Barbarian Migrations and the Roman West, 376–568

This is a major new survey of the barbarian migrations and their role in the fall of the Roman Empire and the creation of early medieval Europe, one of the key events in European history. Unlike previous studies it integrates historical and archaeological evidence and discusses Britain, Ireland, mainland Europe and North Africa, demonstrating that the Roman Empire and its neighbours were inextricably linked. A narrative account of the turbulent fifth and early sixth centuries is followed by a description of society and politics during the migration period and an analysis of the mechanisms of settlement and the changes of identity. Guy Halsall reveals that the creation and maintenance of kingdoms and empires was impossible without the active involvement of people in the communities of Europe and North Africa. He concludes that, contrary to most opinions, the fall of the Roman Empire produced the barbarian migrations, not vice versa.

Guy Halsall is Professor of History at the University of York. His recent publications include Settlement and Social Organization (Cambridge, 1995) and Humour, History and Politics in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages (Cambridge, 2002).
Cambridge Medieval Textbooks

This is a series of introductions to important topics in medieval history aimed primarily at advanced students and faculty, and is designed to complement the monograph series *Cambridge Studies in Medieval Life and Thought*. It includes both chronological and thematic approaches and addresses both British and European topics.

*For a list of titles in the series, see end of book.*
For My Friends,

without whom this book would have been finished sooner
CONTENTS

List of maps and figure page xii
Acknowledgements xiv
A note on spellings xvii

Part I Romans and barbarians in the imperial world 1

1 How the west was lost and where it got us 3
Saba, Romanus and Guntramn Boso: the problems of government 3
The barbarians’ role in history 10
Transformation or fall? 19
Germanism and Celticism 22
The present study 25

2 Defining identities 35
Ethnicity 35
‘Men who have nothing human beyond their limbs and voices’? The Roman view 45
The barbarian view? 57

3 The late Roman Empire in the west 63
Ruling Europe: the early Roman solution 68
The ‘third-century crisis’ 71
The new empire of the fourth century 74
The regions 79
viii Contents

Gender 96
The church 99
The army 101
The late Roman Empire: the problem remains 110

4 Society beyond the frontier 112
West of the Irish Sea: the Scotti 112
North of Hadrian’s Wall: the Picti 114
East of the Rhine: the Germani 118
North of the Danube: the Goths 131
Around the African frontier: the Mauri 136

5 Romans and barbarians before 376 138
The frontier 138
The barbarian threat? 144
Roman use of the barbarians 149
Barbarian use of the Roman Empire 150
Barbarians within the Roman Empire 152
Conclusion 161

Part II A world renegotiated: Western Europe, 376–550 163

6 The Gothic crisis, 376–382 165
Introduction: history and irony 165
The Hunnic storm 170
The Gothic entry into the Empire 175
The Goths rebel 177
The battle of Adrianople and after 178
Trying hard to recreate what had yet to be created: historians and the ‘treaty of 382’ 180

7 The crisis of the Empire, 382–410 186
The usurpations of Magnus Maximus and Eugenius and the death of Theodosius, 383–395 186
Alaric’s Goths 189
Alaric, Stilicho and court politics, 395–397 194
Military withdrawal from the north 195
Alaric’s invasion of Italy, 397–405 200
Alaric, king of the Goths? 202
Radagaisus, 405–406 206
Contents

The great invasion and Constantine ‘III’, 406–408 210
The fall of Stilicho, 408 212
Alaric in Italy and the sack of Rome, 408–410 214
The crisis at the peripheries 217

8 The triumph of the generals, 410–455 220
The suppression of the usurpers, 410–413 220
The supremacy of Constantius: the Empire on the offensive, 413–421 224
Competition for authority, 421–434 234
Aëtius, Gaiseric and Attila, 434–453 242
The deaths of Aëtius and Valentinian and the second sack of Rome, 453–455 254

9 The parting of Gaul and Italy, 455–480 257
Avitus: the Gauls throw the dice again, 455–456 257
Majorian, 456–461 262
The supremacy of Ricimer, 461–472 266
Ephemeral emperors, 472–480 278

10 Kingdoms of the Empire, 476–550 284
Italy: two nations under a Goth? 284
The Vandals in Africa 293
The Visigoths from Gaul to Spain 296
The Burgundian kingdom 300
Gaul: Clovis and the triumph of the Merovingians 303
Where no narrative is possible: Britain 311

