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Visigoths and the fall of Rome

Was the crossing of the Danube by the Visigoths in the late fourth century into the Roman Empire a cause or an effect of the Roman imperial collapse? This is an old question, and Peter Heather tries to answer this old question with new archaeological findings.

In late summer 376, two Gothic groups approached the northern banks of the river Danube somewhere close to the modern Dobrudja. A series of disturbances associated with the nomadic Huns had undermined their long-standing control of lands north of the Black Sea, so that they came to seek asylum from the Emperor Valens. Exactly one hundred years later, in late summer 476, the last Roman emperor to rule in Rome was deposed and the imperial regalia sent to Constantinople: the practical and symbolic termination of the western Empire. In this intervening century, the Goths of 376 and their descendants had played a periodically starring role in some highly dramatic events. Just two years after being admitted, they slaughtered Valens and two-thirds of his elite field army at the battle of Hadrianople. In 410, they mounted the first sack of the city of Rome in over seven hundred years, before negotiating a highly favourable settlement in 416/18 which turned the Garonne valley in Aquitaine into a semi-independent Gothic fiefdom. But this was only the beginning. In the mid 450s, they put their own nominee, Avitus, onto the throne, and, as the western Empire finally collapsed, turned their limited fiefdom into an independent kingdom which stretched from the banks of the Loire to the Straits of Gibraltar. But was the capacity of these Goths to enter Roman territory in the late fourth century and of their descendants to rise to increasing prominence in the fifth (a capacity matched by several other groups of outsiders besides) cause or effect of Roman imperial collapse?

This is an old question and, in one sense, there can be no new answers: the Visigoths and other outsiders have been construed alternatively as cause and effect of Roman collapse by numerous different contributors to

its historiography. But if it is impossible to propose new answers, the last generation of scholarship has been able to increase the sophistication of the arguments being deployed, both by bringing new datasets into consideration, and by freeing itself from some older presumptions.

Arguably the most important intellectual advance has nothing at all to do with the outsiders, the product rather of the emergence of the field survey as a major plank of archaeological investigation. Based on the twin capacity to date Roman pottery brought to the surface by modern deep-ploughing, and to recognise what density of surface ceramics can serve as a reliable guide to the existence of an underlying settlement, this technique was born in late 1960s and started to bring in revolutionary results for the Roman Empire about a decade later. Contrary to the picture painted in all the standard scholarly texts up to the early 1960s, the fourth century has emerged from the surveys as a period of maximum occupation and industry in the Roman rural economy: across the vast majority of its provinces. Parts of northern Britain and what is now Belgium had not recovered from the disruptions of the third century, while Italy itself had declined in relative terms from its boom years either side of the birth of Christ, when it was exporting to undeveloped economies in much of the newly conquered Empire. Otherwise, the mainstay agricultural economy of the Roman Empire was booming as never before in the late imperial period. This finding totally contradicts the backdrop of drastic economic decline which permeates much of the older writing about Roman collapse, and, in doing so, has reopened the whole question of the role played by outsiders in the process. It is now impossible to imagine that the late Empire had become so economically disrupted by the later fourth century that it was simply unable to maintain its traditional frontiers for this reason alone.¹

At the same time, the nature of the intruding groups of outsiders has come under close scrutiny. Here, the most significant advance has been the realisation that, contrary to the assumptions of what might be

1 Surveys of evidence: e.g. T. Lewit, *Agricultural Production in the Roman Economy A.D. 200-400* (Oxford 1991); P. Van Ossel and P. Ouzoulias, 'Rural Settlement Economy in Northern Gaul in the late Empire', *Journal of Roman Archaeology* 13 (2000) 133-160. The findings make astonishingly different reading from the assumptions running through such standard older surveys as the relevant chapters in H.M. Gwatkin and J.P. Whitney eds., *The Cambridge Medieval History*, vol. 1 (Cambridge, 1st ed., 1911) or S.A Cook. et al. eds., *The Cambridge Ancient History*, 1st ed., vol. XII (Cambridge 1939).

