PART I

ROMANS AND BARBARIANS
IN THE IMPERIAL WORLD

I

HOW THE WEST WAS LOST AND WHERE IT GOT US

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SABA, ROMANUS AND GUNTRAMN BOSO: THE PROBLEMS OF GOVERNMENT

The rulers of the Gothic kingdoms had decided to persecute the Christians, and ordered religious ceremonies that they would find unacceptable.[1] In refusing to participate, the Christians would reveal themselves and, by spurning communal ritual, apparently state that they were neither part of the community nor interested in its well-being. This would bring down their neighbours' enmity upon them. However, as with the last Roman persecutions of Christians,[2] things did not quite work out that way. One Gothic community decided to cheat their leaders at the ritual feast by giving their Christians meat that had *not* been sacrificed to the gods and thus would not upset Christian sensibilities. One Christian, Saba, refused to go along with this deception and made a public statement of his belief, adding that anyone who did participate in the feast was not a proper Christian. The elders, unsurprisingly, threw him out of the village.

[1] This story is taken from *The Passion of St Saba the Goth*. The Gothic kingdoms in question lay north of the Danube in modern Romania. For discussion of the *Passion* and its significance, see Heather (1991), pp. 103–6; Thompson, E. A. (1966), pp. 64–77; Wolfram (1988), pp. 103–9.

[2] See, e.g. Jones, A. H. M. (1964), pp. 74–6, for the lengths to which Roman officials went to avoid persecuting their local Christians, and the lengths to which the latter had to go to achieve martyrdom.

Next, at another communal sacrifice overseen by a political leader of a higher level, the local Goths swore that there were no Christians in their midst, again deciding to leave them in peace. Saba (having returned to his village) thwarted them, striding into the meeting and declaring himself a Christian. The unnamed 'persecutor' asked the villagers whether Saba was a rich man, to which they replied that he had 'nothing except the clothes he wears'. Declaring that Saba was no threat to anyone, the 'persecutor' again had him expelled.

Now royal Goths appeared on the scene, in the form of 'Atharidus, son of Rotestheus of royal rank'. Atharid with his 'gang of lawless bandits' swooped on a village where Saba and the local priest had celebrated Easter and captured them both. Thoroughly beating up Saba, they left him tied to the wheel of a wagon (although miracu-lously unscathed) but during the night a local woman untied him. Saba refused to run away so next day Atharid's gang immediately recaptured him. After Saba refused to eat sacrificial meat and claimed to be immune to pain, Atharid ordered some warriors to take him away and drown him in the river Mousaios.[3] Even now, Atharid's men mooted the possibility of just letting Saba go and claiming to have drowned him: 'How will Atharid ever find out?' Yet again, Saba harangued them and told them to carry out their orders. Rather wearily, they held Saba under water with a log and drowned him. Leaving his body by the river, they went away. It was Thursday, 12 April 372.

There are serious grounds for not taking this story literally. The strategy adopted by its author, which succeeds so well in putting modern readers firmly on the side of Atharid and the pagan Goths, originally worked to show the uncompromising depth of Saba's Christianity. Thus all the chances that Saba was given to save himself might simply be a device to show his piety. Nevertheless aspects of the tale can be corroborated from other sources and it has a very human ring.[4] One might suppose that the difficulties in getting anything done which beset Rothesteus, at the apex of the political hierarchy described in the *Passion of St Saba*, or the great Gothic leader Athanaric (†381), who lies behind the whole episode, stemmed simply from the fact that this was a barbarian kingdom or confederacy with no literary instruments of government. However, things were

[3] Possibly the Buzau in Wallachia: Heather and Matthews (trans.) (1991), p. 110.
[4] Heather and Matthews (trans.) (1991), pp. 109–11.

not very different in the enormous bureaucratic edifice which was
the Roman Empire.