11 Provincial society in the long fifth century 320
The material base: society and economy 321
Africa 321
Italy 328
Spain 338
Gaul 346
Britain 357
Survival strategies 368

12 Beyond the old frontier 371
West of the Irish Sea 371
North of Hadrian’s Wall 375
East of the Rhine 379
Contents

Scandinavia 379
The Saxons: settlements and cemeteries in north-west Germany 383
Change around the North Sea and the Anglo-Saxon migration 386
Politics and migration in the Elbe valley: the Thuringians and Lombards 392
Settlements and cemeteries along the old Rhine frontier: the Franks and Alamanni 399
The Bavarians 403
Around the African frontier 405
Conclusions 411

Part III Romans and barbarians in a post-imperial world 415

13 Mechanisms of migration and settlement 417
The mechanics of migration 417
Administered settlement: the hospitalitas question 422
Settlement 447

14 New peoples, new identities, new kingdoms? 455
New Peoples? Ethnogenesis 457
Law and ethnicity 462
Archaeology and ethnogenesis 466
Language, names and religion 468
Ethnic change 470
Gender 482
New forms of power? 1: post-imperial rulership 488
New forms of power? 2: aristocracy and nobility 494
Conclusion 497

15 A changed world: the roots of failure 499
Justinian’s wars 499
The roots of failure (1): the barbarians 507
The roots of failure (2): the Romans 512
A changed world, ‘partly dependent upon unhistoric acts’ 515
## Contents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Appendix: Gildas’ narrative and the identity of the ‘proud tyrant’</td>
<td>519</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bibliography</td>
<td>527</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Abbreviations</td>
<td>527</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A. Journals, series, collections and secondary works</td>
<td>527</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B. Primary sources and authors</td>
<td>529</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Primary sources</td>
<td>531</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secondary works</td>
<td>537</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Index</td>
<td>585</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
MAPS AND FIGURE

MAPS

1. Europe: physical relief  page 8
2. Barbarian culture groups between the Rhine and the Baltic  60
3. The western Empire: administrative units  75
4. Britain  80
5. Gaul  82
6. Spain  87
7. Italy  89
8. North Africa  93
9. Fourth-century barbarian political units  119
10. Distribution of supposedly ‘Germanic’ furnished burials in late Roman northern Gaul  154
11. Warrior burials in northern Gaul  155
12. Distribution of Tutulusfibeln  158
13. Distribution of military metalwork in later fourth-century Britain  196
14. Distribution of metalwork from Germany in earlier fifth-century Britain  199
15. The western Empire in 410, at the death of Alaric  221
16. The western Empire in 421, at the death of Constantius ‘III’  235
17. Distribution of quoit brooch style metalwork  239
18. The western Empire, 439, after the Vandal sack of Carthage  246
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>19</td>
<td>The western Empire, 455, on the eve of the assassination of Valentinian III</td>
<td>256</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20</td>
<td>The western Empire in 470</td>
<td>275</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21</td>
<td>Western Europe, 506</td>
<td>289</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22</td>
<td>Western Europe, 560</td>
<td>311</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>23</td>
<td>‘Ostrogothic’ material in Italy</td>
<td>336</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>24</td>
<td>The ‘Duero valley culture’</td>
<td>342</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25</td>
<td>Sixth-century ‘Visigothic’ cemeteries in Spain</td>
<td>344</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>26</td>
<td>The distribution of Roman villas and Anglo-Saxon cemeteries in Britain</td>
<td>365</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>27</td>
<td>Zones of cultural interaction on the Elbe</td>
<td>396</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>28</td>
<td>Moorish kingdoms in North Africa</td>
<td>406</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Figure**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Gildas’ narrative</td>
<td>524</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
This volume was commissioned a long time ago, and delivered very late. It is only right, therefore, that my editor for much of this time, Bill Davies, heads my list of acknowledgements. I thank him for his faith in this project, and the syndics of Cambridge University Press for their patience and understanding. Simon Whitmore cracked the whip fairly and in thoroughly amiable fashion in the latter period of the book’s composition, and Michael Watson was most helpful at the very end. I hope the book has been improved by the fact that I am older and – perhaps – wiser than I would have been had it been delivered on time.

The people I have to thank above all else are my own ‘barbarian horde’, my students, especially the ‘tradition-bearers’ of this group, the 140 or so undergraduates who have studied the barbarian migrations (in various forms) with me over the past eight years at York and London. Their essays, seminar contributions and stubborn refusal just to take my word for it have kept me on my toes and stimulated my thinking about the issues discussed in this book. They have provided me, moreover, with many very fond memories, and will find much in the following pages that is extremely familiar. Two, Anthony Dee and Adrian Smith, read earlier drafts of this book, for which many thanks.