termed the 'high' nationalist period of European cultural history (mid-nineteenth to mid-twentieth centuries), the Gothic (and other) groups of outsiders moving onto Roman soil in the fourth and fifth centuries were not culturally and political distinct, largely endogamous communities of descent. The point is easily illustrated using the Goths of 376. Traditional scholarship labelled these the Visigoths and traced a continuous history for them from an independent kingdom beyond the Roman frontier in the fourth century to their foundation of a successor state to the western Empire in Gaul and Spain in the later fifth. This is highly misleading. Detailed contemporary sources document that two previously separate Gothic groups came to the Danube in 376, called Tervingi and Greuthungi (not Visigoths). These two groups forged a new, unified entity on Roman soil by the time that Alaric rose to prominence among them in the 390s. Alaric then added two large extra components to this force between 408 and 410: a large body of 'barbarian' (i.e. non-Roman) soldiery which had been part of the western imperial army up to the death of Stilicho in 408, and a large number of slaves who deserted to the Goths when they were camped outside Rome. The barbarian soldiers were probably for the most part the more fortunate of the followers of another barbarian king, Radagaisus, who had led an attack on Italy in 405/6. On his defeat, Stilicho had taken a large body of Radagaisus' warrior elite into Roman service. The slaves were presumably of more mixed origins, but, again, many of them were probably the less well treated among the former followers of Radagaisus, since, on his defeat so many of his less fortunate followers were sold into slavery that the bottom dropped out of the market. Although there were some further comings and goings subsequent to Alaric's death, none appears to be on the same scale as those of his lifetime, and the grouping then enjoyed a more continuous history down to the appearance of its successor kingdom in the 460s and 470s.²

- 2 Detail P.J. Heather, *Goths and Romans 332-489* (Oxford 1991) pt. 2 arguing for a much more radical restructuring than is envisaged even in e.g. H. Wolfram, *History of the Goths*, trans. T. J. Dunlap (Berkeley 1988), or older literature such as E.A. Thompson, *The Visigoths in the time of Ulfila* (Oxford 1966). M. Kulikowski, 'Nation versus Army: A necessary Contrast', in A. Gillett ed., *On Barbarian Identity: Critical Approaches to Ethnicity in the Early Middle Ages* (Turnhout 2002), 69-85 and G. Halsall, *Barbarian Migrations and the Roman West 376-568* (Cambridge 2007) cc.7-8 have argued that Alaric did not lead the surviving Tervingi and Greuthungi

If we are going to reserve the label 'Visigoth' for the group which created the successor kingdom, therefore, it is demonstrably incorrect to use it before to the reign of Alaric, when it first came into being. The Visigoths had no existence prior to 376, but were a new entity put together on the march on Roman soil with significant manpower contributions from at least three major previously independent groups: the Tervingi and Greuthungi of 376, and the followers of Radagaisus. The same is demonstrably true of the vast majority of the other militarised groups of outsiders around whom the different western successor states came into being. The Vandals who carved out a kingdom in North Africa were a new alliance created between 406 and 420 from the previously separate Siling and Hasding Vandals, united with large numbers of originally Iranian-speaking Alan nomads. Theoderic's Ostrogoths were a mixture of two previously separate Gothic groups – one from Pannonia, the other from Thrace – put together in the 480s, which also recruited large number of Rugi in 487. So too the Franks: Gregory of Tours' account demonstrates that the origin of Merovingian pre-eminence lay in Clovis' unification of maybe six or more previously independent warbands to create a new military power large enough on which to found a kingdom. The only successor kingdom not demonstrably built around a new group formed on Roman soil is that of the Burgundians in the Rhone valley in south-eastern Gaul, but there were substantial discontinuities in their fifth-century history, and their exceptionalism may be illusory.³

The barbarian groups who founded the western successor states have to be viewed as new amalgams of population who were themselves as much changed by the process of moving onto to Roman soil as was the Roman Empire itself. Indeed, these transformations on Roman soil can now also be shown to be sitting on the back of a story of much longer-term revolution. That something went on amongst the barbarians on the other side of Rome's European frontiers during the first three centuries AD has always been clear. The mid-third century saw both the sudden

of 376 in revolt against the terms of the treaty of 382, but this is unconvincing: P.J. Heather, *Empires & Barbarians: Migration, Development, and the Creation of Europe* (London 2009), 191-195. A good introduction to the effects of nationalist readings in this field is P. Geary, *The Myth of Nations: The Medieval Origins of Europe* (Princeton 2002).

