Empire Divided 400–700 (London: Longman, 2001), 20–1.

46 PLRE 2:21–2. The famous tale of the aftermath of the battle with Attila – Aetius tricking both the Goths and Attila into withdrawal – encapsulates the way in which Aetius had long balanced Visigothic and Hunnic power; see Fredegar, Chron. 2.53, ed. Krusch, 73–5.


48 Orosius, Historiae, 7.43.14, ed. Karl Zangemeister, Corpus scriptorum ecclesiasticorum Latinorum, Vol. 5 (Vienna: Gerold Sohn, 1882), 562, and Jordanes Getica 291, ed. Th. Mommsen, MGH Auctores antiquissimi Vol. 5 (Berlin: Weidmann, 1882), 133, include (imaginary) speeches in which barbarians urge Romans to pit one people against the other since it would benefit the empire if both perished. The same idea is very clearly expressed by Claudian, quoted by Courcelle, Histoire littéraire, 42.


51 Demandt, Der Fall Roms, selection trans. in Walter Goiffart, Barbarian Tides. The Migration Age and the Later Roman Empire (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006), 248, 249. Demandt evidently regards the early medieval period as a Dark Age. For good and bad levels of barbarian intake, see Williams and Friell, Theodosius, 161 (notice the usage of ‘Germanic’, denoting a homogeneous foreign entity). The alterity of barbarian rulers is stressed by the consecrated term germanische Reichsgründungen. Thompson, as quoted in n. 18 above, sets this matter right.

52 The ‘celebrations’ that I have chosen are especially relevant to the barbarians. The cultural flowering and assertiveness of the later Roman Empire may be illustrated in many other ways, e.g., the writings of the Cappadocian Fathers, the poetry of Claudian and Prudentius, the Vergil commentary of Servius, the monastic Rule of St. Benedict, etc. An excellent, compact

53 For illustrations, see nn. 28, 51. A good example is the practice of titling studies ‘the end of Roman [Spain, Noricum, Britain etc.];’ e.g., E. A. Thompson, ‘The End of Noricum’, in Thompson, *Romans and Barbarians*, 113–33; ‘Spain and Britain’, op. cit., 208–17 (Thompson argues in the latter that ‘the end’ of Rome in both was internal, preceding the barbarian advent).

54 The reputation of Rome has been most threatened by theses of internal decadence, already found in early humanistic discussions of the subject and capable of reaching rhetorical extremes. A noteworthy example is the passage of Herder cited at n. 1 above. The proposed modes and reasons for decadence have multiplied. See the excellent compendia of Mazzarino, *End of the Ancient World*; Demandt, *Der Fall Roms*. The learned case for internal decline is made again by MacMullen, *Corruption*.


56 Modern belief that the imperial proclamation of Charlemagne revived something terminated in 476 would not have been shared by contemporaries, whose frame of reference was an uninterrupted Roman empire (in Constantinople with Italian outliers).


58 The broad-based rehabilitation of the Middle Ages, which has slowly developed for three centuries (and is still largely alien to popular history), has obvious implications for an assessment of late antiquity. To many ancient historians (lately, Ward-Perkins, *Fall of Rome*), Rome continues to be followed by a Dark Age (also Demandt, n. 51 above). Perhaps these opposites can someday be reconciled. It is curious that ‘Dark Age’ in an apparently neutral sense continues to be standard usage in Britain; notice also Dutton’s surprising title, n. 40, above. ‘Dark Ages’, which flatters the audience, seems to have commercial value, see n. 5 above.


60 Common sense tells us that the late Romans were as vigorous as the earlier ones; so does Jones’s conclusion about internal conditions (nn. 2, 10 above). Specifically late Roman monuments (notably poetry and church architecture) were basic to the first medieval ‘classical’ revival in the Carolingian period. For indolent, enervated Romans, see Herder at n. 1 above, and many other authors. Constantine Cavafy’s famous poem ‘Waiting for the Barbarians’ (1904) has no roots in late Roman history.

61 The ‘dissenters’ whose suppression I omit but should not, are the many usurpers, whom the legitimate emperors (unavoidably) put down with unsparing force.