North Africa was a prosperous area of the Roman world, some-
thing that often surprises modern students whose images of the region
revolve around barren mountains and the great Saharan sand-sea.
Here, and at more or less exactly the same time as Saba was so
assiduously seeking martyrdom, was played out the story of Count
Romanus.[5] The tale is unlikely to be as simple as Ammianus
Marcellinus makes it appear, writing twenty years after it ended, and
it is doubtful that we will ever get to the bottom of it, but the outlines
of the case are as follows. In 363–4 a tribe called the *Austoriani* raided
the people of Lepcis Magna (Lebda, Libya) in *Tripolitania* after one of
the former was burnt at the stake, apparently for brigandage. The
citizens called upon Romanus, the newly arrived count of Africa,
who came with his troops but demanded large amounts of provisions
and 4,000 camels. These the locals refused to produce so after forty
days in the neighbourhood Romanus departed, leaving the citizens of
Lepcis to the Austoriani. The Tripolitanians sent envoys to Emperor
Valentinian I (364–75) to complain but Romanus had a relative at
court and tried to get the affair heard by him. As it was, the emperor
heard the envoys' complaint and a defence by Romanus' supporters,
believed neither and promised a full inquiry. This, however, was
delayed and meanwhile the North Africans again fell victim to serious
attacks, which Romanus allegedly did nothing to avert. Valentinian
was unhappy at the news of these raids and sent a tribune called Pal-
ladius with money to pay the African army and report on the situation.

Romanus persuaded the officers of his command to lodge the bulk
of their pay with Palladius so, when two local townsmen showed
Palladius the damage and the extent of Romanus' negligence,
Romanus threatened to report Palladius as a corrupt official who had
pocketed the pay entrusted to him. To save himself, Palladius agreed
to inform the emperor that the Tripolitanians had no cause for
complaint. The townsmen who had reported to Palladius were
condemned to have their tongues cut out for lying, but fled.
Valentinian, wholly deceived in the affair and never lenient at the

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[5] The main story is recounted in Amm. Marc. 28.6 but see also 27.9.1, 29.5.1–2,
30.2.10. For discussion see MacMullen (1988), pp. 154–5, 179–80; Matthews
(1989), pp. 281–2, 383–7. On Ammianus, see Drijvers and Hunt (eds.) (1999);
Matthews (1989).

best of times, also ordered that the previous ambassadors from the
province and the governor be executed although, again, at least one
escaped into hiding. Eventually a number of the (in Ammianus'
account) guilty parties, including Palladius, were driven to suicide
and some were burnt alive by Count Theodosius, who led the
military expedition in 373 which finally quelled the unrest of the
North African tribes. Romanus, it seems, despite a short spell in
prison, got away with it.

There is much more to this story than the simple apportioning of
blame and Romanus' version might have been rather different.[6] The
region's convoluted politics probably led to the execution of Count
Theodosius, the father of the Emperor Theodosius who reigned
when Ammianus was writing. This probably prevented Ammianus
from giving a full account of what happened. Certainly, he never
mentions Count Theodosius' execution.[7] The saga nevertheless
illustrates the difficulty which emperors had in finding out what was
happening 'on the ground' in their huge empire and the ways in
which this difficulty could be exploited by local parties.

The final story in this trilogy comes from the *Histories* of Gregory of
Tours (*c.*539–594). We now move on to the very end of the period
covered by this volume, 200 years after the stories of Saba and
Romanus. By 583 Gaul was divided into three kingdoms – Austrasia,
Neustria and Burgundy – ruled by Franks of the Merovingian
dynasty. Civil war broke out when a certain Gundovald sailed to
Gaul from Constantinople (Istanbul, Turkey) and claimed to be a
Merovingian.[8] Duke Guntramn Boso, a leading figure at the Aus-
trasian court, was with Gundovald when he originally arrived but by
583 circumstances had changed and Boso had deserted the 'pretender',
taking with him the gold sent by the eastern Roman (Byzantine)
Empire to support the revolt. Gundovald fled to a Mediterranean island
while Mummolus, a famous general who had defected to him from
King Guntramn of Burgundy, held out in Avignon. Guntramn Boso
was arrested and brought before King Guntramn, but bought his
freedom by promising to capture Mummolus.