- 3 The same is true of the Lombards who created a second-generation successor state. On the Ostrogoths, see Heather, *Goths and Romans*, pt. 3 with more general commentary on the other groups in Heather, *Empires and Barbarians* 342-347.

replacement of many of the old group names known from the first century by larger collective terms such as Alamanni and Franci, and the appearance of old names such as Goths in quite new places. Archaeological investigation since World War II has shown that these political changes visible in the historical sources had profound roots. The Roman period saw an economic revolution unfold in the largely Germanic world beyond the imperial frontier, with agricultural productivity and population densities increasing substantially. This was accompanied by a considerable increase in some basic craft manufacturing (industrialisation would be a wildly anachronistic term), and in the amount of exchange taking place both within the Germanic world as a whole, and particularly between it and the Roman Empire. By the fourth century AD, therefore, many more people were living in non-Roman western and central Europe than had been the case in the first, and a greater number of more complex flows of wealth exchange were in operation. This transformed economic base generated a corresponding revolution in social structures. Weapons' deposits and historical sources combine to show that permanent specialist military retinues were a new and marked feature of the later Roman Germanic world, and there is considerable evidence for more general differentiation in social status. Between them, these other changes transformed the nature of political power. By the fourth century, rulership was based firmly on the control of military force, and because that military force was more specialised, political power was more stable than in the first century, a fact visible both in a greater degree of heritability among ruling families, and in the capacity of alliance structures to survive even major defeats. In the first century, Arminius' coalition quickly collapsed even in the aftermath of victory, whereas the massive defeat of Chnodomarius' Alamanni at Strasbourg in 357 did not destroy the Alamannic alliance, and within twenty years a new pre-eminent Alamannic king, Macrianus, had emerged with sufficient power to force Valentinian I to grant him favourable peace terms.⁴

This vision of new groups coming into existence on Roman soil, on the back of a much longer-term transformations, is accepted by the vast

4 For introductions to and commentary on the transformations, with full references, see e.g. L. Hedeager, 'Empire, Frontier and the Barbarian Hinterland. Rome and Northern Europe from AD 1-400'; in M. Rowlands et al. eds., *Centre and periphery in the ancient world* (Cambridge 1987) 125-140; W. Pohl, *Die Germanen* (München 2000); Heather, *Empires and Barbarians* cc. 2-3.

majority of recent scholarship, but scholars have responded in different ways to the realisation that the successor states were founded by new and hence improvised amalgamations of population. For some, the Visigoths and their peers were clearly too loose and ephemeral as new groupings of humanity for them to have played any decisive role in the action of western Roman imperial collapse. Either because of straightforward limitations in the numbers of warriors they could field (seemingly a minority view among those whose views have so far appeared in writing),⁵ or because of their internal frailties, these groups cannot have disposed of sufficient military-cum-political power to challenge the Roman state. That they prospered and survived is a reflection, therefore, of the fact that, for various reasons, the Roman body politic chose not to confront them but had become willing to incorporate outsiders into its structures. Such a view obviously relegates the Visigoths and others to the status of 'effect' rather than 'cause' of western imperial collapse.

The roots of such views lie in two main lines of argument. First, its advocates have been greatly influenced by a new body of social scientific research into the operation of human group identities which has emerged since the end of World War II. Some of this has stressed the overall liability to change of group identities, on the one hand, and, on the other (the fundamental cause of the instability), the tendency of individuals to switch identities according to momentary self-interest. In the words of Norwegian anthropologist Fredrik Barth's introduction to a highly influential set of essays, group identity is no more than an 'evanescent situational construct'. From this perspective, a narrative which is about solid groupings of humanity migrating onto Roman territory and carving out kingdoms upon it seems to lack basic credibility, and, from this, comes the other key line of argument: a series of propositions about exactly how and why the action progressed as it did in the late fourth and fifth centuries. First, the outsiders who reorganised themselves on Roman soil to create the successor states were in fact originally allowed by the

5 J. Drinkwater, *The Alamanni and Rome 213-496* (Oxford 2007) 323-324 and A. Merrills & R. Miles, *The Vandals* (Oxford 2010), c.1 suggest that the different groups involved in the Rhine crossing of 406 may have comprised all-male warbands, each of no more than c. 1,000 warriors. But this directly contradicts such indications as exist in the sources (that they were mixed groups of a few tens of thousands including men, women & children: cf. Heather, *Empires & Barbarians* 173-177) and is not accepted even by most who otherwise argue for a more limited barbarian role in imperial collapse than I would myself (see next note).