62 The instances of suppression need not have involved wholesale massacres or eliminations of the peoples involved. What vanished was an entity, however constituted; the persons comprising it, minus casualties, might survive in one way or another. What became of them is usually not recorded, and we are well advised to limit our guessing. The fate of several of these peoples is detailed in Goffart, *Barbarian Tides*, 199–218.


64 For the Gothic peoples in Procopius and contemporaries, see Walter Goffart, ‘The Supposedly Frankish Table of Nations’, *Frühmittelalterliche Studien*, 17 (1983): 120–2, 124. Jordanes is noteworthy for applauding the downfall of three out of the four ‘Gothic peoples’ (he mistakenly anticipated that the Visigoths would vanish); *Getica* 170–2 (Vandals), 245, 303 (Visigoths), 313–15 (Ostrogoths), ed. Mommsen, 102–3, 121, 136, 138; see also Jordanes, *Romana* 386–87, ed. Mommsen, 52 (Gepids). For Justinian fed up with the Goths, see Procopius, *Wars* 8.24.5,

65 Not all suppressions were by direct Roman action. For example, the Siling Vandals were destroyed by a Visigothic army (at Rome’s behest); Attila’s Huns were dispersed by a revolt of the peoples subject to them; Constantinople had no direct part in the destruction of the Gepids. Ostenso barbarian victories might in fact be defeats; Kulikowski, _Rome’s Gothic Wars_, 1–10, 177, shows how the capture of Rome in 410 signified failure for Alaric.

66 Gildas, _De excidio et conquestu Brittonum_, ed. M. Winterbottom (London: Phillimore, 1978), 16–29, is still the best report of what happened to Britain. By Gildas’s account, although Romans helped the Romano-Britons to defend themselves, any reoccupation was out of the question.


70 Christian Courtois, _Les Vandales et l’Afrique_ (Paris: Arts et métiers graphiques, 1955), 169–76, 198–204, 245, 267–9, 289–310 (the church), 353–5. Roman setbacks are more visible than Roman persistence, but the latter should not be ignored. The Vandals were never safe. About barbarian Arianism, see Musset, _Germanic Invasions_, 184–9.

71 Reinhold Kaiser, _Die Burgunder_ (Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer, 2004), 31–4, 200–3. About the Huns, see n. 65 above. The later Burgundians were abjectly deferential toward the Empire.

72 Wolfram, _History of the Goths_, 175–8, 233–4; Karl-Ferdinand Werner, _Les origines (avant l’an mil)_, in _Histoire de France_, ed. Jean Favier (Paris: Fayard, 1984), 273–6. The Visigoths did not need more ‘land’ (e.g., for economic reasons); but, in Roman practice, a ruler, notably a usurper, should gain as much territory as he could. That, I suggest, was the model of ostensibly barbarian expansion. The most conspicuous case is that of Theoderic in Italy.

73 The fortress is most explicitly conjured up by Robert Folz et al., _De l’Antiquité au monde médiéval_. Peuples et civilisations (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1972), 21. This characterization helps us to realize how poorly it fits late antique conditions. Out of the many authors of the later Empire, only one (I believe) exemplifies a siege mentality: Anonymous, _De rebus bellicis_ 6.1, ed. Thompson, 113.

74 That point has been eloquently made and documented by Brown, _World of Late Antiquity_, and many other works. For Brown’s precursors, see Marrou, _Décadence romaine_, 12, and n. 3 above. The collective work _Late Antiquity: A Guide_ (n. 4 above), typifies current tendencies.

75 The same should be said, mutatis mutandis, for the references to Gildas and Boethius in my second list of events. That Gildas’s Romano-Britons lost out to the Saxons and that Boethius was executed are sad outcomes, but with them as with Augustine, the survivals were huge.

76 One might argue that the shift of military responsibilities to barbarians made possible the pouring of resources into the development of Christianity. In Gibbon’s footsteps, Jones decries the cost of the Christian church ( _Later Roman Empire_, 933–4, 1046–7; strongly endorsed by Ward-Perkins, _Fall of Rome_, 40–1); but social investment need not be a waste. However secular we may be (and I am), we can hardly be right to undervalue the part of Christianity in our past. It has a much greater hold on us than classical antiquity.

77 Vol. 12 of the _Cambridge Ancient History_ is called _The Imperial Crisis and Recovery_ (193–324) (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1939). In it, Neoplatonism is dealt with by Joseph Bidez (619–38). There is a library of works on the subject.