[6] Matthews (1989), pp. 282, 375; below, pp. 65–8 for commentary.
[7] Jerome, *Chronicle. a.* 376; Oros. 7.33.7; Matthews (1989), pp. 222, 382. Romanus'
   avarice is also attested by Zos. 4.15.
[8] For this story, see Gregory of Tours, *LH* 6.26. The classic discussion of the
   'Gundovald affair' is Goffart (1957). See also Wood (1994a), pp. 93–8. For an
   introduction to Gregory, see Wood (1994b).

Leaving his son as a hostage with King Guntramn, Boso returned to the Auvergne. Using his title of *dux* (military commander) he raised the troops of the Austrasian city-districts of Clermont and Le Velay, and set out to besiege Mummolus in Avignon. Mummolus, however, thwarted Boso's attempts to capture him through force or persuasion. Now Boso was joined by Burgundian troops sent by King Guntramn and the two sides settled down to a siege. At this juncture the fourteen-year-old king of Austrasia, Childebert II, heard that Guntramn Boso was using Austrasian troops, without permission, to help the king of Burgundy in a campaign to which Austrasia was seemingly opposed, not least because Avignon was Austrasian territory. Childebert or his advisers sent to the spot another duke, Gundulf, a relative of Gregory of Tours. Gundulf raised the siege by ordering the Auvergnat levies home, whereupon the unsupported Burgundians also withdrew. He then took Mummolus to Clermont but shortly thereafter let him return to Avignon, further suggesting that his defection and flight to Austrasian soil had official sanction.

There are many problems with understanding this story, not least the fact that Gregory of Tours wrote about it during the supremacy of King Guntramn, who was implacable in his pursuit of anyone possibly involved in Gundovald's rebellion. Gregory's relative Gundulf played some role as an intermediary between Austrasia and the pretender's supporters and Gregory himself might have been involved.[9] Never-theless, it illustrates more late antique problems of government. Acting a long way from the royal court, an unscrupulous royal officer like Guntramn Boso could call out the troops on the strength of his title and use them illegitimately to pursue his own ends. Order was restored, as it turned out, by another aristocrat, Gundulf, arriving from the court and invoking *his* royally bestowed authority to send the levies home. But what would have happened if Gundulf, like Boso, had only been invoking the king's name, without authority, for his own ends? Who, in the camp before Avignon, would have known?