Roman state (either deliberately or accidentally) to cross the frontier. Second, they prospered subsequently in part because the Roman state changed its traditional military responses towards outsiders to diplomatic ones which allowed them to survive (not least because the two halves of the Empire were more interested in fighting each other than barbarians), but also, third, because Roman provincial elites decided it was more in their interest to form alliances with the leaderships of these groups rather than continue to pay large amounts of tax to the central Roman state. The overall process of imperial collapse would thus become essentially a voluntary one, more indicative of the structural limitations of the Roman world than the power of the outside intruders.⁶

Of these two arguments, the detailed narrative propositions are by far the most important. Looked at closely, the social scientific literature does not require us to take any a priori view on the likely strength of barbarian group identities. Any group identity will certainly have strong subjective elements, but, as our post-Freudian world emphasises in many contexts, the subjective can exercise an extremely powerful hold on individual will. More generally, as the logic of Barth's formulation itself suggests, different situations and contexts create, in fact, different levels of allegiance among the individual, different individuals can respond with widely differing levels of loyalty to the same group, and the same individuals can at different moments both show great emotional dependence on a group identity and seek to maximise their position by distancing themselves from it.⁷ In other words, even if they were new political alliances, we need to judge the coherence of the Visigoths and the other fifth-century barbarian groupings on the basis of the available

6 F. Barth, *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries: The Social Organization of Ethnic Difference* (Boston 1969): quotation from p.9. This has strongly influenced arguments for extreme instability in barbarian group identity such as those of P. Amory, *People and Identity in Ostrogothic Italy 489-554* (Cambridge 1997) and many of the essays in the collection edited by A. Gillett (see note 2). For examples of types of argumentation stressing a Roman contribution to imperial collapse (they are not all identical), see e.g. W. Goffart, 'Rome, Constantinople, and the Barbarians in Late Antiquity', *American Historical Review* 76 (1981) 275-306; Halsall (see note 2), cc. 6-8; or the general survey of M. Innes, *Introduction to Early Medieval Western Europe, 300-900: The Sword, The Plough and The Book* (London 2007) c. 1.

7 One good introduction to the social scientific literature (among many possibilities) is: A. Bacall, *Ethnicity and the Social Sciences: A view and a Review of the Literature on Ethnicity* (Coventry 1991).

evidence. The theoretical literature does not push the argument decisively in one direction or the other.

When you look at the detail of the action without presuppositions, in my view, it fails to support the key propositions that would limit the role in the action played by outside invaders. First of all, it is substantially a myth that the intruding groups of the late fourth and early fifth centuries were allowed or even invited onto Roman soil. Of the different major groups who crossed or attempted to cross onto Roman soil - Tervingi and Greuthungi in 376; Sarmatians, Huns, and Alans in 377; more Greuthungi in 386; Radagaisus' Goths in 405; Siling Vandals, Hasding Vandals and Alans in 406; Huns and Sciri in 408/9; Burgundians in circa 410/11; Anglo-Saxons in many small groups from *circa* 410 - there is evidence that permission to cross into the Empire was given only to the Tervingi and the very first Anglo-Saxons, the latter comprising, so Gildas says, three boat loads of mercenaries. All the rest made uninvited intrusions onto Roman soil, and, even with the Tervingi, a strong case can be made that Valens was acting under duress. When the Tervingi and Greuthungi arrived on the Danube, the emperor had mobilised for war against Persia and his field army was in the East. It is inconceivable that he can really have been happy to see his European frontier go up in flames at a moment when he was giving battle in the Near East, and the subsequent narrative shows that he had not enough troops in the Balkans to control both Tervingi and Greuthungi (both of whom asked for permission). His eventual policy decision, in fact, matched that reality since he allowed the Tervingi in but attempted unsuccessfully to exclude the Greuthungi. This is a clear sign that he was not as enthusiastic about receiving the Goths as his propaganda had to claim, since no God-appointed Roman Emperor, the chief hallmark of whose legitimacy was military victory, could afford to admit that mere barbarians had forced him into a particular line of policy. Of the many thousands of barbarians who entered Roman territory in the key period between circa 375 and circa 420, therefore, only three boat loads of Anglo-Saxons - maybe 100 men - were actually there by invitation. The other tens of thousands, quite conceivably well over one hundred thousand including dependents, were uninvited intruders. No sudden change in Roman frontier policy lay behind the cross-border intrusions of the late fourth and early fifth centuries.⁸