This is a book that touches on dozens of areas of specialist research, in all of which there are many people more expert than I. I owe an enormous debt to those scholars whose work I have drawn upon; if I have any perspective at all on the huge problems with
which this book deals, it is very much one derived from a vantage point perched ‘on the shoulders of giants’. Numerous scholars have kindly sent me off-prints of their works, which have proved invaluable. Of these learned ladies and gentlemen some deserve additional thanks. In the reinterpretation of ‘Germanic’ archaeology I have benefited from discussions with, and the encouragement of fellow-subversives: Sebastian Brather, Frans Theuws and Philipp von Rummel (vive la révolution!). Philipp also read the entire book in draft and made numerous helpful suggestions, saving me from many an error. Many others have helped too, as supporters, readers, discussants, always amiable (and patient!) sparring partners and in numerous other ways: Kate Cooper, Mayke de Jong, Bonnie Effros, Paul Fouracre, Mark Handley, Heinrich Härke, Peter Heather, Mark Humphries, Charlie Insley, Edward James, Ralph Mathisen, Walter Pohl, Susan Reynolds, Danuta Shanzer, Alan Thacker, Chris Wickham, and Ian Wood.

This book was mostly written in York but it owes much to Toronto. The influence of Walter Goffart’s ideas will be readily apparent. His claim, following a lecture at Kalamazoo, to have ‘liked half of [my] paper’, is one which I will carry with pride to my grave as, by Goffartian standards, unstinting flattery. Michael Kulikowski read and offered a thorough critique of the narrative section. I have benefited greatly from discussions with him, as well as from his many publications, as a cursory inspection of this book’s footnotes will attest. Finally, as well as learning much from his excellent volume on political communication in this era, I owe the term ‘post-imperial’, so much more appropriate than the usual, but in many ways misleading, ‘post-Roman’, to another product of the Toronto school, Andrew Gillett.

I must also give my deepest thanks to the fellow members of staff of the Department of History and the Centre for Medieval Studies of the University of York. It is a privilege to work with colleagues who are actually collegial, but they are much more than that. In particular I must thank Mark Ormrod for his unfailing support and friendship throughout.

Before moving to York, much of the period spent working on this book represented an unhappy phase of my personal and professional life, at least increasing my perception of the irony of the historical process! In addition to my family, who have remained the real bedrock of my existence, I have been blessed with wonderful
friends who have served, way beyond the call of duty, in helping me through these difficulties. By calling me away from my wordprocessor they have doubtless significantly delayed the appearance of this tome, but the book and its author have been much improved as a result. It is a pleasure and an honour to record my debt to them. It would have taken too much space to name them all and I’d doubtless have forgotten someone. The enforced anonymity of this acknowledgement in no way reduces its sincerity. You know who you are! The one person who cannot remain anonymous is Emma Campbell, who, in addition to providing invaluable assistance with my discussions of gender and its theorisation, has reassured me that this book would get finished, and continued to make my life a much brighter place.

Guy Halsall
August 2006.
A NOTE ON SPELLINGS

Place-names within the Western Empire (where modern towns often preserve one element or another of their Roman name) have generally been given in their current form. Further east and south, in the Empire’s Balkan, Asian and African provinces (where they frequently do not), I have used the ancient form, with the modern place-name given in brackets after the first occurrence. In the West, where there is no significantly different, generally accepted and thus more familiar, English form, I have employed the spelling used in the country within which the town now lies: thus Reims, Lyon, Mainz and Trier rather than Rheims, Lyons, Mayence and Trèves; but Cologne, Seville, Milan and Rome rather than Köln, Sevilla, Milano and Roma.

Roman provinces have always been given their ancient titles, even where a modern region derives its name from the same source: thus ‘Aquitania Secunda’ rather than ‘Second Aquitaine’. Germanic personal names, rarely spelt consistently in contemporary sources, have usually been given in a Germanic rather than Graeco-Latinised form: Wulfila rather than Ulfilas; Theoderic rather than Theodericus. Some names, however, have forms which are too accepted to change. Therefore Radagaisus retains his Latinised name rather than his Germanic original (presumably something like Radegis or Ratchis) and Clovis keeps the later antiquarian, artificial but (in French and English) usual, back-formation from ‘Louis’ instead of his actual name of Chlodovech.