This anecdotal triptych highlights the problems facing anyone trying to govern a late antique kingdom or empire. Europe and North Africa are difficult areas to rule. Three excellent books appeared in the early 1980s,[10] covering the early medieval history of most of mainland Europe: all began by stressing the geographical
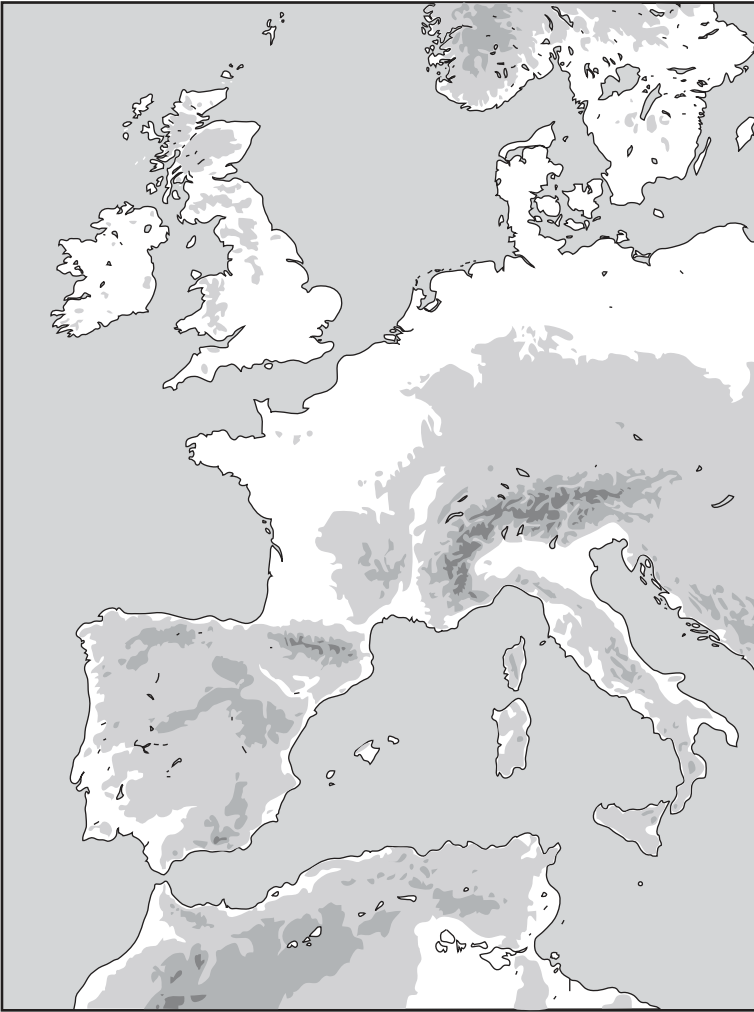
[9] Halsall (2002); Wood (1993).
[10] Collins (1995), pp. 6–7; James (1982a), p. 1; Wickham (1981), pp. 1–6.

Map 1   Europe: physical relief

disunity and thus the problems of governing the area in question. Mountain ranges, barren high plateaux, broad rivers, marshlands and forests cut Europe up into innumerable micro-regions (map 1). Within each were people actively trying to do the best for themselves and their families. Sometimes this brought them into competition with their neighbours or with those trying to rule them in the name

of outside powers. When one considers the difficulties of travel and communication in this period, the problems of effective rule become all too clear. We can see why Valentinian was so dependent upon taking on trust reports from possibly unreliable officers; just how scheming aristocrats could manipulate Auvergnat levies by claiming to bear the authority of a distant king. In Saba's tale Atharid's warriors began to consider how to avoid carrying out his orders when they were literally only just out of his sight; in Gothic territory, even the banks of the river Mousaios posed a barrier to the effective implementation of a ruler's writ.

As recent events in Iraq, the Balkans and the former Soviet Union have shown, and as Valentinian probably knew over 1600 years earlier, force and terror are implements of limited value in holding states together when local communities no longer wish to be incorporated in them. 'Nor is there any military power so great that it can last for long under the weight of fear.'[11] Making an example of a provincial governor and a couple of leading citizens might persuade other locally important figures to throw in their lot with the imperial forces or illustrate graphically what might happen if one got on the wrong side of the emperor but such measures were inefficient. At least two of those whom Valentinian ordered to be killed escaped into hiding with their fellow citizens' help. The local Goths' reluctance to rend their little community through persecution emerges very clearly from the account of Saba's martyrdom.

The problem of late antique government was how to bind all those communities, like Saba's, into one political entity. Large political units were the norm in this period, even after the western Empire's disintegration, something which heightens rather than reduces the importance of understanding this issue.[12] How could late antique rulers succeed where later leaders, even in the modern world with its mass armies, high technology, chemical weapons, cluster-bombs and helicopter gunships, have failed? Political change was brought about not by the imposition of authority but by the active subscription to new governments by inhabitants of all the communities in the different regions of the west. Yet discussions of the end of the western

[11] Cicero, *On Duties* 2.26. Compare the Burmese democratic leader Aung San Suu Kyi, quoted in *The Observer* 9 Feb. 1997: 'All [dictatorships] are shored up by arms and they all collapse in the end.'
[12] Gellner (1973), p. 1.