8 On Valens and the Tervingi: see Heather, *Goths and Romans*, c. 4 with further

Second, while subsequent exchanges between invaders and the Roman state did often result in diplomatic agreements, these agreements always followed, and their nature was actually dictated by, intervening conflict. The point can be illustrated again using those groups who would become the Visigoths. Their early history on Roman soil is marked by three major treaties with the Roman state: in 382, 397, and 416/8. The treaty of 382 was the direct result of two major Roman defeats: the slaughter of Valens' army at Hadrianople followed by the collapse of Theodosius' rebuilt army in summer 380. The more advantageous terms granted the Goths in 397 followed the large-scale revolt led by Alaric from 395, and two years of pillaging around the Balkans. The third and most important of the treaties (both the most advantageous to the Goths – encompassing a land grant in Aquitaine – and the most stable: dictating the pattern of Visigothic/Roman relations down to the 460s) followed ten years of Gothic campaigning in the west, during which time Alaric effectively brought the newly united Visigoths into being and sacked the city of Rome. With the second and third treaties, other dimensions beyond Visigothic military power are certainly part of the story. In 397, the eunuch Eutropius, de facto ruler of the east, opted for peace with the Goths to delegitimize the intrusion onto eastern territory of the west Roman ruler Stilicho who claimed that he was looking to defeat Alaric's revolt (but was at least as interested in unseating Eutropius). By 418, likewise, several other outside groups had penetrated Roman defences (not least the Vandals, Alans, and Sueves who crossed the Rhine in 406) and in granting such an unprecedentedly generous treaty to the Visigoths, the Roman state was clearly aiming to use their military power against the newcomers. Nonetheless, violent military confrontation between the Goths and the Roman state was basic to all this diplomatic activity. If the Goths had not had enough power to defeat Valens and Theodosius, nor built up their capacity under Alaric, they would not still have been in existence as an independent force that could be used as a counterweight from 416 against other groups of intruders. Once again, this is a pattern that repeats. Even the Vandal/Alan seizure of North Africa in 439 was eventually sanctioned by treaty in 444, but this was straightforwardly a conquest, where diplomatic recognition followed only because the Roman state felt that it had no option but to grant it in the face of the rise of

comment in Heather, *Empires and Barbarians*, 158-170 dealing with attempted counterarguments.

Attila the Hun. The key diplomatic moments in the story of west Roman imperial collapse represent not voluntary changes of policy, therefore, but concessions wrung from the state by violent confrontations with it on the part of the intruding barbarians.⁹

Third, both military confrontations and diplomatic concessions severely damaged the structural fabric of the Roman state. Reduced to essentials, the Empire systematically taxed agricultural production to support a professional army which provided protection for the landowning elites who primarily benefitted from the Empire's existence. Viewed from this perspective the actions of outsiders destabilised the system on a variety of levels. Most obviously, the violence undermined the capacity of the Roman army. The *Notitia Dignitatum* preserves an order of battle for the western army which dates to circa 420. As A.H.M. Jones showed, it shows that forty percent of western field army units had been destroyed in the preceding twenty-five years. Equally important, areas that were fought over, even when that violence eventually led to diplomatic settlements, produced only highly reduced tax revenues for a considerable period. The surviving imperial laws suggest that tax reductions of up to ninety percent for periods of five years or more were normal. And wherever outside groups were granted or conquered west Roman provinces, then of course all the tax revenues of the affected areas were lost to the Roman system. As early as 420, Britain had fallen out of the system, while tax income from parts of Italy and southern Gaul together with most of Spain had been much reduced by conflict, and the shortage of revenues again shows up in military listings of the *Notitia Dignitatum*. The forty percent losses in the field army had been made good, but only by recategorizing frontier garrison forces and not by recruiting any new troops. This was the cheaper option, and represents a major downgrading of the west's overall military capacity. Financial crisis became acute, moreover, with the Vandal/Alan seizure of North Africa in 439. This removed the richest provinces of the western Empire from central control, and, not surprisingly, the smell of financial shortage directly affecting military capacity then hangs over the final decades of