78 These codifications were an aspect of the much larger transfer of ancient writings from roll to codex format, a pivotal moment in intellectual history. See L. D. Reynolds and N. G. Wilson, _Scribes and Scholars. A Guide to the Transmission of Greek and Latin Literature_, 2nd ed.
(Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1974), 30–2; Marrou, Décadence romaine, 13–14; Chaunu, Histoire et décadence, 238–9.

79 See Nora K. Chadwick, Poetry and Letters in Early Christian Gaul (London: Bowes and Bowes, 1955). The Britons were the heretic Pelagius; Patrick, the apostle of Ireland; and the less famous Faustus of Riez. None of them was in Britain when writing. Gildas was (n. 66 above).

80 There is a bunching of hagiographies on both sides of AD 500 featuring the beneficent activities of saints in connection with barbarians. I cite a few by their numbers in the Bibliotheca hagiographica Latina, 2 vols. (Brussels: Société des Bollandistes, 1900–01), nos. 3453, 2570, 7655. See also Martin Heinzlmann and J.-C. Poulin, Les vies anciennes de sainte Genève de Paris. Études critiques (Paris: H. Champion, 1986). The same period abounded in Vitae of holy bishops, pillars of Roman order. The extent to which Christianity was ‘imperial’ is open to argument, but it seems certain that it stood for the same standards of, inter alia, civil order, lawfulness, and security as the Roman state. They were the conditions for its existence and that of a Christian society.

81 Courcelle, Histoire littéraire, 77. See also 59: St. Jerome, horrified by news of the fall of Rome to Alaric, spoke of the whole world perishing in a single city; but his comment does not bear on the Empire and its future. Responding to a somewhat earlier invasion, Jerome reduced the occasion to a moral lesson: (25–6, quoting Jerome) ‘le monde romain croule et pourtant nos têtes superbes ne savent pas encore se ployer’; the tottering of the Empire should teach Christians humility and repentance.


83 On this decisive transition, see Leo the Great's sermo 82, In natali apostolorum (J. P. Migne, Patrologia Latina 54 [Paris, 1846], coll. 422–23), quoted by Folz, Idée d’empire, 192: the martyred apostles have incorporated Rome into the kingdom of Heaven; ‘the blessed seat of the blessed Peter has turned you [Rome] into the capital of the world’. Andrew Gillett, ‘Rome, Ravenna and the Last Western Emperors’, Papers of the British School in Rome, 69 (2001): 131–67, shows that the city of Rome had a larger role as imperial capital in the fifth century than is often allowed.

84 There was a retreat of low-level literacy (graffiti, inscriptions: Ward-Perkins, Fall of Rome, 151–67), but also a consistent enlargement of the clerical mandarinate, whose writings occupy the 212 volumes of the Patrologia Latina and fill our manuscript collections.

85 If actually counted, the number of invasions (deserving the name) is lower than rhetoric makes them sound.


87 On Radagaisus and on instability after 455, see Bury, Later Roman Empire, 1:167–69, 323–40, 404–9; Stein, Bas-Empire, 1:249–50, 365–99.

88 Ward-Perkins especially mourns the disappearance of tile-roofed structures and tasteful, mass produced, affordable dishware (87–110). The facts may be firm, the values shakier. We also do not have to share his disquiet about the small size of early medieval churches (148–50). The late Roberto Lopez once complained to me that medieval cathedrals in the north were wastefully large.

89 On Roman conquest, Orosius (n. 48 above), books 4–5. On genocidal consequences of the great discoveries, Chaunu, Histoire et décadence, 11.

90 The massive and very impressive work of Chris Wickham, Framing the Early Middle Ages. Europe and the Mediterranean, 400–800 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), will have to be slowly digested. For example, its account of taxation (ch. 3) may be less firmly grounded in late Roman circumstances than necessary.


92 The original written form of the Trojan legend is in Fredegar, Chronicon, ed. Krusch, 45–7, 93. See also Werner, Les origines, 22, 29–31. For Spain, Isidore of Seville Laus Spaniae, in MGH Auct. antiq. 11: 267.

93 Gibbon, Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire, ed. Bury, 4:163.
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