Roman Empire and the processes known to historians as 'the barbarian migrations' have rarely featured the role of individuals in small communities away from the core of 'high politics', like the Gothic villagers, the North African provincials or the troops before Avignon. This book seeks to restore to these people their important, indeed crucial, role in shaping western European history between 376 and 568.

THE BARBARIANS' ROLE IN HISTORY

Previous works have not generally featured people like these because – following the concerns of contemporary narratives – they have concentrated upon high political events. The barbarian migrations and the fall of Rome are inextricably linked. The end of the Roman Empire (by which, as has been endlessly pointed out, we mean only the *western* Roman Empire) has traditionally been thought to have been brought about by the influx of barbarians. The latter have a historical role but their movement is rarely explained, except as a primeval surge towards the Mediterranean or a late antique domino theory initiated by the pressure from tribes behind, ultimately fleeing from the Huns. On the other side, though, the inhabitants of the Roman Empire have hardly been given any part to play at all. They are usually passive, indeed apathetic, cowardly observers of the movements of armies and the transfers of political power.[13]

The historiography of this topic reflects Europe's strange, almost schizophrenic, attitude to its barbarian past.[14] This is manifest in the way that in popular speech barbarian means a savage, a destroyer of civilised values, yet a fascination with the heroic barbarian exists simultaneously: Conan the Barbarian is the prime example from western popular culture. Similarly, in some histories the end of the western Empire and the entry of the barbarians were believed to constitute a 'Bad Thing', bringing about the end of civilisation and the introduction of a Dark Age. In this way of seeing history, common amongst French and Italian historians, the movement of non-Romans into the Empire has generally been referred to as 'the barbarian invasions': 'les invasions barbares'; 'le invasioni barbariche'.

[13] Jones, A. H. M. (1964), pp. 1046, 1059–60, for the classic castigation of the apathetic Roman population, especially its aristocracy.
[14] Geary (2002), pp. 1–14.

On the other hand, especially amongst German historians, these events acquired a more heroic dimension. The movement of Germanic-speaking tribes was 'a Good Thing', bringing about the collapse of a decadent and effete Mediterranean society or, alternatively, a top-heavy, despotic and corrupt autocracy, and its replacement by a virile, martial society, sometimes seen as having political norms based on a proto-democracy of free peasants or the reciprocal bonds between warlord and retinue. These approaches led to different ways of emploting the period's history, as the tragedy of the Empire's demise or as the heroic epic of barbarian peoples culminating in their settlement and establishment of a kingdom in one of the former provinces. Both views, however, were in agreement about one essential fact: the barbarians brought down the Roman Empire.

It will come as no shock that these historical views were produced by the political circumstances in which they were written. Most national histories in the west begin with barbarians, which is hardly surprising given that many modern states and regions owe their names to the migrating peoples of late antiquity: England, Scotland, France, Burgundy and Lombardy. Other appellations equally derive from the ethnic shifts of the period. The French call their German neighbours 'allemands', the *Alamanni*, the barbarian confederation that neighboured that of the Franks. The Germans refer to France as Frankreich, the kingdom of the Franks. In the British Isles the English call the inhabitants of the western peninsula 'Welsh', a Germanic word meaning 'foreigner', whereas the Welsh call the English 'Saes' – Saxons.

National historiographical traditions frequently go back to a work of the early Middle Ages wherein a people's history is described, often from mythical origins to their settlement in the former Empire. Such 'national histories' are normally thought to include Jordanes' mid-sixth-century *Origin and Deeds of the Goths* (the *Getica*), Gregory of Tours' *History of the Franks* (late sixth century), Isidore of Seville's early seventh-century *History of the Goths*, Bede's *Ecclesiastical History of the English People* from about a century later and Paul the Deacon's *History of the Lombards*, belonging to the end of the eighth century. This is a problematic grouping of texts, which does little justice to their complexity.[15] Bede's work, as its name implies, belongs to the genre of ecclesiastical history and Gregory never wrote a *History of the Franks* at all. Some manuscripts of an anonymous early

[15] On which see Goffart (1988).