9 Context and Nature of (Visi)gothic Treaties: Heather, *Goths and Romans*, cc. 5-6 (Kulikowski as note 2 has tried to argue that there was no formal treaty in 382, but the evidence is overwhelming that there was: Heather, *Empires and Barbarians*, 192-195). On the link between the Vandal Agreement & the rise of Attila, P.J. Heather, *The Fall of Rome: A New History* (London 2005) cc. 5-6.

the western Empire: from the 440s, when Aetius' regime tried to find new revenue sources to increase army size, to the final overthrow of Romulus Augustulus, when the Italian field army revolted over pay.¹⁰

Fourth and finally, all this puts into perspective the switches of allegiance made by Roman landowners, when they decided to throw in their lot with Visigothic and other barbarian kings. Seen against this backdrop, these decisions cease to look at all voluntary. Roman landowners were a small elite, the prime beneficiaries of the hugely unequal wealth distribution which the Empire's socio-economic and legal systems protected. When the central state, due to financial shortages and consequent military decline, became increasingly unable to fulfil its role of protection, the landowners' position came under direct threat, and in some parts of the west (notably southern Britain and northern Gaul), they did not manage to survive the process of collapse, their properties being acquired by incoming outsiders. As this perspective underlines that, wherever they could, Roman landowners had in fact no choice but to come to accommodations with whichever of the new barbarian kingdoms began to hold sway in their region or risk losing everything that gave them status and wealth. Some moved quicker than others, certainly, but in the end there was no choice, as the career of Sidonius Apollinaris demonstrates. He was happy to work with Visigothic kings, so long as they were still operating within the political umbrella of the weakening western Empire in the 450s and 460s. When Euric started to conquer lands entirely for himself in the late 460s, Sidonius tried to resist, but even he was forced in the end to send a grovelling poem about the new king's greatness to the Visigothic court. Individual choice went no further than when and how allegiance was to be transferred, but not the basic fact that it had to be.¹¹

In my view, therefore, a very strong case can be made that the Visigoths played a central role in west Roman imperial collapse. It required the participation of other intruding groups besides, in two key demographic surges across Rome's European frontiers (c.376-80, and 405-8),

10 The crucial part of the *Notitia* (the *distributio numerorum*) is analysed by A.H.M. Jones, *The Later Roman Empire: A Social Economic and Administrative Survey*, 3 vols (Oxford 1964), appendix III. Examples of tax remissions are C.Th. 11. 28. 12, Nov. Val. 13. On the effects of cash shortages, see Nov. Val. (on the 440s) & Procopius Wars (on the deposition of Romulus Augustulus).

11 The poem is included in Sidonius Ep. 8. 9 to his friend Lampridius who was already well-established at Euric's court.

and even in aggregate this total body of armed humanity could not have overwhelmed just any Empire that one might envisage occupying the western Mediterranean and its northwest European hinterland. But given the economic and political limitations of the Roman Empire, which was demonstrably still flourishing before the outsiders arrived, the surge was sufficient to do the job in this particular case. Once reorganised into fewer larger groupings, such as the Visigoths, the invaders were then large enough to fight off imperial counterattacks and force some initial concessions of territory. These in turn undermined the Empire's agricultural tax base, and hence its army, allowing further expansionary activity on the part of the invaders until a point of no return was reached in the later 460s. By that stage, the central Roman state lacked the military force to prevent the intruders from carving up what was left of its provincial resources, and surviving Roman landowners had no choice but to try to save themselves by coming to individual political accommodations with the new powers in their lands.¹²

12 My views on the intersection of internal and external factors in west Roman collapse are set out more fully in *The Fall of Rome* esp. cc. 3 & 10. I would also argue – which there is no space to discuss fully here – that westward movements of the Huns are the likeliest cause of the two great surges of frontier intrusion: see *Empires and Barbarians* c. 4 with discussion of and references to alternative views.